With Foresight Comes Success

When I arrived at Bates Elementary School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, as the principal in 1997, I felt like I had gone back in time. In 40 years, the school had only had two principals, and not much had changed since 1957 when the school opened. The teachers’ lounge furniture looked like early 1950s motel vintage. We even found old “Dick and Jane” books in the closets. Needless to say, with teachers isolated in their classrooms, no aligned curriculum, and very little outside accountability (the No Child Left Behind legislation had not yet appeared on the horizon), student achievement was suffering. Since the school is situated in an older, established neighborhood, where much of the population had attended Bates as children, no one was putting pressure on the school to change—that is, until state standards and state testing came into being.

At one of my initial meetings with my new staff, I set the stage for what I now know is a scenario, defined by Edward Cornish in Futuring: The Exploration of the Future as “conjectures about what might happen in the future.” The question I posed to them was: If you were to design the best elementary school in the world, what would it look like? We agreed that no idea would be too crazy to suggest, there would be no put-downs of colleagues’ ideas, and budget would not be a consideration. I wanted the staff to dream without constraints.

The Bates staff generated hundreds of ideas and trusted that I had honestly empowered them to envision the perfect school with no strings attached. That was the breakthrough for us because we recognized that, in order to move forward, we had to think in new ways. Thus began a 13-year journey of discovery for all of us, which has included some of the following ideas over the years: performance grouping of students in the major content areas; a version of an ungraded grade school; an aligned K-5 curricula; teachers teaching to their areas of strength; tutoring and interventions before, after, and during school; looping of teachers; collaboration with the neighboring university; and freeing up teachers during the instructional day to meet and collaborate about student achievement.

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Planning for the Future

At the time, my staff and I had no idea that the exercise we had participated in was formally defined by Cornish as the Futuring Method. Cornish’s use of the term “futuring” comes from his belief that we must develop the skill of foresight in order to anticipate many of the risks and opportunities that might come our way in the future. He advocates that foresight will help us develop long-term goals and the strategies to achieve them, so it stands to reason that principals should lead the effort with their school staffs to understand current trends in order to forecast the future and ultimately achieve their goals for 21st century schools and beyond.

Following are some recommendations for principals to begin using a futuring process to improve their schools.

Hire staff who are willing and interested in change and continuous improvement.

Predicting and implementing scenarios to change the school’s future can be risky, so staff must work collaboratively as teams.

Bring your parents on board every step of the way. Parents can feel threatened if they do not understand the reasoning and research behind a new concept.

Teach your staff to be comfortable with conflict. When a staff is continuously looking to the future and frequently brainstorming ideas, conflict is inevitable. When conflicts do occur, principals can model bringing the involved parties to the table, confronting the conflict head on, agreeing how to solve the problem, and walking out of the room as colleagues.

Be willing to be the head risk-taker and step out on that limb with your staff. Often, the scenarios that your staff suggest might go against the grain of central administration. For example, when our school district adopted standards-based report cards about eight years ago, the Bates staff spent an inordinate amount of time learning what they are, how benchmarks and proficiencies differed from letter grades, and explaining all this to parents. Within a few years, due to some disgruntled parents, the district reversed its course and mandated that all schools put both letter grades and proficiencies on the report cards. This was a huge disconnect for the Bates teachers, so we stood our ground and, to this day, still do not use letter grades. This could have been a career-breaker for me as principal; however, if the staff do not truly believe their leader will empower them to make decisions and then stand with them in the face of adversity, they will lose trust and probably never step out of the box again.

Seek out expertise and partnerships; never work in isolation. With a university located near its back door, Bates Elementary has easy access to professors, researchers, and student teachers. We invite everyone into the school who can help us reach our goals. If we have a group of fifth graders who are ready for sixth-grade math, we recruit someone who can teach it, and he or she does...
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Reinventing the Present

Using futuring has its strengths and weaknesses. With all of our successes at Bates Elementary using this method, we have certainly had our bumps in the road. Putting the literacy block in the afternoons and tutoring after school in the winter months are a couple of our “great brainstorms” that either did not work or needed a major overhaul.

Overall, however, futuring through the use of scenarios can be an exciting pathway for our nation’s schools to reinvent themselves rather than be overtaken by vouchers, charters, private schools, and homeschooling. The important lesson for us is to keep reinventing the present in order to prepare for the future. Our nation’s children deserve nothing less.

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not have to be a teacher. We also have had a six-year relationship with a local church that provides mentors for our at-risk students.

Be persuasive, persistent, and patient.

Many of the scenarios that the Bates staff put into place in the mid-1990s have gone through dozens of iterations and look very different today. This fact is particularly evident with our teacher class assignments. The idea of teachers teaching to their strength area was a good one. The stronger writers taught writing, while the stronger mathematicians taught math. However, teacher burnout began to occur after a couple of years, particularly for the writing teachers. When one teacher taught all the writing, grades 3-5, both low and high classes, she was eventually overwhelmed with the volume of paperwork and grading. So the staff went back to the drawing board and designed another schedule, which continues to undergo revisions annually.

SOMEBODY OUT THERE, A PRINCIPAL WILL INSPIRE HER STAFF TO CAUSE AN EFFECT.

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