

What Makes a Blue Ribbon School?

Lessons from visits to more than 30 unusually effective schools

By Richard Long

When the U.S. Department of Education was searching for “unusually effective schools” in what became the Blue Ribbon Schools Program, I was fortunate to be tapped as a site visitor. I spent three years in that role, looking at more than 30 excellent schools, and I learned a lot.

As a site visitor, you walk into a school that’s recognized as good—if not great—to find out what makes it so good, while verifying the information reported during its data collection and review phase. A site visitor checks schools’ claims and, in doing so, often learns something interesting about our education system.

Selection for a site visit has a curious way of ensuring that long-deferred maintenance gets done. One time, a fellow site visitor walked into a school about an hour early to find a custodian applying paint to a men’s room wall. “We have some Fed coming into the building today, and we repainted the entire building,” he said. (The custodian might have included an unsavory modifier in front of “Fed.”)

On another occasion, a student mentioned that he had spent part of his lunch period launching sharp pencils into the ceiling tiles. The site visitor noticed that about a third of the tiles were new.

Beyond encouraging fresh maintenance, visits underline the fact that school communities have different perspectives. During a parent interview at one school, a parent advocated for the school color being orange: “Why not orange?” she asked. “We’re all Protestant.” The principal



seemed shaken by this comment, and rightfully so—decisions can have consequences that influence everything from administration evaluation to housing values.

The Mystery of Excellence

While these incidents were amusing, there are deeper lessons to be learned. One of the oddest things to discover in the schools I visited was that they often didn’t know why they were as good as they were. But they did know their test scores, and they knew the programs they were using. They were aware of the many needs of students and worked to continually update their practices.

One principal, for example, proudly handed me a set of brochures that he used for professional development. More telling than the materials themselves, though, was the fact that the school’s culture

allowed individual teachers to build their own professional development experiences and share them with colleagues. Support was so good that no one seemed aware of how effective the program was.

In another school, teachers taught using different methodologies that reflected their own personalities and interests. The principal knew such personalization gave the faculty an ability to offer instruction related to their talents and individual students’ needs, and he had found a unique way to manage teachers’ talents.

What surprised me was that many complained that he wasn’t really in control, never noting that they had been given the autonomy necessary to deliver an excellent product. This was the same school in which a custodian insisted I climb inside a furnace to inspect his work. Everyone in the building strived to

show their contribution to making the school great.

Sometimes I would have site visits at schools within 50 miles of each other, but in different states—and find information and innovation getting stuck at the border. On one side, I would find schools struggling to identify and intervene in a problem, while in the neighboring state, schools had addressed that challenge but were struggling with something else.

I did see a few questionable practices. It was easy to tell which schools were simply putting on a show for site visitors, which ones were divided, and which were putting on a show but generally doing a great job. The kids tell you, as do others.

Adaptation Is Everything

Years later, what's the biggest takeaway from seeing so many examples of good to excellent schools? First, there is no set of "right" ways. The principal with an MBA and an M.A. in curriculum and a strong, vocal, professional staff would have faced other challenges if he or she had tried the same methods in a different school.

Most likely, that principal would have adapted. And that's what you see in the best schools: ongoing adaptation—adaptation that is data-driven, and professionals who can find meaning in the information they have. Adaptation that reflects strengths and weaknesses.

Based on these experiences, I have several recommendations. The first is for state and local associations to facilitate idea exchange across state borders. Another is for school leaders and other educators to conduct self-evaluations of their strengths; educators are often upfront about their weaknesses, but every school has assets, too. And a final recommendation? Find a way to become part of an evaluation team. It's an incredible way to learn what's working in this complex profession. ■

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