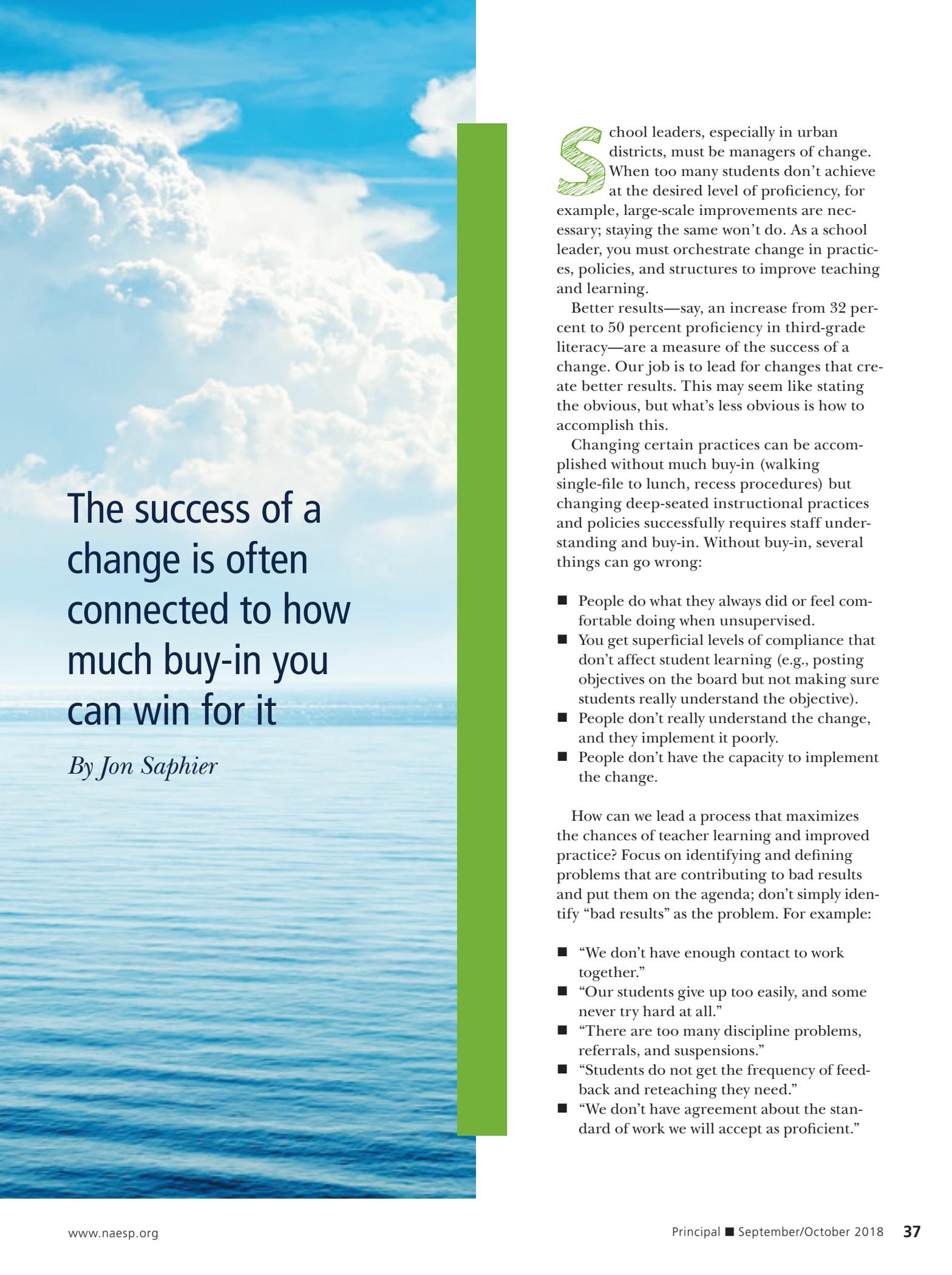# LEADING FOR CHANGE

The success of a change is often connected to how much buy-in you can win for it

By Jon Saphier

School leaders, especially in urban districts, must be managers of change. When too many students don't achieve at the desired level of proficiency, for example, large-scale improvements are necessary; staying the same won't do. As a school leader, you must orchestrate change in practices, policies, and structures to improve teaching and learning.

Better results—say, an increase from 32 percent to 50 percent proficiency in third-grade literacy—are a measure of the success of a change. Our job is to lead for changes that create better results. This may seem like stating the obvious, but what's less obvious is how to accomplish this.

Changing certain practices can be accomplished without much buy-in (walking single-file to lunch, recess procedures) but changing deep-seated instructional practices and policies successfully requires staff understanding and buy-in. Without buy-in, several things can go wrong:

- People do what they always did or feel comfortable doing when unsupervised.
- You get superficial levels of compliance that don't affect student learning (e.g., posting objectives on the board but not making sure students really understand the objective).
- People don't really understand the change, and they implement it poorly.
- People don't have the capacity to implement the change.

How can we lead a process that maximizes the chances of teacher learning and improved practice? Focus on identifying and defining problems that are contributing to bad results and put them on the agenda; don't simply identify "bad results" as the problem. For example:

- "We don't have enough contact to work together."
- "Our students give up too easily, and some never try hard at all."
- "There are too many discipline problems, referrals, and suspensions."
- "Students do not get the frequency of feedback and reteaching they need."
- "We don't have agreement about the standard of work we will accept as proficient."

Introducing a Change

When you are interested in changing a policy or practice, first talk about the problem that might be solved, in part, by this change. Don't start with the solution you favor. That way, you prevent the meeting from being "about you" or something you want people to do. It's about a problem that exists "out there" and needs to be addressed, and a solution or idea that might help.

Next, step into a mode of balancing advocacy and inquiry after you introduce the issue. Use a discussion structure that produces reflection and participation from everyone in the group—or, if that's already happened, proposals for solutions. That structure should prevent dominant personalities from taking over or intimidating others into silence.

Also, take a stance—using body language and choice of words—of advocacy and inquiry. The advocate will say that the problem has to be addressed somehow; we can't dodge it or ignore it. You are interested in an idea or solution, and wish to clarify your thinking about it. Be clear that your participation in the dialog is to help you do that.

Your inquiry should show that you are genuinely interested in what other people think and feel. You want to know the assumptions and beliefs behind others' views, and you are willing to be transparent about yours. Most important, you should be willing to change your mind. There are times when top-down decisions are appropriate, but this is not one of them.

The more often you, as the leader, position yourself as a visible, forceful advocate for an idea, the more you may convince yourself you're right. Then, you can develop "blinders" to others' points of view, defaulting to defense and persuasion rather than listening. Take yourself off the stage as a salesman, but keep the idea on the agenda. If you start off without opening yourself to ideas, you won't be able to hear and reflect on all sides of the issue.

The parallel issue is that if you're a center-stage advocate for a particular strategy, members of your organization will start to identify the idea with you, the leader, instead of considering it and evaluating its merits. This is where structures in which you can be in the group as a participant will be crucial.

If an idea has merit and you keep it on the agenda while balancing advocacy and inquiry, it will improve with ongoing dialog. And if you stay in connection with people throughout this process, a good idea will generate enough

ownership among them to carry it. The most powerful lever you have as leader is control of the agenda; keep a problem on it, and you can get people to "worry" about the issue with you.

Support those who want to try out an idea with pilot projects or experiments before deciding on the wholesale adoption of a practice or policy. If the idea is a good one, these people will become a constituency that helps make it work, and they will have the credibility to sell it to others.

Tactics Toward Change

Several tactics will help you present a problem and engage a group in working on it, and that engagement will help distill better solutions.

First, take a stand: "The problem of student investment and effort is one we've been talking about for some time," or "It makes me too sad to stay quiet about this." The implication is that the school has to do something, but the "stand" is that there's a problem that must be solved, not a particular solution you are committed to.

Next, state the problem as you see it: "We have kids who are giving up, who take no books home, and who don't know how to exert effective effort." Balance advocacy and inquiry by advocating a persistent focus on solving the

> ## "Leadership is the art of getting people to want to do what must be done."
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> — *Dwight Eisenhower*

problem, not on a particular solution. Once you present the problem, listen authentically to others' positions using "active listening" to check that you heard them correctly.

Acknowledge the range of emotions in the room, which may include defensiveness, discomfort, and worry. Surface any misconceptions or false assumptions you suspect exist: "Some of you may think that this grading policy is decided, and that I am going to shove it down your throats. I want to assure you that I haven't decided anything except that we need to do something to get our kids to be more effective," or "I don't want you to think anyone outside the school is telling us that we have to change our grading policy."

Use a discussion structure such as the Interview Design Process, World Café, Medium Sized Circle, or Carousel Brainstorming to maximize reflection and participation. Affirm disagreement: "I'm glad you said that, because we need all views on the table." Or start with the "third story," describing the problem as a neutral observer might see it. "We have different interpretations about what's most important in this situation."

Surface the assumptions and beliefs beneath people's positions by asking follow-up questions, especially to those who are negative. Walk into, rather than away from, objections. Make your own thinking and assumptions visible, test your conclusions and assumptions, and compare them with those of others. Use tentative language to express concern: "That would be tricky," rather than "We could never do that."

Even though you may be leading a change, you should never think that you can't benefit from the input of those affected by the change or responsible for installing it. By actively listening to their feedback and getting their buy-in, you can start solving the problems you need to solve together. ▣

Jon Saphier is the founder and president of Research for Better Teaching in Acton, Mass. The research that resulted in this article emerged from a study he and Caroline Tripp, consultant emeritus, performed in a large urban high school.