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SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CHANGE: CREATING SETTINGS TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

CLAUDE GOLDENBERG
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Reviewed by Ruth Tinsley

Educators are constantly looking for ways to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. Frequently, the teacher works alone to implement improvements. Not knowing where to turn and feelings of inadequacy are two reasons that teachers do not seek help that is often available. In *Successful School Change* (Goldenberg, 2004), the search for answers is found in the bridging of classroom, school, and home. For effective change to take place, "Schools, as a whole, not simply individual classrooms must become settings for productive teaching and learning" (p. 23). Although the story is set in a bilingual school, the story of how positive change can happen within a school is universal. Educators who read the book can find the approach helpful to almost any situation.

Successful School Change is Goldenberg's research-based book that follows one school's journey on the path to change. Freeman Elementary School is located in the Lawson School District in Southern California. (The names of both the school and the district are pseudonyms.) The community is comprised of both illegal and legal immigrants who work in the service industry. No longer the model for academic progress, the school struggles with the burden of language barriers. Ninety-percent of the students attending Freeman are Latino, and the drastic change in the socio-economic situation taking place in the community has teachers witnessing the decline of the once prominent school. Jessie Sullivan, a new principal, becomes the third principal in 3

years to be at the helm of Freeman. The new principal came to the school with high expectations for making a difference. Soon Sullivan was beginning to feel “frustrated and disappointed in her efforts to turn the school around academically. Her initiatives met with resistance or apathy, and those that seemed at least modestly successful were themselves extremely modest and of marginal consequence” (p. 40). This frustration is felt by many who meet with the resistance of those who think they have tried it all without success. Some of the new programs actually seem to be making matters worse. The book does not paint a rosy picture of change; instead, it focuses on the real life efforts that are met with resistance at times, and success at others.

Struggling to turn things around, Sullivan recognizes she needs help if she is going to implement school-wide improvements. Goldenberg provides this assistance, employing a no-nonsense approach to initiating change within the struggling school community. Here the partnership begins between Goldenberg’s university-based work and the work of an elementary school. How to initiate the necessary changes was the first problem addressed. Goldenberg and Sullivan felt that teachers had been adverse to previous changes because the changes were not their own. “We speculated that successful change would be more likely to result from the faculty’s articulating a concrete, specific, and shared set of goals for student learning, then working assiduously toward them” (p. 58). The school created a committee of teachers, the Academic Expectations Committee, to examine student needs and establish goals and expectations, to become the starting points of the school reform. Goldenberg and Sullivan used the strength of teacher commitment as the mortar in the building of school reform.

Keys to the success of the school reform were agreed upon by Goldenberg and Sullivan, including “improving achievement school-wide: setting goals, developing indicators, providing assistance, and providing leadership. We knew that no single one of these elements alone would turn a school around” (p. 73). As part of school reform, teacher workgroups were created to discuss student achievement, collaborate on the implementation of new ideas, and to review those strategies already being used. This led to a greater understanding of how students were progressing and what still needed to be addressed.

Goldenberg did not stop with reforming the school alone. The assumption that parents did not care or did not have the time to help the teachers had been long standing. Parents of students in the Freeman School were mostly poor, spoke little or no English, and were under- or uneducated.

In any case, the big eye-opener for me was that parents almost invariably were responsive, even grateful, when I called. Far from hostility or indifference, they

expressed concern about their children's school behavior and moved swiftly to correct it when necessary. (p. 114)

Faculty meetings became a productive part of the reform. Instead of conducting the day-to-day business of school during meetings, faculty focused on school reform and student achievement.

The changes implemented between 1992 and 1995 resulted in improvements in student achievement in language arts. Students in the Freeman School raised their language arts scores on the California Learning Assessment System, with over 45% of the students averaging a 3 or higher on a scale of 6, up from only 30%.

Goldenberg's study reveals many successful strategies for school reform. The book focuses on how to make successful changes within a school. At Freeman School, student outcomes had improved in terms of test scores, and teacher attention to improving instruction by addressing specific student needs was also successful. In this sense the study was triumphant. Freeman School did not end reform simply because the study was over. Teachers continued to focus on student needs, but as time passed some teachers were ultimately reassigned, new directives from the district were put in place, and the focus shifted, causing scores to backslide. Goldenberg concludes the book with a straightforward discussion of what happens after reform.

One advantage of having taken so many years to produce this account of the Freeman project is that I have had a long time to think about it and refract it through the lens of subsequent experiences, my own and those of others....One thing for which I still have no answer, however, is how you sustain change when key individuals leave. (p. 170)

A possibility might be to create school networks where teachers can share and collaborate.

Successful School Change offers several strategies that are useful and necessary for school reform. Goldenberg's writing invites the reader to join the author on a moving and inspiring journey of one school's reform. Goldenberg does not profess to have all the answers for school reform, but instead offers a model that is clear and concise. Despite the fact that the school study focused on a bilingual school, the message about reform is applicable to other situations. The reader is exposed to solid strategies for beginning school reform by increasing expectations of achievement through the collaboration between principal, teachers, students, and home.

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