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Impact Journal

Impact Journal is an open-ended theme journal published by the Utah Association of Secondary School Principals (UASSP). Impact is published twice each year.

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Impact Journal Publication Guidelines

Impact Journal is an open-ended theme journal published by the Utah Association of Secondary School Principals (UASSP). We welcome opinion essays, interviews, program descriptions, research reports, theoretical pieces, school climate pieces, reviews of books, humor, satire, poetry, and cartoons.

Impact is published twice each year to correspond with the UASSP annual winter and summer conferences.

Form
- Impact editors use American Psychological Association (APA) style manual.
- Manuscripts can be sent by e-mail attachment.
- Most of our articles are between 1000 and 3000 words.
- Submit a cover sheet with the manuscript. The cover sheet should include the title, author(s), each author’s present position and school (if applicable), each author’s academic status (if applicable), each author’s mailing address, telephone, and email address.

Submission deadlines are November 15 and April 15 of each year.

Manuscripts will be reviewed as to content and acceptability. Authors should assume that manuscripts will be edited to conform to length and clarity.

Send manuscripts electronically to the editor.

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Letter from the Editor

Mary Rhodes, EdD
Editor

Spring lingers, thankfully, since my spring cleaning is lagging. Chaos threatens all year, but in spring I battle with renewed energy. March brought conviction, and April two books bought from the best seller list. One discusses magic of tidying up, and one has immense promises for losing the clutter. I love them both, even the one I haven’t read. May involved recycling clothes and books.

Chaos threatens all of us perpetually, and the articles in the Summer edition of Impact provide tools to confront it. The trio of the second, third, and fourth articles help us sort to the essentials, manage them, and discard the nonessentials. Rhet Rowley talks about discrimination in choosing change initiatives, and Brad Christensen demonstrates a data management system, with free tools, to track student progress and interventions. Larry Hadley’s faculty reviewed assignments and pruned, collectively, 1,600.

As papers, programs, and plans are scrutinized, discarded, and retained, systems are necessary. A pair of articles by Alan Griffin and Kerrie Naylor provides systems perspectives. Alan’s article on curriculum review describes a professional and credible process that lightens the load of administrators, provides expert information for decisions, and protects us from the onslaught of materials, political positions, and poor choices. Kerrie Naylor provides us with a well-researched review of administrative evaluation, and she extends the existing frameworks in profound ways; the massive and potentially chaotic responsibility of evaluation is managed by her system.

Pruning promotes new growth. Aubree Christensen deserves a solo position, and her article, the seventh, explores the growth of social media to provide pared down, quick, and powerful opportunities for positive publicity. A duet of articles by David Boren and Floyd Stensrud frames the collection and explores growth through the interactions between leaders and those in their circles. Dave’s article is the first in the journal, and he applies Dweck’s work on mindset to promote growth. Floyd’s piece takes literature that has survived pruning and nurtures new growth; the concept of Motivational Interviews as a premise for conversations is potent.

The work against chaos is eternal. Still, discarding and organizing is freeing for minds and hearts. Space abhors a vacuum, and freshness flow in. Robert King’s cover photo captures freedom and space, and freshness is epitomized in photography throughout the journal by Dave Tanner. Improving domestic, professional, and personal contexts amplifies the freedom, space, and freshness that are the promise of June. This edition of Impact can help us nurture fresh growth.
Fail, Learn, Grow, Repeat: Mindsets of Continuous Improvement in Schools

David McKay Boren, PhD

_I failed my way to success._ Thomas Edison

Recently my young son began learning to walk. It was a new and scary prospect for him and he fell several times. I was thrilled by his happy determination as he repeatedly stood, took a step or two, fell, and then stood up again. He was not ashamed of falling, nor was he scolded for falling. Somehow he inherently understood what we all understood as young children, but sometimes forget as adults: anytime we try something new, we inevitably make some mistakes. Students, teachers, and principals are constantly being asked to try new things, so we should not be surprised that we are also constantly making mistakes. How we respond as school leaders to mistakes can have a huge impact on the learning that takes place in our schools.

As part of a study of effective organizations, Edmonson (1996) examined the errors in medication administration made by patient-care teams in hospitals. She was surprised to find that teams perceived to have better coaching, better relationships, and better overall performance also reported more errors than less effective teams. Did more effective teams really make more mistakes? As she delved deeper into the data, she found that the higher quality teams actually made fewer mistakes but were more open and honest about the number of mistakes they made. In reality, the lower performing teams actually made more errors but only reported the very obvious and visible errors. They did not feel safe reporting the smaller, optional-to-report errors. Those working on the higher quality teams felt that making mistakes was a natural part of the learning process and were not ashamed to admit making some. Such organizations are sometimes termed “learning organizations” because they recognize that making and learning from mistakes is natural and helps the entire organization improve. As school leaders we must ensure that our schools become learning organizations in which it is safe to share and learn from our successes and mistakes.

Hiring and Mindsets

_I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it._

-Pablo Picasso

One way our schools can become learning organizations is by hiring the people that are committed to continuous learning and growth.
cure-alls in educational leadership, there is a lot to be said about getting “the right people in the right seats on the bus” (Collins, 2001). We all know that some new teachers start off really strong, only to plateau early because they are afraid to make mistakes or to ask for help. In hiring new teachers, we need to identify those who will continuously learn and improve.

Athletic coaches often face similar challenges when putting together a team. When I was in seventh grade, the basketball coach taught me some vital lessons about identifying those who will continuously improve. Around eighty young men came to the first day of seventh-grade tryouts. To my dismay, that day of tryouts was spent performing torturous exercises such as stair laps and running lines. I had come to try out for the basketball team, not boot camp. Nobody was surprised when only about half of us returned for the second day of tryouts. The coach congratulated us for returning and made it clear that basketball skills were not his only priority in choosing players for his team. To my relief, that second day of tryouts was full of dribbling, passing, shooting, defending, and other basketball-specific drills. The coach observed us very closely...not only how well we performed these skills, but also how we responded to correction and feedback and how we interacted with the other players. The next morning I nervously looked over the final roster and was relieved to find that I had made the team, but I was also amazed that some of the most skilled players had not made the team! My coach did want skilled players, but even more important to him were players who worked hard and welcomed feedback as continuous learners.

Dweck’s (2006) research on fixed and growth mindsets provides a helpful framework for thinking about this process of continuous learning. Those with a fixed mindset see their level of skill as a fixed trait that they either cannot or will not change. They often spend a lot of time trying to prove to others their competence and intelligence and avoid challenging situations that could result in failure. They generally get defensive in the face of difficulties, ignore feedback, feel intimidated by the successes of others, and give up easily. A math teacher with a fixed mindset might say, “I’m not very good at teaching the quadratic formula.” Period. End of story. No plan for improvement. Those with a growth mindset also like to feel competent and intelligent but better recognize that with consistent deliberate practice (Colvin, 2008) and “dollops of feedback” (Hattie, 1992, p. 9), their skills will improve. They seek new opportunities, persist, view effort as a way to excellence, ask for feedback, learn from the success and failure of others, and do not give up easily. These individuals know that knowledge and skills can be improved and work tirelessly to get better. A math teacher with a growth mindset might say, “I’m not very good at teaching the quadratic formula yet, but I’m going to do whatever it takes to get good at it!” Such a teacher would then take the necessary steps to improve.

I recently reviewed the questions I asked when interviewing teacher candidates and realized that most of the questions sought to assess knowledge and
skills, but were only minimally related to a mindset of continuous learning. If I wanted to hire teachers with a growth mindset, I would need to adjust how I interviewed. Some principals refuse to hire a teacher before observing them teach (Clark, 2011, p. 267). Perhaps this idea should be taken a step further by refusing to hire any candidates before observing them teach and assessing how they respond to feedback. Our calls to references and previous employers could target both skill set and mindset. How does this person respond to feedback? How does this person respond when things don’t go well? Is this person hungry to improve, or content with fulfilling the minimal status quo?

Teachers and principals would readily agree that it is extremely frustrating to work with people who are not interested in learning or who consistently bristle in the face of feedback. Dweck shares: “I’ve met with many coaches and they ask me: ‘What happened to the coachable athletes? Where did they go?’ Many of the coaches lament that when they give their athletes corrective feedback, the athletes grumble that their confidence is being undermined. Sometimes the athletes phone home and complain to their parents. They seem to want coaches who will simply tell them how talented they are and leave it to that” (2006, p. 182). In contrast, it is an absolute joy to work with those who welcome feedback and are continuously seeking to improve (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). A growth mindset should be at the top of our list when making hiring decisions.

**Teacher Evaluations and Mindsets**

*Learn to fail or fail to learn.*

-Tal Ben Shahar

While hiring for a growth mindset is important, it is not enough. We need to cultivate a mindset of continuous improvement with teachers that are already in the school. Sometimes teachers are so eager to prove their competence that they can easily fall prey to a fixed mindset, particularly during formal observations and evaluations. I fell into this trap as a first-year teacher. I was extremely nervous for this first evaluation, and as is normal for newer teachers, my classroom management was a bit of a mess. I consulted with the other teachers on my team, and they gave me all the tricks for getting a good score on the evaluation, reassuring me that I had nothing to worry about. The long-anticipated day arrived. I had prepped my students well, with promises of free time and candy if they stayed in their seats and participated. The principal came in, and the next thirty minutes smoothly followed the meticulously rehearsed script that I had so carefully planned. The lesson ended, the principal left, and my classroom promptly descended into the raucous bedlam that generally reigned there. At the end of the day I met with the principal to review the lesson. She praised me as a talented teacher and awarded me near-perfect scores. I had proven to the principal that I was a competent and talented teacher. A triumph for the fixed mindset! The only problem was that I still needed to face a class full of rambunctious students the next day, and I had no ideas for how to
I had used bribes, tricks, and showmanship to paint a false façade for the principal. I left her office in a dazed stupor, realizing that I had just made a mockery of the entire evaluation process. I had used bribes, tricks, and showmanship to paint a false façade for the principal. In reality, I had flat-out lied to the principal. I was in serious need of help, and I had just cut the supply line to someone who could have offered some much needed support and resources. I realized that unless I changed my approach, I would have to maintain this illusion for the rest of the school year, and worse, the rest of my career. This evaluation had not been a success, but an utter failure. I resolved that I was not going to let this happen again.

A little later in the year my principal asked to schedule my second evaluation observation. Though things had somewhat improved, I was still struggling and was in desperate need of some real feedback. While I refused to play the dog-and-pony game again, I was also uneasy about admitting and exposing my weaknesses to my principal. Garnering my courage, I approached the principal and told her that she could drop by my classroom at her convenience because I was not going to prepare anything special for the observation. I wanted real feedback. A few days later, my principal came by the classroom at a random time. I don’t remember all of the specifics of the lesson, but it certainly was a more accurate representation of my class, with several student disruptions throughout the lesson. I felt a bit nervous prior to the post-observation conference, wondering if I would be out of a job. To my relief, the principal seemed thrilled to have actually seen a real lesson. She reassured me that because I was anxious to improve, she was equally anxious to help me. She then provided me with some very helpful feedback that led to my classroom running much smoother. I followed this same procedure for subsequent evaluations and even got to the point of asking her to come observe when it wasn’t my turn to be evaluated. Not surprisingly, when I made myself vulnerable by sharing my real classroom, I got real feedback, and as a result, teaching and learning in my classroom gradually improved over time. My blood pressure still rose whenever the principal came to my classroom, but that worry subsided over the years. A growth mindset allowed me to use my time to actually improve practice rather than wasting my time trying to prove my competence.

Team and School Mindsets

Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again more intelligently. -Henry Ford

A culture of continuous improvement is absolutely essential in a professional learning community. Researcher Brown claims that we must be willing to make ourselves vulnerable by admitting our weaknesses to others. If we really want to improve, we must “dare to show up and let ourselves be seen” (Brown, 2012, Introduction). Recent research in neuroscience and social learning theory actually suggests that sometimes we may more readily learn from the mistakes and successes of others than from our own.
Certain neural pathways only fire when we observe the actions of others (Yoshida, Saito, Iriki, & Isoda, 2011). In other words, I might make the same error over and over, but I may not recognize that error in myself until I see someone else make that same error. The same is true of success. When teachers make their practice and results public, they allow themselves and others to learn and improve from their errors and successes. Fullan asserts: “It is actually very hard for a weak teacher who enters a highly collaborative school to remain there without improving” (2014, p. 72). An unwillingness to share our mistakes and successes not only limits our own growth but also severely limits the growth of others with whom we work. Principals must ensure that their schools and teams are “safe environments for teachers to critique, question, and support other teachers to reach [their] goals together. These are the leaders who have most effect on student outcomes” (Hattie, 2009, p. 83). Teams functioning in a professional learning community provide a perfect context for each individual and the team to collaboratively learn from the successes and mistakes of each other.

As leaders, we must foster a climate where all feel safe enough to be vulnerable. Dweck explains: “just learning about the growth mindset can cause a big shift in the way people think about themselves and their lives” (2006, p. 216). Last year my faculty read Dweck’s book Mindset, and later watched videos, read articles, and held deep discussions about mindset. I was amazed at the results. Some teachers actually asked me to come watch them teach and offer feedback, even though they weren’t on the evaluation rotation! A few teachers began video taping their lessons, others asked district-level specialists for support, and some teams seemed more willing than ever to share successes and weaknesses. This did not happen overnight, nor did it happen with every faculty member or team, but there was a notable difference throughout the school. Most teachers seemed more honest in self-evaluations and more open to feedback and suggestions from parents, students, administrators, and other teachers. Some teachers even taught their students about growth and fixed mindsets and were pleased to see more students willing to ask for help and support.

Leadership and Mindsets

Don’t let success go to your head or failure go to your heart. -Anonymous

Of course, our own mindsets as school leaders likely have the greatest impact on whether our teachers willingly make themselves vulnerable to us and to each other. As noted earlier, as we model a growth mindset, others may learn more from our mistakes and successes than they will from their own. Behaviors that promote our own growth are worth modeling.

- Continue to learn, grow, and find opportunities to improve.
- Admit to others our weaknesses and mistakes.
- Avoid a façade of always having the right answers.
- Apologize and change when needed.
- Approach struggling teachers and
teams with the reassurance that they can learn.

If my first principal had approached me with a fixed mindset, my educational career likely would have been very brief. Do we make it safe for teachers and teams to expose weaknesses and ask us for help? Do we ever give up on teachers and teams before giving them all the support and help needed in order to become effective? Do we ever give up on ourselves saying, “I’m great at managing schedules, but no good at leading learning?” Period. End of story. No plan for improvement. Next. We may not be great at leading learning yet, but we certainly could be as we seek and implement honest feedback from students, teachers, parents, peers, and supervisors. A culture of continuous improvement with a growth mindset creates the necessary conditions for improved teaching and learning. Let’s willingly share our mistakes and successes and pave the way for repeated cycles of continuous improvement by safely failing, learning, and growing together.

References

Useful Resources
Videos
A Study on Praise & Mindsets by Trevor Ragan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= NWv1VdDeoRY
Austin’s Butterfly by Ron Berger: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqh1MRWZjms
The Power of Belief by Eduardo Briceño: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN34FNbOKXc
The Power of Yet by Carol Dweck: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyAde4nIIm8

Articles

David McKay Boren is Director of Brigham Young University’s School Leadership Program. Past positions include teacher, assistant principal, and principal in Alpine School District. David can be reached at david_boren@byu.edu.
When I was a new teacher, our school was investigating a change in our intervention program. I had been working diligently to make our current program work and therefore did not want a change. I became a vocal naysayer; badmouthing the new program we were investigating. I searched for reasons it would fail. A trusted colleague of mine pulled me aside one day and offered some sage advice; he told me that the best way to encounter inevitable change is to own it and then make it work for you. He wisely advised I join the winning team and have a say in how the new program would be rolled out. He was right; the program proved to be very successful, and I had the opportunity to play a key role in its success.

Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, asserted, "change is the only constant in life." Changes in education are happening at a neck-breaking pace. I believe that we can't expect anything different. This pace mirrors everything else going on in the world. Take a minute and think about the cool new technologies in classrooms from just 10 years ago. If your school had projectors in every room you were cutting edge, a document camera was really special, some teachers even had their own websites! Heaven forbid you think back 20 years. Now take a minute and think of the different school initiatives, changes to the core, tests, and laws that have been flying in the last ten years. While many of those ideas aren't new, they are being rejuvenated with a much higher frequency, and many new ideas are coming out.

The ways information can be disseminated has accelerated everything. We live in a global community where information is available and it is simple to connect with all sorts of people worldwide. Ideas, good and bad, are being floated around constantly. New initiatives, programs, policies, laws, ideas and technologies are being pushed on educators at this accelerated pace. Many connected educators are sharing ideas, thoughts, and problems with other educators all around the world. The days of quietly laying low and waiting to see what sticks are far behind us.

All of this information can become really noisy if we are not careful. While we cannot wait and see on all initiatives, we should be careful about which ones we embrace. Jumping on every bandwagon that pulls up to the front doors is only confusing and lacks focus. Doing what is best for students should always be the guiding light. If we are not jumping on with good ideas, we are falling behind, and it will be increasingly more difficult to catch up with innovative schools. This is a disservice to our students.

As these changes fly at us we need to become the masters of our world. We need to control the response. We need to make it fit us. We need to own it. This is our responsibility as school leaders in an ever-changing current.

Often change is a hard sell on faculty and staff. May I suggest a couple of strategies to help our schools embrace change, even own it.

1. **Change the vocabulary:** Don’t talk about change, talk about innovation. In many ways it’s the same thing, but innovation carries an exciting tone. Never underestimate the power of vocabulary.

2. **Get the faculty in on the ground level:** A school leadership team should openly study and discuss innovations and how they should be unveiled. Be open about what is going on with your school. “Asking uninformed people to make decisions is
bound to result in uninformed decisions… Furthermore, giving people access to the same information increases the likelihood that they will arrive at the same conclusions” (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p.37). Keeping people in the loop and informed will help create a culture of openness, innovation and the best ideas will come from it.

3. **Be a filter:** Don’t overload the system with innovations. There is a lot out there, and this is certainly a call to stretch ourselves but not a call to break ourselves.

4. **Do the walk and talk:** Everything we do in our schools is talked about. Make sure to be a part of the conversation. Actively seek out your teachers, students, and parents and talk to them. Make sure your voice is part of the conversation.

5. **Monitor and Reflect:** The challenge with so many changes is that some just do not work. Don’t get married to an idea. Collins (2001) says that to become great we must confront the brutal facts and make changes however brutal it may be. If you have honest reflection and something is not working, ditch it! More innovations are coming; gear up for those.

Owning the changes that are thrown at us will benefit our students, our faculty, and ourselves. If we own the changes coming our way we can tweak them to most benefit our students. Owning the changes gives our faculty some control. It will increase their buy-in if they feel ownership and will ultimately increase their job satisfaction. Finally, by owning change we, too, will have more job satisfaction and joy in helping move our schools forward in an ever-changing world.

Don’t fear change!
Don’t fear new things!
Own them

**References**

Rhet Rowley is Assistant Principal at Springville Junior High in Nebo School District. He can be reached at rhet.rowley@nebo.edu.
In order to assure high levels of student learning, schools must implement tracking systems to monitor proficiency. Teachers also need to use data to monitor each student’s progress toward academic goals (Marzano, 2012). Dufour, DuFour, & Eaker (2008) explain that teachers must determine what students need to learn. Teachers must then ascertain if each student has learned the essential skills, concepts, and dispositions. Unless the data are kept simple and used in a meaningful way, it is easy to get lost in the sea of facts, figures, and colorful graphs (Reeves & Flach, 2011). At Hurricane Intermediate School in the Washington County School District (WCSD), we are fortunate to have a designated Data Coach, a teacher who is paid a little extra to help us track student achievement and get practical data to teachers. Our Data Coach, York Hepworth, has designed a tool that allows the teachers and school administrative team to easily see every student’s current academic level. He calls it the HIS Master Control Panel, but I think of it as a Student Learning Portal.

The top half of the first page of the panel (see Figure 1) contains a link to all of the notes from faculty meeting and a reminder of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) questions addressed in coaching sessions and in department meetings (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The bottom half of the first page (see Figure 2) features several items. Department Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (GVC) links are listed in the middle of the page (Marzano, 2003), a graphic created by Bob Sonju (the Professional Development Director in the WCSD), a link to student interventions completed by the special education aides, and a link to a spreadsheet that tracks whether students “did their best” on the end-of-level SAGE assessments. The first page also contains a list of links to spreadsheets completed by every teacher, tracking student learning and interventions for every student in every subject.

Figure 1 Links to notes from faculty meetings.
Departments track achievement data in one of two ways. Most list and analyze information from common formative assessments (CFA) administered by everyone who teaches a specific subject. These CFAs are tied to the core curriculum and the department GVCs. Others look at student’s “Academic” grades (intermediate schools in the WCSD give an “Academic” grade calculated from a variety of tests and quizzes and an “Effort” grade based on homework and assignment completion) to determine which students need interventions.

As shown in Figure 3, in English Language Arts 6, students were given a common assessment on “Manners Matter Essay”, “GL Vocab”, and “CC Vocab”. Results were imported into Google Docs spreadsheet and colors were embedded in the cells according to proficiency level. If a student scored too low on the assessment, the cell turned red alerting the teacher of the need to intervene. Interventions were recorded using a drop down menu and “Outcome of Intervention” scores were recorded (showing the student’s score on the assessment after the intervention). After the intervention, the “retake” score was entered.

In Science 7 (as shown in Figure 4) students were given CFAs in “Heat”, “Light”, “Sound”, and “Seasons”. Student scores were imported into the Google Docs spreadsheet and like the Language Arts 6 spreadsheet; colors (red, yellow, and green) were automatically assigned to scores making it easier for the teacher to identify who needed more help.

The Math 7 department used a slightly different method. Figure 5 shows that they determined if each student was proficient (P) or not proficient (NP) in each of their CFA/GVC goals based on a predetermined cut score. Students who were not proficient completed interventions and were reassessed.
Figure 5 Proficiency data and for Math 7.

Figure 6 shows a class that imported the academic grades from the PowerSchool gradebook and highlighted students with NPs (using red) instead of using CFA data. Interventions that were used were chosen from a drop-down menu. Every three weeks Academic Grades were imported into the Google Docs spreadsheet, allowing the teachers to track whether or not students were improving.

Figure 6 Imported grades from PowerSchool color-coded.

The Student Learning Portal at Hurricane Intermediate School is a work in progress. Teachers are making adjustments to the tool to better track student learning, so they can help students with concepts they don’t yet understand. The work and willingness of York Hepworth, our data coach, has been invaluable. As the school principal, I now have a single place to go to see how every student is progressing in every subject. This site makes work on our consolidated school improvement plan easier. Finally, the H.I.S. Master Control Panel was created using free tools from Google. I am thankful to my faculty for their great efforts for our kids.

References
http://legisweb.state.wy.us/InterimCommittee/2012/Z02MarzanoLevels.pdf

Brad Christensen is Principal of Hurricane Middle School in Washington County School District. He can be reached at brad.christensen@washk12.org.
At our school, as well with many schools, we find that student performance, student achievement, and student attendance tends to drop as we enter and complete the second quarter of a school year. Our third and fourth quarters tend to rebound or trend back upwards, but we never reach the achievement levels that we do in the first quarter of the year. There are many reasons for the achievement drop during second quarter and many educators, teachers and administrators alike, know these reasons. We have become experts at explaining these reasons, but this year we wanted to get ahead of this drop. We didn’t want to have to explain the drop anymore, we wanted to be able to “stop the drop.”

Therefore, we took upon ourselves a school wide initiative to “stop the drop.”

Our initiative began by us looking at the number of missing assignments for students by grade. We started a competition between grades to see who could have the fewest number of missing assignments. We had our student advocate work in a study table lunch setting with any seventh grade student who was missing five or more assignments in any one class, meaning, a student who was missing five or more assignments in one class would get their lunch a few minutes early and then eat with our student advocate in a quieter setting in our school to devise a plan to get missing assignments turned in. This was a great start to our initiative, but it was just the tip of the iceberg.

We began wondering what the ratio of missing assignments was to the total number of assignments given.

We didn’t want to have to explain the drop anymore, we wanted to be able to “stop the drop.”

The question then became, if this is the first quarter, what would the second quarter number turn into? We were looking at close to 500,000 assignments for a school year. It also opened up some questions for our PLC teams to look at. Our PLC team took the opportunity to first look at how we were marking missing work and our grade distribution report which tells us the scored assignments they gave to calculate students’ grades in each of their class periods. We then took that number of scored assignments, multiplied that by the number of students in each period, and then added up each teacher’s totals. This gave us a total number of assignments given to students during our first quarter as a school. The total number of assignments for our first quarter was 120,416 scored assignments assigned to students for grading purposes. At the time we found this to be a staggering number; at Sand Ridge Junior High School we have 808 students. The math worked out to be just over 149 assignments per student for the quarter, or just over 24 assignment per class or just over 3.3 scored assignments per day. From our initiative for the first quarter, we found that the number of our math assignments was well above any other course of study, and we also were able to answer our own question about the ratio of missing assignments compared to the total number of assignments. Our ratio turned out to be 4.36% of assignments were marked as missing for a total of 5,251 missing assignments for our first quarter.

The PLC teams took the opportunity to first look at if we were marking missing work commonly. We needed to look a bit deeper into how was missing work being marked and graded. Our faculty and staff were awesome. The talk and conversation soon turned to looking inward, “why do we assign so many assignments?” “Do we really need to assign so many things to assess mastery of a concept and what do we consider missing work to be?” Without any poking or prodding, our faculty and staff over the course of second quarter cut out over 16,000 assignments. Our PLC teams led discussions on commonly marking missing work and our grade distribution report which tells us the
We were looking at close to 500,000 assignments for a school year.

number of failing grades per quarter showed our best second quarter graded distribution on record. Due to this initiative, our faculty meetings and PLC time have been jumped started in a direction of commonly marked missing work and discussions to unify late work policies school wide. This focus from missing work to late work will open up discussion on grading and common assessments. Overall, as a school, we dropped over 7% of failing grades from the second quarter from the year prior to our most recent second quarter. Our drop from this year’s first to second quarter was under a 1% increase of failing grades in our grade distribution report. We have taken our data from the first two quarters and now will compare semesters at years end. There is a new energy to turning work in and to review the work we are having students complete. In the end, we may not have stopped the drop completely, but we applied the brakes extremely hard, and we are celebrating successes instead of explaining dropped results.

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Local Control and Vetting Instructional Materials

Alan Griffin

From the earliest days of the United States Constitution, there has been concern about federal disregard of states’ rights. The argument has been ongoing and essential to the preservation of our democratic republic. Members of congress take on the roles of protectors of the various states in which they reside, in hopes of preserving the freedom and rights of individual citizens, as well as promoting local industry and economic ventures. Citizens of individual states and communities are highly protective of their values, and the rights necessary to guarantee their freedom to construct lifestyles aligned to them. In current jargon, people are extremely concerned about maintaining “local control.”

The significant public reaction in opposition the Common Core Standards is less about the actual content of the standards than it is about federal encroachment into local community educational practices. Opponents have been very vocal in stating their fears that such standards are the first steps to establishing a national curriculum that ignores local culture. The prevailing belief is that localities are much better equipped to meet the needs of the students who reside in them than is the federal Department of Education. State residents want “local control” of the standards, delivery methods, and assessments of public education.

So what exactly is meant by “local control”? Here is a post from the International Debate Education Association:

According to Oxford Dictionaries Online, the term local is defined as “belonging to or relating to a particular area or neighbourhood.” Control refers to “the power to influence or direct people’s behaviour or course of events.” As there is no definition given for the term local control, those terms are combined in common usage and could refer to a municipal government, to a province, regional, or state government. Although not stated as a comparison, the motion implies a comparison to something, probably a federal government or national ministry. Education is “the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction especially at a school or university.” System is defined as “a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network.” There are many components to an educational system so this term is also broad. Since the term local control could be interpreted in a wide variety of legitimate ways, to better focus the debate, it would be valuable to indicate the expanse of the term “local”. Local control could legitimately mean municipalities or the regional government structure. The ability to influence does not state what type of influence exactly. Influence could refer to all aspects of an educational system or simply influence/control over certain parts of the system. Even though dictionary definitions are useful, the terms set forth by the proposition require careful thought and consideration when defining them for use in a debate.

“Local control” may be exerted by a home school, charter school, public school, school district, or state education agency. Indeed, with the advent of technology, a locality could take in a range of municipalities from different countries.
Shared values, rather than geographical limits, may establish the boundaries of the locality. Education today must prepare children to succeed in the global economy and do business with worldwide partners. Determining the limits to a neighborhood is increasingly difficult. It all depends on agreements reached by the clientele being served.

The real issue is to what extent educational agencies, whatever their size or makeup, wish to be independent or collaborative. Certainly there should be a balance between preserving the values and traditions of a community and taking advantage of collaboration with other like entities. There must be a way to investigate and benefit from the world’s resources without sacrificing the virtues of the community.

Many state education agencies have extended local control to districts and schools in the selection of instructional materials. These resources are being produced and made available everywhere. They come in both printed and digital formats and can consist of student editions, online curriculum, simulations, applications, instructor materials, manipulatives, games, videos, ancillary materials, and a wide variety of other media. Locating and then evaluating such materials is an extremely time-consuming task. The smaller the locality, the larger the issue becomes without the help of larger communities. Small districts and schools, left to find their own resources, face a gargantuan task, and risk becoming overloaded and isolated.

There is always a selection process in the acquisition of instructional materials. The doctrine of No Child Left Behind required every state to have standards for student learning. Curriculum is evaluated based on its alignment to those standards, especially as it affects student achievement. The real question is, who checks the alignment, conducts the evaluation, and makes the selection of materials? Who is the agent of local control? How does the agent guarantee fair and objective review of the available resources?

Commercial entities have begun to appear to try to ensure that provided evaluations are free of any political or commercial interest. Such services have the difficult task of supplying unbiased information about national curriculum resources that are tailored to the values and standards of local education agencies. Funding for such work has been based on annual subscription fees from the school, district, or state organization, or from donations from private organizations.

All of this assumes that high quality reviews are fundamental to the selection process. Such reviews need to provide information about (1) alignment of content to core standards and objectives; (2) guarantees of accessibility to all students without bias toward ethnicity, race, religion, age, or ability; and (3) resources that encourage the highest levels of pedagogy. There are numerous high quality review tools available, many of which are listed on the web. State and local education agencies should spend time selecting the tools that work best for them. Credentials of reviewers should be thoroughly vetted, and processes clearly described to promote transparency to publishers, educators, and the general public. Additionally, provisions should be made to allow public representation and input into the review process. This is best handled through an organizational structure that oversees a logical sequence of procedures that include public input.

Twenty-two states have formed an organization known as the State Instructional Materials Review Association (SIMRA). Originally formed in 1947 as a group that favored adoption of curriculum items from mandated lists provided by its member states, SIMRA has since broadened its bylaws to include local control agencies. Members participate in ongoing collaboration regarding the tools and criteria involved in the evaluation of instructional materials. Monthly webinars and a yearly conference allow SIMRA members to compare reviews available in “localities” (including schools, districts, states, and the nation). Many SIMRA states profess allegiance to local control by providing free access to the reviews as well as the rubrics, criteria and structures used to create them.

The conversation regarding local control ends up being nothing more than the old arguments regarding states’ rights versus federalism. It is a balancing act between the preservation of values and cultures of states and communities and the risks and benefits of collaborative action that exceed imposed boundaries, be they geographical or social. SIMRA endeavors to allow for the advantages of both points of view by allowing
free participation for educational agencies big and small, to sample each other’s resources without required mandates regarding adopted instructional materials. Official membership in the organization is gained by simply paying a nominal fee (currently $125) which covers registration for the annual conference.

Whatever the definition of “local control” as it relates to curriculum evaluation, the following list provides justification for the review process.

**17 Reasons for Reviewing Instructional Materials**

1. It helps educators by providing lists of vetted materials for specific subject areas.
2. It assists publishers in providing a conduit to potential adoptees of instructional materials.
3. It secures economical pricing through the favored nation clause, which guarantees the lowest price as contracted by any state.
4. It provides accurate information about the alignment of content to core standards and objectives.
5. It provides information about the structural quality of the book or resource.
6. It enhances the awareness and expertise of those who participate in the review, as well as those who are considering materials for adoption.
7. It provides tools and resources that can be used at the community or state level, thus supporting local control of the curriculum.
8. It provides sharable data about instructional resources that can be compared and shared with other agencies or organizations involved in the review process.
9. It provides recommendations to help educators select the very best materials for instruction.
10. It assists in protecting educators and students from encountering materials that may be of poor quality, or which may violate community standards and law.
11. It provides publishers with valuable information about the quality of their products and allows them to compare their materials with others available in the industry.
12. It encourages authors and publishers to keep materials current and relevant to the needs of students.
13. It provides an organized process for evaluating curriculum materials that saves time and money for local education institutions.
14. It provides information freely available to the public about instructional resources used in education.
15. It helps categorize resources and target them to meet specific objectives in instruction.
16. It encourages participation from credentialed reviewers to produce high quality reviews.
17. It provides unbiased reviews from educators that are not influenced by political, special or commercial interests.

The benefits of the credible curriculum review are significant in the current political climate. The potential benefits to student learning, our priority as educators, are monumental.

**References and Footnotes**


www2.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/standards/standards.html).


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The purpose of this article is to share recent research on principal practices that directly influence school conditions, community context, and teaching quality from two perspectives: the practice perspective and the impact perspective (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Fetters, 2012). These two perspectives will be examined to explain why both are necessary to accurately measure principal effectiveness. Specific research-based human resource functions that fall on principals’ shoulders and have an indirect influence on student achievement will be discussed. I want to examine administrative actions and behaviors researched to be effective for attracting, selecting, supporting, and retaining quality teachers. These actions and behaviors then lead to a greater chance that teachers will contribute to enhanced student growth and learning. Finally, I am going to suggest an adaptation to Dr. Matthew Clifford’s conceptual framework that identifies the direct and indirect influence principals have on student achievement. I will suggest two additional constructs for the framework that I believe need to be in place to assist principals in their work at the school level and have a direct influence on principal effectiveness.

**Background Information:**
**Educator Effectiveness Project**
First, let me share with you some background information about why human resource functions may be linked to student success.

When the Utah State Office of Education Educator Effectiveness Project started five years ago, the research supporting the kinds of specific actions and behaviors that principals should exhibit in order to contribute to student learning and achievement was just beginning to emerge on the scene. Previous research had focused almost entirely on what knowledge, skills, and dispositions principals needed to exhibit to manage and lead effective schools (CCSSO, 1996; CCSSO, 2008). The practice perspective for principal effectiveness was driven by the paradigm that evaluations of administrators were to focus on what principals do and what practices they bring to the job, rather than evaluating them on what impact their actions have on school changes and student outcomes (Clifford et al., 2012). Of course, it is not difficult to see why the practice perspective was typically used when evaluating administrators. It is similar to the way teachers are determined to be effective and usually measures performance according to a rubric of behaviors identified from performance standards. This appears to provide a rational way to determine a level of effectiveness, but, in fact, it is difficult to observe principals the way that teachers are observed in classrooms (Clifford et al., 2012). Principal supervisors must be able to identify and isolate skills and behaviors through observations of practice within multiple contexts. What has been helpful in identifying effective skills and actions, however, are Utah Educational Leadership Standards (R277-530, 2011) that can be used to define and distinguish effective principal performance.

With the passing of State Board Rules R277-530 and 531, as well as the new evaluation requirements noted in Senate Bill 64 (later coded into state law 53A-8a, 2012), educator evaluation...
When the Utah State Office of Education Educator Effectiveness Project started five years ago, the research supporting the kinds of specific actions and behaviors that principals should exhibit in order to contribute to student learning and achievement was just beginning to emerge on the scene.

This requirement in law includes both the practice perspective and impact perspective to be part of Utah’s evaluation system. This is consistent with the American Institutes for Research (Clifford et al., 2012) work which also makes the claim that evaluation systems need to include both perspectives, practice and impact, to fully capture the complete picture of what principals do and how their actions contribute to student success.

Determining principals effectiveness by measuring their impact or influence on school and student results (e.g., attendance, graduation rates, school improvement, student achievement) is very challenging and, according to some, problematic because it require sophisticated statistical models (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). To assist with this challenge, Clifford and his colleagues (2012) created a conceptual framework to describe the direct and indirect relationships between principals’ effective practices and student achievement (see Figure 1). They describe the relationship as direct when the actions of principals affect school conditions, community involvement, and the quality and performance of teachers. They describe the principals’ actions as indirectly affecting student achievement based on principals’ influence over what teachers do in the classroom, constituting the direct relationship teachers have on student achievement (Clifford et al., 2012). This framework is consistent with the research of the Wallace Foundation (2011) which identified teachers’ instructional skills and practices as the most important factor contributing to student learning. In addition, the Wallace research (2011), as well as other research, identified the actions of principals as the second most important school-level factor influencing student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). This link to student achievement through the work of the teachers takes into account the effectiveness of administrator consulting, facilitating, coaching, and leading teachers in the classroom. The relationship between administrators’ effective actions and behaviors, teaching quality, and student outcomes is critical when determining the type of evaluation system to use when measuring principal effectiveness.

Human Resource Functions

The number of school leadership and principal effectiveness studies has increased dramatically in the last few years (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Research suggests that principal practices influence school programs, community context, and teacher effectiveness, which in turn influence school performance and student achievement (Clifford et al., 2012). Many studies found that principal practices associated with student achievement and school quality include:

- Creating and sustaining a common vision and mission;
- Engaging in data discussions about student achievement;
- Managing resources efficiently;
- Creating safe learning environments;
- Developing strong and respectful relationships with parents and community;
- Acting in professional and ethical manner (CCSSO, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).
Of the teachers surveyed who were thinking about leaving the profession, 67 percent said they would consider changing their minds if they worked with a principal that helped them improve their effectiveness.

Effective principals are also successful at recruiting, retaining, cultivating, and supporting effective teachers (Clifford et al., 2012). Clifford and his colleagues cite a study by Public Agenda (2009) that found that of the teachers surveyed who were thinking about leaving the profession, 67 percent said they would consider changing their minds if they worked with a principal that helped them improve their effectiveness. In another study, one fourth of the teachers surveyed said that they left the profession because of poor principal support (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The Wallace Foundation (2011) found that when teachers work under an inspiring and highly competent principal, they are more likely to be open and eager to work in a challenging school environment. In addition, creating a school culture that makes a difference in whether a teacher wants to be in challenging school, effective principals also influence the distribution of quality teachers within the school and can make placement decisions that ensure students with the greatest need have teachers with the appropriate experience and expertise to be successful (Clifford et al., 2012).

Instructional Quality

Effective principals also affect instructional quality. This is called instructional leadership and is usually identified by providing important resources and supports to teachers, as well as assisting with the types of instruction that are acceptable and optimal for students and the school (Spillane et al., 2004). Effective principals provide feedback, select instructional programs and curriculum, and support teachers with financial, material, and human resources to make effective teaching possible (Wahlstrom et al., 2010). These principal practices related to instructional quality have an indirect influence on student performance.

Given that there is an indirect impact of principals’ management of human resources on student achievement, and a direct impact of effective principal practices that influence the quality of teaching and instruction, it would be irresponsible not to focus on both principal practice and outcomes in principal/leadership evaluation. The next section of this article will review research on how to support school-level principals and improve effective principal practices, especially focusing on instructional leadership and human resource functions at the school-level.

Adapting Clifford’s Framework to Include Instructional Leadership and Support for Principals

In Figure 2, I have taken Dr. Matthew Clifford’s and his colleague’s Framework for Principal Impact (2012, pg. 7) and adapted it to include the intervening variable of “instructional leadership” as a direct influence on “effective teaching practice.” I have also adapted the framework to rework the direct influencers on “teacher quality” to be influencers on effective teaching practice. I did this because the Utah Effective Teaching Standards (R277-530, 2011) are not performance expectations about teachers, as people, but rather expectations of teaching practices for all teachers. They provide indicators of the UETS in teaching practice. Let’s think about this and review Figure 2,
Given that there is an indirect impact of principals’ management of human resources on student achievement, and a direct impact of effective principal practices that influence the quality of teaching and instruction, it would be irresponsible not to focus on both principal practice and outcomes in principal/leadership evaluation.
Effective District Conditions

I am adding this construct to the conceptual framework based on the work that has been done in 2014 by two organizations: 1) the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and 2) the collaborative partnership between New Leaders and the George W. Bush Institute’s Alliance to Reform Educational Leadership (AREL). The projects that these organizations have been working on are in support of the claim that school leaders need to be supported in their work by effective district conditions and effective principal supervisors.

Principal Supervisor Instructional Standards (CCSSO)

CCSSO (November 2014) has created a draft document describing “Model Principal Supervisor Instructional Standards” that delineate seven performance standards and their corresponding functions for practice. All seven of the standards identify what supervisors of school-level principals need to be able to do to help them be better instructional leaders. The seven draft standards for principal supervisors are listed here:

1. Principal Supervisors dedicate their time to helping principals grow as instructional leaders;
2. Principal Supervisors engage in teaching practices in their one-on-one work with principals to help principals grow as instructional leaders;
3. Principal Supervisors engage in teaching practices while leading principal communities of practice (e.g., professional learning communities and networks) to help principals grow as instructional leaders;
4. Principal Supervisors systematically use multiple forms of evidence of each principal’s capacity for instructional leadership to differentiate or tailor their approach to working with principals and helping principals grow as instructional leaders;
5. Principal Supervisors engage principals in the formal district principal evaluation process in ways that help principals grow as instructional leaders;
6. Principal Supervisors selectively and strategically participate in other central office work processes to maximize the extent to which they and principals focus on principals’ growth as instructional leaders;
7. Principal Supervisors engage in their own development and continuous improvement as a leader to help principals grow as instructional leaders (CCSSO, 2014).

I can’t help but think about my role as a principal supervisor in Jordan District prior to coming to work at the USOE, and how these performance standards would have helped focus my attention to the ongoing process of continual improvement and student learning in the schools that I supervised. Although I readily acknowledge that I was a principal manager with the responsibility to help principals in their schools, I did not have these instructional standards to help guide my work and determine the effectiveness of my practice in leading instructional leaders. Since these standards are still in draft form and are currently out for stakeholder review and input, I encourage principals to go to CCSSO website and offer feedback http://ccsso.org/.

Creating District Conditions that Enable Effective Principals (New Leaders and Bush Institute: AREL)

A recently released joint publication by New Leaders and the George W. Bush Institute’s Alliance to Reform Educational Leadership (AREL) entitled Great Principals at Scale (June 2014) outlines how school districts can create systems of support that promote working conditions for school leader success. Drawing on the research-based premise that “a principal accounts for 25 percent of a school’s total impact on student achievement” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004); Louis et al., 2010) and the finding that “the difference between having an average and an above-average principal can impact school-level student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005), this report advocates that districts need to create the appropriate effective conditions to directly influence school principals to be successful by establishing district systems that support leadership practices and partner with principals to reach shared student goals (Ikemoto et al., 2014). The report is an accumulation of the

Educational administrator preparation programs need to educate the candidate for administration licensure to the same standards (UELS) that the administrators will be evaluated on in their jobs.
research on the conditions needed for effective leadership. From the literature, four Strands are developed that describe the set of conditions that effective school systems need to put in place to enable principals to be effective in their schools.

**The four Strands are listed here:**

1. Alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources, so that the work of every staff member in the district is supporting system-wide goals focused on increasing student achievement;

2. Culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement;

3. Effective management and support for principals with on-going opportunities for development and feedback—and most notable, roles and responsibilities that are feasible; and

4. Systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school-level, giving principals the authority to implement staffing models that meet school needs and to appropriately staff teaching and leadership positions (Ikemoto et al., 2014).

These four Strands represent the conditions for district systems to implement to assist principals in their work. By recognizing that districts also have a role to play in school improvement and student achievement, a shared responsibility and partnership between district administration and school leaders is developed and sustained. Effective district systems then become a direct influence on the performance of effective school leadership. The old paradigm of “top down” central office policy that is supposed to work for all schools in all contexts is removed from the picture. As such, the paradigm at the other end of the continuum that advocates for site-based school-level decision-making also becomes old practice. The new district system that implements these four Strands creates a culture of shared responsibility and partnership between the schools and the district working for all students’ success and intervening with appropriate practices based on the needs of the schools.

What is most impressive and noteworthy for the thesis of this article is how Strand 4 speaks directly to the human resource functions that effective principals perform and how districts need to support and assist them with these duties. “Researchers have found that one of the most critical ways in which principals impact student learning is by hiring, placing, developing, retaining, and managing talent to improve teacher effectiveness in the school they lead” (New Leaders, 2009 & 2012). Strand 4 speaks to the need for principals to have the authority, tools, and systems they need to conduct this role effectively. Ikemoto and her colleagues (June 2014) identify the ways that district systems can implement effective conditions to impact principal performance by changing district culture related to human resource functions and allow principals to make HR decisions based on school needs.

In addition, Strand 3 outlines the need for principal managers to be in schools supporting principals with instructional leadership and effective teaching. Strand 3 identifies the type of work that supervisors of principals need to be competent to perform. Coincidentally, these conditions for district systems to implement align with the “Model Principal Supervisor Instructional Standards” discussed above (November 2014).

**Conclusion**

The purpose for this article was to present an argument that principal effectiveness needs to be determined using both the “practice perspective and the impact perspective” (Clifford et al., 2012). Just as effective teaching is measured by observing teaching practices embedded within the UETS and ultimately should improve instructional effectiveness and student growth and learning, leadership effectiveness also must be measured with evidence from both perspectives. Principals, like teachers, matter, and the direct influence principals have on teaching practices is of great importance and needs to be measured as such. The direct relationship principals have to changing or influencing effective instructional leadership, school conditions, and community context will eventually, although indirectly, reap the benefits of student achievement. Most important is the emphasis on leadership practices that impact teaching working conditions and human resource functions. These practices ultimately influence effective teaching practices. In addition, just as effective principal practice affects teaching practice, so effective district systems and conditions affect school-level leadership practice. District systems that support the human resource functions that principals do at the school-level should be adjusted and systematized to support principals in the schools. Preparation programs that prepare new administrators and offer professional learning for current principals also need to align with the Utah Educational Leadership Standards to promote effective principal practice based on current research. As you can see, the
entire process for improvement and effectiveness is complex and challenging; as I have said in past articles, together, with appropriate time and focus, we can all make a difference in our effectiveness to influence student achievement.

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When did society become more concerned with how they are perceived over a screen than how they are perceived in real life? One day after school, I was sitting with one of my close friends. We were hanging out and doing homework and I decided to take a break from my essay and scroll through my Instagram feed. My friend had recently posted a really cute picture. I double-tapped the picture to “like” it, and turned to her to ask her where she got the dress in the picture. She immediately asked how many “likes” she had on that post and pulled out her phone. Once she saw the number, she expressed her disappointment and deleted the photograph.

When I asked her why, she explained that if after a day she doesn’t have at least 100 “likes”, she deletes her Instagram pictures. I was shocked! I didn’t realize the extent of reliance upon “likes” by others that some people have to validate themselves. By the time I went home, her Instagram concern was still weighing heavily on my mind. When did this become such a problem?

A couple of months later, I had the opportunity to participate in the Miss Washington County scholarship pageant. We were asked to choose an issue that is prevalent in our community, come up with a solution, and implement it through our year of service. Immediately, the story of my friend and her Instagram reliance came to mind, and I knew exactly the issue I wanted to address. According to a new report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (along with Harvard’s Berkman Center), 95 percent of teens ages 12-17 use the Internet, and 81 percent of them use social networks. Compared to the 55 percent of teens that used social media in 2006, it seems that social media is only growing and won’t be going away anytime soon.

As educators, you are constantly exposed to and expected to solve problems that have been caused by social media. The principal at Hurricane High School, Jody Rich, found a way to use his educator stature and social media to help inspire confidence in students and inspire them to take pride in their accomplishments rather than in their “likes.” Instagram has been a great medium for him to connect with and celebrate the accomplishments of the students at HHS. He features different clubs and groups of students on his page, expressing his appreciation for their hard work and ensuring that their efforts aren’t going unnoticed. He also features individual students and deems them as his “HERO” which is an acronym for “Hard Experiences, Relentless Optimism.” This “shout out” not only allows the student’s peers to celebrate their classmate, but also inspires students to push through trials and achieve their goals.

Another great social media site to use in your school is Facebook. Creating a Facebook page is an extremely effective way to reach both your students and members of your community. Post about sporting events, fundraisers, fine arts performances, and the various activities that are going on in your school. The awareness will create a closer community and allow students to get offline and go out to the actual events to support each other. It’s also a great way to feature students’ academic achievements. Celebrating your Students of the Month, Sterling Scholars, and Honor Roll students will not only validate that their accomplishments are worth celebrating, but inspire other students to reach this standard.

The power social media has on youth is grow-
ing. Obviously, school officials need to be careful when connecting with students online. However, if used professionally, this opens up a powerful source for administrators to reach out to students, build important bridges with and for the youth in their charge, and continue to inspire and push the rising generation to become the great leaders of tomorrow.

As part of my platform for the 2014 Miss Washington County Pageant, I developed a program to promote positivity, and the idea was awarded Outstanding Platform. I have made presentations to young men and women in church groups and at schools. I have also given talks to the UASSP and Rotary Clubs. I talk to audiences about being self-confident and instilling that confidence in others. Most importantly, I discuss posting things they like instead of things they think others will like. I have started an online movement called #IFeelConfidentWhen, where people can post photographs and stories of things that matter most to them. In the short time this has been implemented, #IFeelConfidentWhen has generated many postings, but who’s counting?

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Changes the Talk: A Leader’s Pathway to Conversational Literacy

Floyd Stensrud, EdD

During an episode of undercover boss, the CEO of a limousine company was working beside a customer service rep who was talking to a limo driver and customer through a headphone. After a brief argument about a particular destination, the service rep called the customer a “liar.” The CEO was noticeably frustrated and angry. Toward the end of the show the CEO met with his customer service rep and told him that at first he wanted to fire him for the way he handled the situation, but then decided to give him another chance with additional training. The CEO then stated that as part of the employee’s remediation and training, he would write a plan for the employee that must then be followed in order to remain employed.

This scenario represents what often happens in administratively-directed behavior correction. The CEO did not include the employee in any part of the corrective remediation process. In addition; the CEO provided the plan as if having already diagnosed the problem, determined what the employee was doing wrong, and then decided how he was going to educate the employee about how to fix it (Miller and Rollnick, 2013). In most cases, this is still how school administrators operate. If you are saying, “No, that is not true,” I want you to think back to the last time you had a conversation with an employee about a discipline problem or the last time you wrote a memo of concern or reprimand. You most likely listed the concerns and gave the necessary directives to be followed. If you did have a conversation, your conversation may have been more of a discussion than a true dialogical conversation, and one that was more prescriptive rather than discursive. The problem with having a serious discussion with someone is that you may be so percussive in the tone of the conversation that you are actually talking about two different things altogether without either party acknowledging it.

I suggest that we shift our thinking to a more dialogical approach, which I would like to phrase as conversational literacy. For the moment, I would like to think of this type of literacy in metaphorical terms using music. The World Book Dictionary (1982) defines music as “a composition for two instruments or voices, or two groups of instruments or voices, each responding to the other or joining the other in a duet.” What is discursive about this metaphor is that you bring numerous instruments together of different types and sounds to make a brilliant piece of music that sounds harmonious and melodic rather than chaotic. At first glimpse, with a new piece of music, it may sound chaotic to the untrained ear, but as you practice and know what nuances you are looking for during the practice, you begin to bring clarity and understanding to an otherwise tumultuous and noisy performance. Thus it is with conversational literacy.

Conversational literacy is learning how to talk to people to gain understanding and clarity that allows you to move in a helpful direction. We may say that we agree with another person or that we are willing to step to their side in the conversation, but we may not even be talking about the same thing.
thing. Without an understanding of conversational literacy we may miss or be unaware of what the signals are to help navigate a better interaction. We must be aware of what is going on during the conversation, redirecting and navigating these waters carefully, to find our way through to dialogue. Such conversational techniques are not used in most interactions. Stone, Patton, and Heen (2010) discuss the pathway often found in most verbal interactions as “Your interests versus their interests.” Picture two arrows going in opposite directions yet joined at the backside so neither arrow actually goes anywhere. They keep tugging at each other for attention yet, neither one is moving.

We may say that we agree with another person or that we are willing to step to their side in the conversation, but we may not even be talking about the same thing. Your interests are not my interests and vice versa. Discussions can be a lot like this. Don’t get me wrong, discussions can be useful to feel out the situation, but they rarely go deep unless it formulates into a dialogue with the interests of both parties going in the same direction. Sometimes a discussion between people turns into a battle of wills, and nothing is gained because the two are talking about two different things, or what the negotiation literature refers to as Positions (Fisher and Ury, 2011). At some point the discussion needs to coalesce into a meeting of the minds on the topic or the twain shall never meet. Positions detract from a desire to come together.

One thing that has helped me is to focus on the other person’s interests first before considering my own. With their interests in your mind, the conversation will be less about positions each of you is taking on the matter and more about the deeper concerns of those interests. This will bring you closer to dialogue than a “you know what” contest! From my Smart Phone Dictionary app, I was able to find the obsolete definition of conversation. It brought up phrases such as “Behavior or manner of living.” Another interesting obsolete definition was this one: “Close familiarity; intimate acquaintance, as from constant use or study.” My take on these obsolete definitions is this: conversations used to be about relationships! I do not think we focus on what it truly means to be engaged in conversation any longer. I think we focus on getting people out of our hair, putting out fires, and attempting to fix problems. Conversations take time. And time is something we simply do not have enough of in our busy administrative roles. These missed opportunities for relationship building may be to our own professional peril, and they may be more frequently recurring, particularly in our technological world where it is easier to text than to talk.

So, if conversational literacy is important to us, we must sharpen our skills to develop more meaningful and relational conversations. If you have not already heard of Motivational Interviewing, I would like to introduce you to the concept. Miller and Rollnick (2013) coined the phrase about thirty years ago when they developed a conversational method designed to help people overcome ambivalence regarding their substance addictions. Over time, the method was more broadly generalized to include any area where one is working collaboratively with others through conversations to strengthen their “own motivation and commitment to change” (p. 12). I am referring to the kind of change needed to help others be successful both in their thought processing and in their behaviors. This is next to impossible to do as a leader, unless you have some basic knowledge of what it means to converse.

This is where Motivational Interviewing (MI) comes in to play. This concept, MI, is about relationship building while still maintaining professional conduct and accountability. We generally think about interviewing as strictly question and answer. You get grilled with questions you’ve never seen before, and then you get to answer them, too. For this simple reason we also get uncomfortable when we think that we are going into an interview. But if we think about the word interview in terms of problem solving, then it has the potential to bring on a whole new meaning. If we think of interviewing as, “... two people collaborating with one another and “looking at” or “viewing” the problem together” (drijamesbyland.com), then we shift our thinking. This moves us to collaborative problem solving, which is what MI is all about. From this perspective, collaboration is about partnering up using dialogue, creating a menu of options, and solving the problem together. You hold each other accountable to the options you have selected and choose the best one to work through the issue, hopefully toward a resolution both parties have derived together.

Motivational Interviewing was designed to help people overcome their ambivalence to change. Ambivalence is about wanting and not
one of active listening, where one essentially parrots back what the other person is saying, to reflective listening. Reflective listening is more concerned with truly listening and thinking on what the person is saying, and searching for meaning in the message being conveyed, rather than merely parroting and asking questions. Reflective listening moves the conversation along more smoothly because the person with whom you are talking does not feel like they are being interrogated. It enhances the dialogue and allows for depth in the conversation rather than merely seeking information.

Accurate empathy, the pathway to understanding using reflective listening, enhances one’s ability to see the picture in the other person’s head. Being able to see the picture, or frame, in another’s head is critical to Motivational Interviewing and negotiation literature (Miller and Rollnick, 2013; Diamond, 2010; Fisher and Ury, 2010). You must be able to see the picture in their mind’s eye. If you cannot get to this point, then you may find it difficult to move constructively and collaboratively through to the problem’s solution. Expressing empathy does not necessarily mean that you agree with the person. It only means that you see their private, personal meanings as if they were your own. This is the purpose of the frame or picture you are striving to envision.

Seeing the problem from their perspective avoids the temptation to offer unsolicited advice lending itself to the “righting reflex” (Miller and Rollnick, 2013, p. 5). In this situation, empathy plays less of a role and you are offering advice, righting them reflexively, as if you know better than they how to help them resolve their problem. The process of problem solution no longer belongs to both of you, but now to you alone. This gets back to the “fix it” mentality we entertained earlier in this article. And remember, empathy by itself is not merely doing a role reversal. You are attempting to see the situation or issue from the other person’s frame or window of reference. Situations where accurate empathy may be necessary to work from a reflective listening mode may be important to include when talking with a co-worker who behaves offensively, discussing with your boss his or her inappropriate action towards you or another colleague, critiquing a colleague’s work, talking to a team member who is not keeping commitments, or when giving an unfavorable performance review to an employee. The reasons for these types of conversations are many, and
having the skills necessary to approach people professionally and empathically will go a long way toward building a relationship where trust and credibility are critical.

You as a leader can help others improve their conditions in the workplace from a conversational perspective. After all, the goal of the leader is to help those for whom you are in charge with a reorientation toward improvement or bringing them along on the difficult journey ahead. Miller and Rollnick (2013) provide a tool, OARS (p. 62). OARS stands for Open-ended questions, Affirmation, Reflection, and Summarizing. In a conversational setting, you might ask an open-ended question to get the ball rolling or to gain additional familiarity with the other party. For example, “How are you doing...?” with the particular problem or issue at hand. You can then affirm, not praise, their response by saying something like, “That’s wonderful that you are making progress toward your goal.” Praise includes the word “I”, most generally, and detracts from how the person may feel about herself regarding the issue or problem under discussion. “I am thrilled that you are making progress toward your goal.” Frankly, who cares that you are thrilled? Affirmation on the other hand considers the personal feelings of the individual without you getting in the way. Praise can often produce feelings of condescension, which you want to avoid and may have felt in the praise-oriented statement above. Remember, it’s about them and not about you!

Offering a reflection to their response, “So you feel that you are moving in a positive direction toward your goal,” can initiate a deeper level of discussion rather than asking a question potentially detracting, rather than enhancing, the forward motion and flow of the conversation. Finally, you may want to summarize the contents of the conversation in order to maintain an appropriate understanding of where the conversation is at this point. Reflecting and summarizing allows the other party to either agree with you or correct your thought process, which is a very healthy way of maintaining the confidence the other party has in your ability to understand their side and stay focused.

These are just a few ways Motivational Interviewing offers depth and a feeling of robustness to conversations that otherwise can become just another discussion with someone who really needs a listening ear and a partner engaged with them in resolving a problem that strongly encourages and needs collaboration. Particularly in difficult situations as leaders, we need a more collaborative approach to problem solving than we have previously realized. As with a finely tuned instrument, the quality of the conversation you will have in the future comes with a starting point called practice. Using a combination of tools contained within the framework of Motivational Interviewing may help you along the way. As you are practicing the appropriate skills, with a heart striving for understanding and the other’s perspective, those interactions will become meaningful, and harmonious music will be heard.

Motivational Interviewing offers depth and a feeling of robustness to conversations. Expressing empathy does not necessarily mean that you agree with the person. It only means that you see their private, personal meanings as if they were your own.

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