## Utah Association of Secondary School Principals

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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

I don’t confine resolutions to the new year but take multiple opportunities to resolve. Maybe I don’t like myself much since I am always trying to change, and maybe I am simply anxious to apply learning, and probably both. Improving interactions is my most recent resolution. I want to build skills that honor and learn from the essence of others, that contribute to positive journeys, and that strengthen valued relationships. Every article in our journal illuminates such strategies.

Nielsen talks about lapses in evaluation systems and the need to fortify the most salient aspect of the process—relationships—to serve our fundamental purpose of student learning. Administrators and teachers must engage in observations and authentic interactions that identify, investigate, and deliver instructional improvement.

Hoover, Nelson, and Keate contribute articles on different dimensions of mindfulness. Hoover describes how a minute of mindfulness in classrooms has improved classroom interactions, and her report of use by other teachers and of the words of students demonstrates a force in a positive direction. To address increased pleas for help with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, Nelson implemented a mindfulness program practiced three times a week by all students in the school, including those not explicitly identified as troubled. Keate begins with observance of the disturbing stress identified by Hoover and Nelson and responds with an exuberant homage to the power of hope, and mindfulness is an acknowledged strategy to foster hope. Keate also gives information on a March conference organized on such topics.

Co-authors Wright, Leanne, Keate, and Rolfe describe a program to help students at risk navigate the complications of interactions—personal and academic. One fundamental precept of their work is explicit training on relationships between a teacher and a student, and this sequential guide empowers students and diverts dropping out.

Jensen, Boren, and the Murphy eschew the image of a lone-star leader and embrace the necessity for interactions, and they tell us how to amplify our power by relying on and developing the power of our colleagues.

Certainly, this journal is a demonstration of massive interaction. Carl Boyington and Jane Bradbury interact with our entire membership to make sure the journal happens, and Dave Tanner’s photography captures interactions in moments. Brent Sumner and Robert King practice invisible interactions to ensure the visual format. Interactions are sometimes electronic, and Clint Tyler moves this polished piece to an electronic format on our UASSP website where you can find this and past editions. You are invited to interact, electronically perhaps, with the authors and with Search other as you read and reach out.

The power of mindfulness to strengthen the fundamental interaction, that with ourselves, is likely to gain momentum. Our cover with the dominant clouds, distant mountain, and dry desert provides enough space and void and peace to close your eyes, take a breath, and find your inner eternity. As you do, all interactions with strengthen for a bit.
Teacher Evaluation and Student Learning

Bryon Nielsen, EdD

As school administrators, our number one goal should be to assure that all students are learning. A host of research documents the impact of teacher quality on student learning (Akiba, Le-Tendre, & Scribner, 2007). Because of this connection between quality teaching and student achievement, federal and state attention to school and teacher accountability for student learning has increased dramatically in the last decade. Current nation-wide teacher evaluation reform efforts have resulted. Forty-six states have revamped their teacher evaluation systems in the last ten years (Donaldson & Papay, 2015), and all this, despite a lack of evidence that evaluation reforms are improving teacher performance (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017) or that the outcome is better teaching and improved student achievement (Donaldson & Papay, 2015; Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008; Kimball & Milanowski, 2009; Popham, 2013; Steinberg & Sartain, 2015).

I recently completed a research study which examined the attitudes of principals and teachers about the teacher evaluation process. I studied an extensive list of reports, books, and articles; I interviewed teachers and principals and studied the teacher evaluation training materials published by a large school district. I was looking for how teachers’ and principals’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about evaluation influence implementation of the evaluation process.

Current literature indicates a substantial disparity between the expectations of researchers and policy makers on one hand and the perceptions and attitudes of practitioners on the other regarding the influence of teacher evaluation on teacher quality and student learning. New standards-based teacher evaluation systems, such as the system I studied, are predicted by many researchers and policy makers to be an important factor in improving teaching and raising student achievement, and yet many principals and teachers harbor negative perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of teacher evaluation that may hinder its impact (Goe, 2013; Goe, et al., 2008; Popham, 2013; Towe, 2012). Goodwin and Hein (2016) reported that some administrators have “questioned whether the tremendous effort to observe teachers in classrooms, given its weak overall correlation to achievement, was worth it” (p. 83). Schmoker (2012) complained that “…we are rushing into a premature, ill-conceived innovation without any solid evidence that it promotes better teaching” (p. 20).

In my study, I examined several factors contributing to the disparity identified above: (a) recommendations of current research; (b) the expectations of policy makers; (c) the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of administrators and teachers; (d) principals’ will and skill regarding evaluation; (e) principals’ lack of time; and (f) the difficulty in linking cur-
This perception, that the evaluation process is a perfunctory measure, impacts the evaluation process at its most critical level, where administrators give feedback to teachers about their observation of classroom teaching.

Due to these constraints, the very component teachers value and trust the most--face-to-face feedback with administrators and conversations about their teaching—is the most lacking in the process.

rent teacher evaluation practices to improved teaching and increased student learning. The following is a short synopsis of what I learned from my study and some recommendations for principals that may help them use their time allotted to evaluation effectively.

Although I studied only one new standards-based evaluation system, my findings appear to be similar to comparable studies completed in other large school districts. The system I studied was designed to fulfill both summative and formative purposes of evaluation, but the greater aim is, as claimed in training materials, is formative. However, despite clearly stated goals of teacher growth and improved teaching, some implementation strategies and training tools led me to the conclusion that the goal of the evaluation was simply to comply with state laws. Many of the practices and procedures school leaders engaged to complete the evaluation process appeared aimed at just getting the evaluation done, as well. Consequently, long-held negative perceptions of teachers and administrators, that the evaluation is nothing more than a yearly hoop to jump through, seem to persist (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulher, & Keeling, 2009).

This perception, that the evaluation process is a perfunctory measure, impacts the evaluation process at its most critical level, where administrators give feedback to teachers about their observation of classroom teaching. How that feedback is given is dependent upon his or her attitude and beliefs. Principals’ and teachers’ attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about evaluation are impacted by a number of factors: time, principals’ will, principals’ skill and training, how the process is presented and used (formatively or summatively), teachers’ training with the evaluation tool, consistency or inter-rater reliability, and differing opinions of what quality teaching is.

Based on my interviews with teachers, their view of evaluation, in general, is negative. Teachers complained about each of the components of the evaluation system. They don’t trust parent and student surveys; they believe observations are too infrequent and short; they admitted their self-assessments are often contrived and used to make up for perceived-poor observation ratings; and they reported that goal setting has been marginalized by being taken over by district curriculum supervisors. Teachers’ perception of the evaluation process as mainly summative negatively influences their desire to engage in the process. Teachers’ lack of trust in their administrators’ assessment of their teaching also hinders their willingness to accept feedback and make positive changes that improve their teaching.

In general, the expectations district and state policy makers have of the evaluation process and how it impacts teaching and learning are quite different from how school level administrators and teachers are experiencing it. District level documents indicate a strong, clear focus on teacher growth and improved teaching as the aim of the system. School leaders desire to realize the formative aim of evaluation and recognize the possibilities but feel the very real constraints of time, lack of training and skill, and difficulty in providing consistency. Due to these constraints, the very component teachers value and trust the most--face-to-face feedback with administrators and conversations about their teaching—is the most lacking in the process.
**Recommendations**

**Perception Replacement**

The perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of educators are critical to the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation process. Principals’ attitudes about evaluation impact, for good or bad, how they carry out their evaluation duties. This point was clear in both the principal and teacher interviews. Teachers’ attitudes, likewise, influence how they receive the evaluation process and react to feedback (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009).

**Culture.** The collection of the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the educators in a school or district is described by DuFour (1998) as the culture of the school or district. A conclusion of my study is that when a school or district seeks to implement any large-scale change, such as a new evaluation system, the culture must be addressed (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006). The actions, traditions, symbols, ceremonies, and rituals of the district must be addressed to assure they are creating the culture conducive to the aims of the change to be implemented; in this case, a new evaluation system (Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012).

**Principals should receive training to learn to articulate and demonstrate strong belief in the goal of teacher improvement and to encourage teachers’ confidence in the formative benefits of the evaluation process.**

District leadership and training should focus on bringing school leaders and teachers to see the formative value in the evaluation process. For example, all of the components of the evaluation tool I studied that are recommended to assure that the evaluation actually promotes teacher improvement and student learning gains can be implemented with fidelity, and yet the evaluation will fail to accomplish that goal if both the teacher being evaluated and the administrator doing the evaluating don’t believe in the goal and the importance of the process in achieving the goal.

**Articulate, demonstrate, and nurture.** According to the teachers and principals I interviewed, and the literature I reviewed, the most important aim of evaluation should be teacher growth and increased student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012). Principals should receive training to learn to articulate and demonstrate strong belief in the goal of teacher improvement and to encourage teachers’ confidence in the formative benefits of the evaluation process. They must learn to nurture teachers’ commitment to engaging in the process of improvement with high expectations of a positive outcome and to welcoming the formative possibilities built into the evaluation process (DuFour, 1998). The ideal of assuring that every student has access to highly effective teachers should be the focal point of evaluation, and all involved need to believe that the outcome of that process is more students learning more, more college-ready kids, higher graduation rates, and fewer failures.

**Get on the same page.** During the interviews, some principals expressed some confusion about the purpose of the evaluation process, while teachers were certain the aim is mostly summative; the training documents are clear that the aim is teacher growth, however. School district leaders must ensure congruence within all stakeholder groups (policy makers, school administrators, and teachers) and documents that the purpose of evaluation is teacher growth and improvement aimed at increased student learning gains (Havens &
Principals should receive training on how to build teachers’ capacity and self-efficacy as a prerequisite to expecting them to accept evaluation as formative.

Much of the time principals spend in training is spent on the mechanics of implementing the evaluation tool. Principals learn about how many observations they need to complete, how many times they need to have conversations with teachers, how many goals teachers need to set, and so forth, but never get to the meatier matters of what quality teaching looks like. More time ought to be given to training teachers and administrators regarding the district-provided rubrics for the observation indicators. These rubrics provide a framework for understanding effective teaching; they foster a common language, identify specific teaching strategies and behaviors, and clarify expectations of teacher growth and improvement. Rubrics serve to eliminate confusion regarding what specific observation indicators mean and help to assure greater understanding between evaluators and teachers. The rubrics allow for more specific and timely feedback tied to research-based teaching practice, as well as better self-assessment and reflection centered on the development of specific improvement goals and individualized professional development plans. Furthermore, principals need training on how to have meaningful conversations with teachers about instructional practice and they need to know how to help teachers set meaningful goals that lead to better teaching.

Practices and policies. Practices and policies, which reinforce the perception that any evaluation components are a formality to get out of the way, should be replaced with authentic procedures that teachers and administrators believe have formative value. For example, to streamline the goal-setting process for teachers, school district curriculum supervisors have taken on the task of providing goals for teachers, rendering the goals, according to the teachers interviewed in this study, meaningless to them. Teachers in the study recommended that teachers’ goals need to be personal to them, based on an examination of data from administrators’ observations and feedback along with their own perceptions of their teaching effectiveness. Goals, they said, ought to match identified areas of needed improvement and fit within a broader framework of school, department, and team aims, and should lead to the crafting of a plan for professional development.

Self-efficacy. Administrators would do well to focus on building each teacher’s sense of self-efficacy (belief in their ability to impact student learning in positive ways). Marzano, Frontier, and Livingston (2011) reported that the effectiveness of teacher evaluation systems rests on teachers’ acceptance of the process as formative and their willingness to accept less than perfect scores as a means of identifying areas of needed improvement. One of the attributes of teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy is a willingness to accept feedback that encourages more experimentation with new ideas and methods to meet more students’ needs (Prothero, 2008). Bruce (2008) noted the important relationship between teacher quality and teacher self-efficacy; “Teachers” she said “must focus on their own attitudes and classroom behaviors…” (p. 1). Teachers’ ability to impact student learning in positive ways is affected by their own beliefs about their potential to influence student learning (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2000; Torff, 2011). Principals should receive training on how to build teachers’ capacity and self-efficacy as
a prerequisite to expecting them to accept evaluation as formative.

School administrators must be taught to cultivate and nurture the seeds of formative evaluation. They should focus their discussions with teachers and their evaluative efforts on the formative aspects. They should receive the training they need to help them find time to meet face-to-face with teachers, give quality feedback that includes rich discussions about enhancement of teaching strategies, and develop their own expertise in pedagogy. They need to learn how to gain teachers’ trust and confidence in their ability as expert evaluators. District leaders, school leaders, and teachers must acknowledge that effective teachers are the most important factor in student achievement and that therefore, by improving the effectiveness of teachers, student learning will increase. Furthermore, educators must be convinced that the evaluation process is a crucial component of the teacher improvement process. All involved in the process must see the value of evaluation and be willing to both give and receive feedback with an attitude of continual change and growth.

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**Teachers and administrators agreed that having one evaluation system that fills both summative and formative roles adequately is difficult. Principals must become ultra-skilled in how they traverse the often-rocky terrain of dual-purpose evaluation systems.**

Principals must become experts at developing and maintaining positive relationships with teachers and help them see evaluation as fair and useful (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Havens & Roy, 2007; Marshall, 2005; Marzano & Toth, 2013; Popham, 2013; Toch, 2008; Towe, 2012; Weems & Rogers, 2010). Teachers in the interviews were clear that they feel they are driven to improve, that they reflect often on their teaching, and that they look for ways to improve. What teachers hope for from administrators is encouragement and support in a friendly, growth-focused environment.

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**Principal Knowledge and Skill.** The principal’s leadership is crucial in the effective implementation of the evaluation process. The burden of teacher evaluation rests primarily with principals who determine the usefulness of the system through their implementation of the system’s components (Steinberg & Sartain, 2015). Teachers and administrators agreed that successful implementation of the evaluation tool is largely dependent on principals’ beliefs and attitudes about teacher evaluation in general, and specifically, their skillful use of the components of the evaluation tool. Principals would benefit from ongoing training to help them become more proficient and consistent evaluators (Goe, 2013). District leaders should work closely with school administrators to assure that principals have the knowledge and skill to be effective evaluators. For instance, teachers reported in the interviews that although they find the summative role of the evaluation tool to be threatening, they also recognized the necessity of having an evaluation system that informs personnel decisions. Teachers and administrators agreed that having one evaluation system that fills both summative and formative roles adequately is difficult. Principals must become ultra-skilled in how they traverse the often-rocky terrain of dual-purpose evaluation systems.

**Environment.** Principals should receive ongoing training in how to create an environment of accountability without the fear and distrust that teachers reported accompany summative evaluation. They should learn how they could assure that evaluations take place in an environment of support, collaboration, reflection, and professional development. Principals must become experts at developing and maintaining positive relationships with teachers and help them see evaluation as fair and useful (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Havens & Roy, 2007; Marshall, 2005; Marzano & Toth, 2013; Popham, 2013; Toch, 2008; Towe, 2012; Weems & Rogers, 2010). Teachers in the interviews were clear that they feel they are driven to improve, that they reflect often on their teaching, and that they look for ways to improve. What teachers hope for from administrators is encouragement and support in a friendly, growth-focused environment. They want to feel assured that their principals know what is going on in their classrooms and are ready and will-
Training should be required for principals to give written and face-to-face feedback that focuses on strategies and solutions while acknowledging quality and growth.

The many roles school administrators play should be reassessed and prioritized to provide time for meaningful evaluation.

Time. Providing training and assurances to teachers that build confidence in principals’ observations and evaluations is critical to the success of evaluation, but also requires more time than simply filling in checklists (Halverson, Kelley, & Kimball, 2004). District leaders must work closely with principals to help them find the time to train teachers and to be trained themselves; to be in classrooms often, more than just the three or four times they are required to; to complete observation protocols effectively; and to spend time providing quality feedback and having frequent instruction-based conversations with teachers (Reinhorn, Johnson, & Simon, 2017). The many roles school administrators play should be reassessed and prioritized to provide time for meaningful evaluation. Perhaps routine tasks such as hall and lunch supervision could be performed by teachers or other adults in the building at little additional cost. Possibly the district could reprioritize to free up funds for administrative interns who could take on the roles of student discipline, 504 coordinator, or LEA. Principals may want to re-evaluate roles assigned to the school leadership team to assure time and resources are used for the best benefit of teachers and students and time is freed up for classroom observations and follow-up conversations.

Focus on What Works. Current teacher evaluation literature recommends multiple data sources and lines of evidence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012). The evaluation system I studied, like many contemporary evaluation systems, requires evaluators to gather data from an increased number of principal’s observations each year, yearly parent and student surveys, and measures of student achievement. Principals in the interviews, however, reported that they often find themselves hurrying through observations, looking at surveys only to find support for employment decisions, and going through the motions of collecting evidence of student achievement, just to get evaluations done by district imposed deadlines. Teachers in the interview also reported that principals tried to save time by spending little time in classrooms and giving minimal feedback or comments on the observation protocol. They also placed little trust in parent and student surveys and were inclined to discount them for a number of reasons, indicating that they would not likely make changes based on them. Like the teachers I interviewed, the principals acknowledged only slight confidence in parent and student surveys.

Both groups recommended simplifying the evaluation process and focusing on the elements that have the most impact - evaluators being in classrooms often and following up with face-to-face conversations focused on student learning (Danielson, 2015). Both interview groups reported the belief that, of all the components of the evaluation process, conversations between administrators and
teachers had the most powerful influence on teachers’ growth and improvement and the greatest likelihood to improve student learning. Frequent conversations focused on providing teachers with the feedback they require and want, they agreed, create an environment of mutual trust and fairness in which teachers are most likely to take responsibility for, and engage in meaningful professional development and growth plans which will deepen their understanding of teaching and learning. Streamlining the process to focus on the components that make a difference will potentially give principals more time to focus on conversations and feedback and allow teachers more time to focus on self-reflection and assessment, setting meaningful goals, creating a professional development plan, and following through.

District leaders should restructure the training school administrators receive regarding implementation of the evaluation tool to focus at least as much on the quality of how they administer the evaluation process as they do on what they are expected to do. Principals in the interview noted that they feel unprepared to engage teachers in instruction-focused dialogue following observations, saying they don’t have time or the expertise. They expressed a need to learn how to facilitate post observation conversations that encourage teachers to own the improvement process through self-reflection and assessment, goal setting, and creating a self-improvement plan. They must learn how to ask the right questions that will guide teachers in identifying areas of strength and weakness, and they need to be more than familiar with the resources teachers will need to create an improvement plan.

**Build Relationships.** The administrator and teacher groups each talked about the need for administrators to develop relationships of trust with teachers. Each group recommended that district leaders ought to train principals in the skill of relationship building. The interview groups concurred that positive relationships between teachers and administrators are fostered by principals who engage teachers in meaningful dialogue about instructional practice, work closely with individual teachers to identify areas of strength and weakness, and then collaboratively develop a plan for improvement. Teachers said that the more principals came into their rooms to actually see what is going on there, and then take time to have meaningful conversations, the more trusting their relationships are. They also said that when the relationship was positive, they were more likely to perceive the evaluation process as fair and valuable to them; they were more motivated to engage in collaboration with their peers regarding instructional practice, to self-reflect, and to participate in professional development.

Notwithstanding recommendations in the literature (Marzano & Toth, 2013; Popham, 2013) that quality relationships between teachers and administrators are foundational to successful evaluations, principals reported that they received little or no training from the school district on how to develop or maintain positive relationships. On the contrary, principals reported that most of the training they received was focused on the mechanics of the evaluation. If teacher evaluation is to achieve its stated purpose of teacher growth, then district leaders should work more closely with school administrators to train and mentor them to cultivate relationships of trust with teachers (Frontier & Mielke, 2016).

**Interrater Reliability.** Teachers reported being skeptical of administrators’ ratings, at least in part, because the ratings they received...
were dependent on which administrator observed and evaluated them. Principals reported that they made efforts to assure that each member of their administrator team was on the same page with respect to the way they rated teachers; they tried to ensure that teachers would receive the same ratings regardless of which administrator was evaluating them.

One suggestion that came out of the interviews was to have the administrator team observe teachers together and compare and discuss ratings afterward. With each teacher observation, the ratings, feedback, and conversations with teachers should become more consistent between administrators. One school reported that all three administrators observe each teacher together on the first observation of the year, and meet with each teacher after the observation. They complete the other observations during the year individually, but still meet as a team to discuss any concerns. Based on district generated observation item reports, this school’s administrative team has a high inter-rater reliability score.

Interrater reliability may also be improved through the establishment of common language and rubrics. Although the training materials for the tool I studied include rubrics for each item on the observation checklist, when I asked principals if they used them, some weren’t aware they existed. Teachers asked if rubrics were available to them, as well. Ongoing professional development with teachers and administrators regarding the training rubrics would assist school leaders in promoting the instructional strategies they look for when observing. Additional ongoing training with the rubrics would also provide a springboard for quality instruction-focused conversations that include detailed, descriptive feedback (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulher, & Keeling, 2009).

The evaluation system I studied includes an online professional development site which provides teachers and administrators with many learning options for teachers. For each of the five domains of the evaluation, teachers can simply click on any of the four or five indicators within the five areas and find resources such as web pages, videos, books, and articles that will give them specific ideas and solutions, based on well-researched comprehensive teaching frameworks. This resource has been operational for four years, and yet none of the teachers and only one of the principals I interviewed knew it existed. The school district should do more to make principals and teachers aware of the resources available to them; principals should also recognize the resources they have at their fingertips that could assist in improving interrater reliability.

Conclusion

Teachers, according to the literature I reviewed, are the most important factor in assuring that all students learn and achieve school success (Akiba et al., 2007). Assuring that every student is taught by highly effective teachers is a noble goal and seems to be the focus of the decade-old trend to revamp teacher evaluation systems throughout the U.S. (Donaldson & Papay, 2015; Goe et al., 2008; Kimball & Milanowski, 2009; Popham, 2013; Steinberg & Sartain, 2015). Teacher evaluation done right, and combined with other efforts, such as collaboration in teams and departments, may be an important factor in improving teaching and raising student achievement.

References


Each group recommended that district leaders ought to train principals in the skill of relationship building.


Bryon Nielsen, EdD is principal of Fairfield Junior High School in Davis County School District. He can be reached at bnielsen@dsdmail.net or 801-402-7000.
Junior high is a tough time for teenagers. There are many factors that bring anxiety into our students’ lives. Things like the transition from elementary to junior high, academic pressure, social acceptance at school, socio-economic struggles, self-esteem, bullying and friendships, social temptations, learning English-as-a-second-language and crowded, rowdy hallways are a few stressors in our student’s lives. Not only are students faced with different environmental factors, but they are going through physical changes in their body and brains. Student’s stress appears in our classrooms.

Concerns
As teachers, we get all the chaos from the hallways and the drama from the lunchrooms. We feel the anxiety and the pressure when we are introducing new concepts and activities. What we have seen at Valley Junior High is that something as simple as a mindful, quiet minute can make a class period more productive and less chaotic.

Concepts
Trent Hendricks, principal at Valley, introduced mindfulness and yoga concepts to our staff at Valley Junior High early in the 2017-2018 year. The idea was that if we were taught mindfulness and breathing techniques, it would spill out into our school. As a first-year teacher last year, my anxiety level was always extremely high. I had no coping methods for this new stressor, and it would result in meltdowns and exhaustion. We were taught breathing exercises and meditation techniques. I could feel the difference between high levels of stress at the beginning of the year and later when I knew how to control some of my anxiety. My favorite breathing exercise was the 4-7-8. You inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds and exhale for 8 seconds. I found myself doing this before school started, in-between class periods and when I had to deal with behavior or management issues. I also did this outside of school whenever I needed it. I felt calmer and more in control. Haim Ginot said it best, “As teachers, we are the decisive element in our classrooms. How we react to situations creates our classroom environments.” If we are stressed out and on-edge, we react in ways we wouldn’t normally. I was a better teacher. I wanted to teach my students these techniques to use in school and at home.

Calmness
We were also taught about a mindful minute where students come in and sit quietly for an entire minute. They are trying to wipe away the stress from the halls, from other classrooms, and from home as well as they could. They are more willing to start class and be productive after this mindful minute. Students have often reminded me, if I have forgotten, about their mindful minute. They can feel the change in our classroom, too.
Students have told me they feel “fresh” and work harder after our mindful minute. One seventh-grade girl, who is an English as a Second Language (ESL) student, told me, she likes the minute because “It helps me get the sadness and anger out sometimes. I feel stressed a lot and it makes me feel less stressed.” Another ESL student who is an eighth-grade boy said “I like the silence. I am able to put my head down and relax for a minute. I feel like I can focus on what is coming next after the silence.”

They are ready for the next subject after they come in and can be in a silent place for a while. After we could be quiet for an entire minute, I introduced the 4-7-8 breathing exercise. Students were excited to tell me about the times they had used the technique at home when they were feeling frustrated. I know that class is a lot smoother after we have done it.

Since this is working so well throughout my classes, I will be using this as we approach WIDA testing. A majority of our student body are ESL students or are learning English as a second-language. Easing any stress that they may have before a test will help them do better. There are so many strategies we use to help ESLs do better and feel more comfortable at school. Letting them breathe between classes has been one strategy I have loved seeing because it works.

I don’t just feel it in my classroom. Many teachers including our SPED teachers have come to see how our mindful minute creates a calmer classroom. Mr. Ken Woods who teaches Special Education-Math said, “I find that when my overall class was really hard to control, I had forgotten to do the minute of silence at the beginning of class.” Our reading teacher, Ms. Brinna Torgersen, said “I use it in every class period, and it definitely helps with classroom management. I can see a difference in myself and the students if I forget to have our one minute of silence. Often, students will remind me if I forget to do it. I remind the students that the one minute is time for them to step away from everything else going on in their lives. It’s time that they do not have to think about anything.” We have many teachers, in our building, doing the quiet minute, and there is a consensus that it is working and helping our classroom atmosphere.

To make this effective in your own classroom, I would first, research it and adapt it into your own life. Go to a yoga class, try meditation, talk with a yoga teacher, try mindfulness minutes at the beginning of your day, research and try new breathing techniques and be open to something that may seem odd at first.

Next, I would introduce the concept to your students. Students will buy into this new concept if you are excited and optimistic about it. Teach the mindfulness silent minute to your class just like any other procedure. Have your silence at the bell or right after your starter. Start out your minute with “You may put your head on your desk or close your eyes. Put your hands in a comfortable position and your feet firmly on the floor. Don’t think about anything but deep breaths.” After the one minute is up, I would say “Ok! Heads up! Get ready to start work for the day!” You may get a few embarrassed glances or nervous laughs the first couple times but eventually, it will become part of the schedule and you will see the difference.

Our staff has jumped into this with both feet. We are feeling the calmness in our school. We see the benefits in our students and in some of our personal lives. As educators, we are always trying new things that bring success into our classrooms. I honestly think a great step to success is teaching mindfulness and breathing exercises. The best way
to start mindfulness in a new classroom is one minute of silence and letting our students know that this is a time to not think about anything but breathing. It doesn’t take much practice or teaching and is often met with an eagerness to do it more than once a day.

Our students need calm spaces to manage the stress they deal with in their personal lives and the stress they meet every day at our front door, and mindfulness is one way to calm their worlds and ours.

DeMarie Hoover is an ESL and history teacher at Valley Junior High in Granite School District. You can contact her at dmhoover@graniteschools.org.
Exploring Mindfulness at Albion Middle School

Cathrine Nelson

Albion Middle School has recently introduced a new program to address the social and emotional needs of students. While such needs for this age group seem to exceed those in elementary and high school, clearly our society has grown so complex that such programs hold promise for any age.

Reason for Implementing
We had noticed a significant increase in the number of students requesting to see us in the Counseling Center for help with stress, anxiety, and depression, and we were looking for a school-wide approach to help students with these concerns. Because this was such a widespread concern, roughly 30% of the students we were meeting with were wanting help with coping skills, we knew that a systemic approach was key. The Utah State Board of Education provided a grant opportunity that we applied for and received that allowed Albion to implement the Inner Explorer Mindfulness program.

Purpose, Hopes and Goals
The purpose of this school-wide mindfulness program is to help ALL students in middle school whether they suffer from anxiety and depression or just the normal stress that comes with middle school. Mindfulness can help students manage their stress and anxiety, and it also helps with common middle school issues like impulse control, focus, kindness, empathy, resilience, and productivity. A quote from the presenter who trained the grant recipients on the mindfulness program really resonated with me and my experience with middle school students “Mindfulness creates space between how you FEEL and what you DO. It helps you to RESPOND to a situation rather than REACT. And, it helps you focus on what’s RIGHT instead of what’s WRONG.” I believe everyone could use help with this! We are hoping to see an improvement in grades, a reduction in office discipline referrals, and a reduction in the number of students needing help with stress, anxiety, and depression.

Description of Program
The Inner Explorer Mindfulness program is a series of 90 different 10-minute mindfulness practices. They are age and developmentally appropriate, and Inner Explorer provides an elementary, middle, and high school version for schools. All the practices are prerecorded so all teachers need to do is press play! They are designed to be implemented every day. Our school, so far, has implemented this practice three times a week.

Implementation Difficulties or Successes
We asked all teachers to set up the same
requirements in their classroom for the mindfulness practice. All students must sit up straight, face the same direction, and be silent. Students are also encouraged to close their eyes, but this is not required. Asking middle school students to be quiet and sit still for 10 minutes can definitely be challenging. Typically the students who struggle with this the most are also the students who need the positive benefits of mindfulness the most. We have worked hard to emphasize with students and teachers that practicing mindfulness is not easy. It is hard to quiet our busy minds that are accustomed to being inundated with texts and social media updates. We also have encouraged our teachers to participate in the practice at the same time to help set the example and reap the positive benefits as well.

**Results**

It is too early to tell any results based on data collection, but, anecdotally, many students report feeling calmer and more relaxed after participating in their mindfulness practice. Students also report feeling better prepared for upcoming tests and quizzes and that the mindfulness practice helps them calm down after a stressful class presentation or project. We’re also using it in the counseling center to help students calm down and hit the “reset” button.

**Refinements**

Ultimately, I would love to incorporate this practice into every school day. I would also love to be able to continue offering this program to our students in future years. I have also discussed with some teachers the need to incorporate mindfulness throughout the day as needed. For example, allowing students to practice the exercise before a test or student presentation might be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

Of course, the practice of mindfulness is as ancient as it is innovative to introduce to our schools. As our world and student worlds are complicated with sensory overabundance, responsibility pressures, and complicated turmoil, the search for remedies is important. We will continue to monitor data and anecdotal material, to refine our implementation, and to explore elaborations of this program.

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Focus on Hope

Justin Keate

As administrators who work with students daily, no matter the size of our student population or demographic, we deal with our fair share of behavior issues during the school day. A growing number of mental health problems also seem to be part of the mix in working with student behavior and discipline. Truth be told, the gamut of mental health issues--from depression, anxiety, suicidal idealization, to struggles focusing in school--seems to be on the rise and growing at a rapid pace. We educators see this first hand.

Working hard with students who struggle with some sort of behavior or mental illness, which likely is getting in the way of learning, I am all ears when it comes to new strategies that may help. I would like to share with you a strategy that we have tried lately, and I believe is truly making a difference for the better. It’s actually quite simple. Focus on Hope! This is not just a suggestion that hope or being more hopeful could help students feel better. I’m talking a relentless solution-focus that hope or being more hopeful can and will be the catalyst for optimal success. Give your students a reason to have hope in all situations, no matter what is going on.

What is hope? Let’s start with a basic definition of hope. Hope, for our purposes, can be defined as a firm belief or trust that the future can and will be better than the present. When students, or any of us for that matter, lose hope, they are in a tough place mentally and emotionally. Navigating these struggles while sitting in class could mean there is not be much math, science, history being learned at all. When hope is gone, there is essentially no education happening. Losing hope is the granddaddy of roller coasters that takes motivation and engagement on a screaming downhill not so thrilling ride to Throw-the-towel-in-town. Not a good place to be at all for our students.

Enter hope. I don’t care what the behavior is, what the student was sent to your office for, what you’ve always done to solve issues like this in the past, focus on hope! Start by getting their thinking right. Hope can be learned, can be cultivated, is like a muscle that can grow with exercise, and it’s time to hit the hope gym! Students need to believe, really trust and believe, that the future can and will be better than the present. Get their thinking right!

Practice mindfulness in these situations with your students. Teach them to be mindful and focus on the present, then weave in a healthy dose of hope. No matter what the behavior is that got them here, flip the hope switch on and get them believing they just learned a valuable lesson in what not to do. The struggling student’s current behavior isn’t working or serving their best self, so we’re going to stop. Good! High fives all around on learning what didn’t work for you, and celebrate that you now have that
knowledge and can move forward better and smarter! Now you can bring your better, smarter self to similar situations in the future. Keep moving forward!

Hope is energizing! Help students believe that simply failing, learning from failing, moving forward grateful for the lesson learned and a better self is born! When students see struggles and mistakes for what they really are, learning opportunities, they can move through challenges with greater energy and ease. The secret sauce to abundant energy in moving through those challenges and mistakes is hope. When we infuse all the hope we can back into students’ mindset, they can tap into massive amounts of energy and sustaining power!

So give it a try with your students who are struggling! Commit to focus on hope! Help your struggling students see that with a hopeful attitude and working out their hope muscles no matter how undeveloped they are, they can and will find the energy to move through challenges. Shane J. Lopez, author of the book “Making Hope Happen” even went as far to say “How we hope is how we live.”

When you are working with students in any capacity who struggle with behaviors or mental illnesses, and you make hope a part of your positive behavior interventions, you can help them tap into that seemingly endless amount of energy to move through life’s struggles a little better. When you help your students find hope, the future truly can and will be better. I hope you try it!

Our Vision:

What sets Empowered Academy apart is lessons learned over 2000 years ago which are still relevant today. Our inspiration for Empowered Academy is taken from the Fathers of Philosophy and Education, modeled after the ancient wisdom of Plato’s Academy. Plato’s academy was a meeting of the minds, bringing people together to learn and collaborate, to inspire, to become empowered.

An Empowered Academy Conference is not your average conference, our unique model will take your conference experience to another level! Plato’s academy was not held in the classroom, but in the gymnasium or outdoors. Ancient philosophers understood and honored the importance of educating the whole-self, the mind and the body. Lectures were followed by opportunities of movement, exercise, and activity. In that spirit, Empowered Academy offers you the unique experience of optimal learning. At an Empowered Academy conference we are dedicated to that same wisdom and are committed not only to educating the mind, but also purposely building in movement, mindfulness, and wellness sessions to optimize your experience.

We invite you to join Empowered Academy at our Empowered Conference on Saturday, March 30, 2019 at the Dixie State University Campus in St. George Utah.

Justin Keate is principal of Desert Hills High School and can be reached at Justin.keate@washk12.org. Justin, in seeking answers, has been a leader in organizing a conference with a focus on social emotional well-being March 30, 2019 at Dixie State University. Details accompany this article.
To be the premier resource for educators, counselors, administrators and professionals to help young adults optimize social emotional wellbeing.

Disrupt the traditional conference model by following the style of Plato’s Academy through a ‘whole-self’ experience infusing the best speakers and topics with purposeful wellness and movement sessions.

To empower attendees via whole-self learning to enhance their skill sets and therefore better serve their students/clients.

Empowered Academy Conference
A Unique Mental Health and Wellness Conference for Educators and Professionals
Hosted at the beautiful campus of Dixie State University, Saturday, March 30, 2019.
While dropout rates have been declining (Freeman et al., 2015) since the 1990’s call for educational reform, the overall dropout rate in the U.S is 6.2% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Many factors contribute to student’s decision to drop out of school including: school climate and student discipline (Bohanon & Wu, 2014). While the overall dropout rate is 6.2% it should be noted that students with minority identities and disabilities are more likely to dropout than their white peers; Caucasian at 4.6%, black 6.5% and Hispanic 9.2% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Students who find themselves unable to meet the growing demands of school and receive traditional discipline approaches are also at an increased risk for dropping out (Morrissey, Bohanon, & Fenning, 2010). While there has been a declining trend in dropout rates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018), the impact that dropping out has on society and the student’s future trajectory can be devastating (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). With numerous negative consequences such as living in poverty, an increased likelihood of being in prison, and negative employment outcome, (Christle, et al., 2007) it is essential that dropout interventions are effective at targeting the reasons why student’s dropout.

Dropout Interventions
While there are a number of existing dropout prevention programs (e.g., Reconnecting Youth, Check and Connect, PRE-PaRE), there is a paucity of evidence to support the effectiveness of these programs (Freeman et al., 2015). The commonly studied interventions aim to teach students skills to prevent – dropping out (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2010; Cheney et al., 2010; Cho, Hallfors, & Sanchez, 2005; Maynard, Kjellstrand, & Thompson, 2014; McDaniel, Houghins, & Robinson, 2016; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998); however, these interventions do not always fit within a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This article details the creation and implementation of a dropout prevention program called School of Life in Utah called School of Life Foundation.

The flexibility in allowing each school to determine risk criteria allows the intervention to serve the unique community of the school.
program School of Life Foundation (SOLF) intervention which fits within a PBIS framework and shows promising results in teaching skills to reduce dropout rates.

**School of Life**

The School of Life Foundation (SOLF) intervention is aimed at decreasing student dropout through a prevention curriculum. This intervention focuses on students who are seen as at-risk for dropping out of school. Some of the common factors that go into determining risk are: tardies, low academics, and behavioral issues. This intervention has been implemented in Utah schools as an alternative to traditional discipline. By providing students with an alternative to school detention and suspension, and instead by teaching key life skills, they are more likely to stay in school. SOLF has had a positive impact on a number of students in Utah schools (Hawken et al., 2018) and serves as a cost efficient intervention. This article will describe the basic implementation of the SOLF intervention and the preliminary research supporting the intervention.

**Setting the Stage for SOLF**

One of the hallmarks of this intervention is the trainer/student interaction. This interaction is vital to the integrity of the intervention. The SOLF trainers are members of the student’s community, such as teachers or other educators which allow the students to make meaningful connections with the program. Prior to the intervention being implemented, the trainers, two per group, one male and one female, undergo 14 hours of training on how to implement the intervention. This training is comprised of both observing and partaking in a SOLF class as well as classroom instruction. The classroom instruction is centered on implementation fidelity and requires that the trainers practice presenting materials as well as review the standardized script of content.

Once trainers have received adequate instruction on how to implement SOLF, they are assigned to schools, and students are chosen to participate in the intervention. Each school creates a list of criteria to determine if a student is at risk for dropping out. The flexibility in allowing each school to determine risk criteria allows the intervention to serve the unique community of the school. Prior to participation students are required to sign an agreement indicating their dedication to participate in the intervention. Additionally, students fill out a survey to gauge their current views and abilities.

**SOLF Curriculum**

The key components of SOLF are nine A’s that serve to guide lessons and the intervention: 1) Appreciate, 2) Assist, 3) Attitude, 4) Aim, 5) Align, 6) Action, 7) Associate, 8) Avoid, and 9) Adapt. These A’s are the foundation upon which students can successfully navigate school and avoid dropping out. SOLF is delivered after school over four sessions, each lasting two hours. These sessions each follow a similar format and consist of: a check in, lesson and discussion, and closing comments and support. SOLF serves as an efficient intervention due to the highly scripted nature of the lessons. This allows the trainers to focus their energy on interacting with the students and engaging them in discussion rather than generating content. Each lesson is delivered through PowerPoint and includes a mix of videos and didactic instruction. Throughout the lessons the trainers encourage participation in the form of asking questions and challenge the students to apply the A’s to their own lives. Three A’s are covered in each session.
Trainers undergo training

Students selected for intervention

Week 1: Students introduced to program, lecture

| Appreciate | Assist | Attitude |
| Week 2: Check in and lecture |

| Aim | Align | Action |
| Week 3: Check in and lecture |

| Associate | Avoid | Adapt |
| Week 4: Personal presentation & certificates |

**Overview of the A’s**

The A’s that are covered in the intervention are aimed at providing students with the skills necessary to stay in school. These A’s encompass factors that can be linked to students being at risk for dropping out. The chart below lists some of the most common reasons student drop out of high school and how those align with the A’s. While the A’s cannot capture all the possible reasons that students have for dropping out, they do span a wide variety of circumstances. Additionally, these A’s map on to two constructs shown to impact drop out prevention: school connectedness and motivation. School connectedness has shown to have strong implications for later success and preventing dropping out (Biag, 2016; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), with students demonstrating more connectedness having higher grades and more engagement (Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012). Additionally, there has been an observed link between motivation and students’ decisions to drop out (Khalkhali, Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013) with students who drop out demonstrating lower levels of motivation (Vallerand et al., 1997). Taken together, the A’s are an effective framework that address the major reasons why students choose to dropout in addition to targeting two key factors in dropout prevention.
### School Connectedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assist</th>
<th>Aim/Attitude</th>
<th>Avoid/Associate</th>
<th>Align</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Adapt/Appreciate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had to take care of or financially support my family</td>
<td>Did not like school, thought it would be easier to get a GED or other alternative high school credential</td>
<td>My friends had dropped out of school</td>
<td>Got behind in school work or got poor grades</td>
<td>Was suspended or expelled</td>
<td>Could not work and go to school at the same time, did not need to complete high school for what I wanted to do, wanted to gain early admission to school that provides occupational training or a college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Week One

Week One of SOLF covers Appreciate, Assist, and Attitude as well as orients students to the intervention. Expectations are established for communication as well as participation. Students are then provided with a copy of the SOLF handbook, “Learn to School Your Toughest Component,” which provides reading and homework assignments that follow the lessons. Appreciate covers being grateful for one’s support system and opportunities with the corresponding homework of writing a letter to someone in their lives. Assist emphasizes the importance of helping others and includes corresponding homework assignment to assist someone during the week. Attitude introduces students to the power of positive attitude in shaping their mood and emotions. For their homework students engage in a daily exercise of looking in the mirror and adjusting their attitude.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciate</td>
<td>Being grateful</td>
<td>Writing a letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist</td>
<td>Helping others</td>
<td>Help another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Positive thinking</td>
<td>Mirror exercise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Week Two

Week Two of the intervention opens with a review of the previously assigned homework and reminder of the A’s covered. For week two Aim, Align, and Action are explored and discussed. Aim introduces students to goal setting, in the form of SMART (specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic and timely) goals. Students are taught how to create effective goals and given the homework of creating one short-term goal to be accomplished within the week. Align exposes students to organizational skills and the importance of organization for future success. Students explore a number of organizational systems in class and are given the homework of organizing a space in their life. Finally, Action is discussed as making the choice to achieve something and avoid procrastination. Students are given the assignment to complete one thing that they have been avoiding.
Aim  |  Concept  |  Homework  
---|---|---
Goal setting | SMART goals | 
Organization | Organize space | 
Making choices | Take action on a task that has been avoided |

### Week Three

Week three, similar to Week Two, starts with a review of the assigned homework before moving into the new A’s. Week Three incorporates the final A’s: Associate, Avoid, and Adapt. Associate encourages students to make friends and connection with others in their community and emphasizes the importance of friendship. Homework for this A is to meet one new person over the next week. Avoid, in conjunction with Associate, emphasizes abstaining from people, places, and things that might harm them or keep them from their goals. Following this A, students are to reflect on their support system and how it aligns with their current goals. The final A covered, Adapt, emphasizes the importance of being flexible in accepting challenges and changes in life. The corresponding homework requires the students to convert a challenge into an opportunity and share their experience with someone in their support system. Additional homework for Week Three includes the students preparing for their final presentation (discussed below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Make connections</td>
<td>Meet someone new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>Avoid harmful things</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Convert a challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Week Four

The final week of SOLF is aimed at reflecting on what has been taught. For this reflection students are required to prepare a short presentation explaining which A has impacted them the most. Students are encouraged to use a media platform such as a song, poem, or visual art form that is unique to them. Following the presentations students complete a closing survey, mirroring the one they took prior to the class, and receive a certificate of completion.

### Outcomes

Outcomes for SOLF have been evaluated using the data collected from the opening and closing survey as well as data provided by the administrators to the SOLF research team (Hawken et al., 2018). This survey spans all the A’s and requires students to reflect on their growth. Currently, results have demonstrated a significant reduction in tardies and absences. Additionally, students who participated in SOLF had significant increases in motivation and school connectedness following the intervention. The final finding, and perhaps the most relevant, shows that 85% of students who were off track to graduate ended the year by graduating or advancing grade levels.

### Conclusion

High school dropout is a phenomenon that impacts the United States as well as Utah specifically. The consequences for students who dropout can be both detrimental and severe. These consequences demonstrate
the need for efficient and effective dropout prevention curriculum. Given the need to address dropout in Utah high schools, the School of Life Foundation intervention should be considered as a viable way to increase students' motivation and school connectedness. Additionally, this intervention aims to increase students' skills in a number of areas which increases their ability to be successful and complete high school.

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The Why and the What of the School Leadership Team: A Bicycle Worth Riding

Joe Jensen, David Boren, Theron Murphy

In an efficiency study of animals, S.S. Wilson showed that humans on foot are average compared to other creatures. Yet, when humans rode a bicycle they became more efficient than any other animal studied. On bicycles, humans are five times more efficient, they increase “unaided speed by a factor of three or four” and “improve their efficiency rating to number one among moving creatures” (Wilson, 1973, p. 82). Similarly, in moving a school toward a vision, operating solo, even the best principal is average. However, principals that ride a metaphorical bicycle become much more efficient and effective in moving their schools toward a vision. That metaphorical bicycle is the purposeful, consistent distribution of leadership through a School Leadership Team (SLT).

Distributing leadership through the SLT requires a fundamental shift in how we define leadership. It requires us to “move away from a model where the leader knows, directs, and tells . . . toward one where the leader sees, provokes, asks, and unleashes the capability of others” (Wiseman, Allen, & Foster, 2013, p.167). Thus, “rather than focusing on the character traits and actions of individual leaders--in the heroic American tradition of charismatic leadership—we will increasingly have to focus on the distribution of leadership” (Elmore, 2004, p. 42). The traditional leader as hero model is outdated. Leaders must realize “No one person, no matter how competent, is capable of single handedly developing the right vision, communicating it to vast numbers of people, eliminating all of the key obstacles, generating short term wins, leading and managing dozens of change projects and anchoring new approaches deep in an organization’s culture. Putting together the right coalition of people to lead a change initiative is critical to its success” (Kotter, 2010, p. 52). Unfortunately, such powerful coalitions rarely exist in schools. “While many schools may have teams, our experience has suggested that few
may constitute what we think of as authentic leadership teams. Rather than being imbued with leadership capacity, many school teams simply perform delegated administrative tasks” (DeFlaminis, Abdul-Jabbar, & Yoak, 2016, p. 157).

A well-tuned bicycle wheel is smooth and efficient. Wheels wobble when even just one spoke is not tuned. When one or more spokes become loose or broken, the wheel becomes un-rideable. Just as tuned-up spokes are central to a smooth ride, let’s examine some key elements to high functioning SLTs that must be in place for schools to experience a smooth and efficient distributed leadership ride.

Spoke 1 - Leverage the Power of Ratios

While most principals know that “improving an organization must take place within, and across, each level of the organization,” they are also keenly aware of their inability to personally meet the needs of all students, teachers, and teams (Scribner, et al., 2007, p. 96). Even the 1:25 principal-to-teacher ratio in small schools presents a daunting task, not to mention the 1:120 ratio in large schools. “It isn’t humanly possible for one person to shoulder this responsibility” (Sweeney & Mausbach, 2018, p. 89); principals don’t have “unlimited supervisory capacity [nor] all the time in the world to change teachers one at a time” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2014, p. 46). Even if principals had unlimited time with each teacher and team, one leader cannot be expected to “embody all traits and skills that remedy all the defects of the schools in which they work” (Elmore, 2000, p. 14). From a strict numerical perspective, it is only possible for a principal to work intensively and consistently with a small ratio. Therefore, it is crucial for a principal to build capacity of his administrative team and the SLT. Real principal leadership means coaching other leaders and building capacity behind the scenes, so those school leaders can then co-lead the rest of the faculty (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows why the SLT is the lynchpin for leveraging this power of ratios and serves as the forging link between administration and faculty. The combined efforts of an administrative team and SLT will have a much greater impact than a few “harried supervisor[s], running frenetically from teacher to teacher, giving advice” and trying to initiate improvement (Schmoker, 2005, p. 125). As principals strategically leverage ratios and build leaders around them, their energies and efforts will be distributed, multiplied, and improved throughout the school. Fullan and colleagues (2017) encourage leaders to leverage “the group to change the group” (p. 31), and in order to do that, principals must make ratios manageable.

How could your school utilize the SLT to more effectively leverage the power of ratios?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Traditional vs. Distributed Leadership Ratios in Schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
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</table>
Spoke 2 - Assemble the Right Coalition of People and Those Closest to the Work

Ed Catmull, in describing PIXAR’s phenomenal success said, “Getting the team right is the necessary precursor to getting the ideas right.” PIXAR’s leadership team is “one of Pixar’s key mechanisms” to push them “toward excellence and to root out mediocrity.” It is their “primary delivery system for straight talk...its premise is simple. Put smart, passionate people in a room together, charge them with identifying and solving problems, and encourage them to be candid with one another” (Catmull & Wallace, 2014, pp. 86-87).

To experience similar benefits from a SLT, we must carefully consider who serves on that team. While seemingly obvious, an SLT must include those closest to the work—teachers. Which teachers? In many schools, in addition to administrators and coaches, the SLT includes department chairs or grade-level team leaders. With respect to how we choose and train members of the SLT, Eaker and Keating (2009) lament: “what they are to do, and how they are selected goes largely unexamined.” DuFour and Marzano (2011) offer helpful considerations:

- How influential are they with colleagues?
- Do they embrace the school vision?
- Will they champion a PLC culture and other key processes?
- Can they think systematically about whole school needs?

Eaker and Keating (2009) further recommend that collaboratively clarifying roles and responsibilities of the SLT also clarifies who should serve on that team. One principal shared, “My whole understanding of distributed leadership has given me permission not to feel the pressure of having to know it all. . . that’s given me the freedom to look for people who can support my limitations” (Rosalie cited by DeFlaminis, Abdul-Jabbar, & Yoak, 2016, p. 92). Because the SLT “sets the tone for everything we do” (Catmull & Wallace, 2017, p. 87), who serves on the leadership team absolutely matters.

How have you carefully selected who serves on your SLT, clarifying and publicizing the qualifications, roles, and responsibilities of SLT?

Spoke 3 - Work from the Inside-out and Outside-in

With the right team members in place, we move a vision forward by working from the inside-out and from the outside-in. This means we create a culture where everyone learns and grows in a two-way process. There are many nuanced layers to building such a culture, not be addressed in this article. But, suffice it to say, it requires an environment where a principal shapes a vision, and that vision is also shaped by the SLT. The same is true of the SLT—they help shape the vision but are also shaped in the process.

Working from the inside-out means a principal has a vision and can articulate that vision with the administrative team. Then, unitedly, the administrative team shares, supports, and further co-develops that vision with the SLT. SLT members then model similar processes with collaborative teacher team leaders. Eventually, for student learning to improve, those collaborative team leaders spread that vision and build teacher capacity to carry out that vision. It is difficult to leverage a SLT effectively if a principal lacks vision or struggles to work from the inside-out to communicate that vision (see Figure 1).
Principals must also recognize the benefit of working from the outside-in. Visioning, communicating, and learning must be two-way processes. The SLT must be involved in creating the school vision. Principals should not negligently delegate improvement efforts to the SLT, washing their hands of responsibility. DuFour and Eaker warn: “principals do not empower others by disempowering themselves. . . They must lead… Empowered teachers and strong principals are not mutually exclusive” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, pp. 187–188). Nor do principals work with a leadership team merely to execute their own personal vision. This is a shared endeavor. Both the hands-off and my-way-or-highway approaches to leadership are self-serving and are not true distributed leadership.

Instead, we distribute leadership because we recognize that on its own, our individual vision is incomplete and inadequate. We distribute leadership to tap into our school’s collective intelligence, passion, and talents. We distribute leadership recognizing that doing so will build ownership, passion, synergy, capacity, and commitment for a co-created shared vision bigger and better than what we could ever develop on our own. Surely, “when people are ordered to do something they don’t believe in, they go through the motions. When they take ownership of their goal, they blow you away” (Dintersmith, 2018, p. 191). Thus, we are “as bottom-up as possible; as top-down as necessary,” (Evans, 1996, p. 245) balancing the “loose-tight” tension as we thoughtfully work from the inside-out and from the outside-in. In the process, everyone in the organization improves.

How could your school better work from the inside-out and the outside-in?

**Spoke 4 - Have Peers Lead Peers**

Position peers to lead peers to work from the inside-out and outside-in. Teachers lead teachers by being empowered to take “the helm in leading action plans, facilitating faculty meetings and professional development trainings, and conducting surveys and other data collection and analysis projects in their schools” (DeFlaminis, Abdul-Jabbar, & Yoak, 2016, p. 73). Credibility increases when respected teachers stand before peers to facilitate a vision toward meaningful learning. “Peer-facilitators are uniquely positioned to model ‘a leap of faith,’ … as a full participant in the inquiry process. Teacher-facilitators are trying out in their classrooms the same [strategies] as everyone else in the group” (Gallimore et al., 2009, p. 548). Ask yourself, who conducts and facilitates various meetings? While an administrator likely facilitates administrative team meetings, schools with healthy distributed leadership would see teacher leaders taking the prominent role in facilitating SLT meetings, teacher team meetings, professional development, classroom observations, and teacher coaching. Truly, “hierarchical leadership can never influence the masses on any scale, but purposeful peers can have this effect” (Fullan, 2014, p. 55).

**Spoke 5 - Focus SLT Meetings on Building Capacity**

For peers to lead peers effectively, we must have quality SLT meetings. Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2012) recommend a few
possible agenda items for SLT meetings: co-creating the school mission and vision; coordinating schedules; allocating resources; leading schoolwide screening, overseeing teaching and intervention efforts in academics and behavior; and monitoring student progress. These are important agenda items, but two overarching agenda items must be included to create the conditions for peers to lead peers.

First, we must deliberately build the capacity of each member of the SLT to make informed decisions. Some principals “convene leadership teams with the intent of sharing leadership, but then fail to provide the support the teacher leaders need” to grapple with larger schoolwide issues (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 64). We need to learn from and become informed together. Interestingly, “the more aware teacher leaders become of the rigors of the administrative job, its burdens and challenges, the more they are willing to assist, co-lead, and negotiate understandings with their peers” (DeFlaminis, Abdul-Jabbar, & Yoak, 2016, p. 110). Effective leaders realize that “if they ask uninformed people to make decisions, the result will be uninformed decisions. Therefore, they are vigilant about ensuring people have ready access to the most relevant information and that the group has collectively studied the information before it is called upon to make a decision” (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, p. 124). By becoming informed together, the gap that often exists between administration and a staff shrinks because the SLT bridges that gap.

Second, SLT meetings must build the capacity of PLC team leaders to effectively guide their respective teams. The primary work of the SLT is to ensure that collaborative team leaders can effectively support their collaborative teacher teams to accomplish their goals in the PLC process. If PLC collaborative team leaders leave meetings led by the SLT knowing the new intervention schedule or the attendance policy but are not sure how to help the teachers on their team collaborate effectively, something went wrong in the meeting. Meetings led by the SLT to build PLC team leader capacity should exemplify collaboration, serving as a model for PLC team leaders to follow as they lead their teams. In these settings, SLT members should provide time for PLC team leaders to celebrate triumphs or struggles in leading their collaborative teams toward their team’s goals. This type of authentic collaboration allows SLT members to learn from each other. PLC team leaders learn how to better lead, and the SLT gains insight about how to better support team leaders and teams.

Have you built the capacity of SLT members to make informed decisions by sharing information and studying best practices together?

How do you use SLT meetings to build capacity to support teacher teams in the PLC process?

Spoke 6 - Create Conditions and Structures to Build Capacity

How can we make time to build capacity during SLT meetings when there are so many other truly important, urgent, in-your-face needs (e.g. scheduling, attendance, discipline, budget, events)? Many principals attempt to address a few management items at the beginning of meetings, only to have them consume entire meetings. Developing leadership capacity gets neglected when management issues dominate. These should be leadership team meetings—not management meetings. Three possible solutions to this problem include:

Address management items last on the SLT agenda to ensure time for capacity building. (Good)

Distinguish between two separate types
of SLT meetings—one focused on school vision and another focused on management. (Better)

Create two separate teams—a SLT focused on instructional leadership, and a management team comprised of other faculty members (Bush & Glover, 2012). This structure fully divorces management issues from the instructional focus. (Best)

Regardless of how you separate management and instruction, make time to build teacher-leader capacity during SLT meetings. Some additional ways to create capacity-building conditions during meetings include:

Create enough time for the SLT team to meet. Bush and Glover found that the most effective leadership teams “devoted considerable time to team meetings” (2012, p. 27). SLT teams need time for reflection, dialogue, capacity building, thinking, and planning.

Meet regularly. A SLT team that meets on an ad hoc basis will struggle to generate the momentum to move the school forward. Ideally, build STL meeting time into the school day.

Jointly develop and articulate a clear purpose and clarify collective commitments.

Create clear agendas that clarify the purpose and work of the team.

Always post school vision, goals, meeting purpose, and norms on the agenda. Review them regularly.

Schedule time for capacity building during each meeting. Employ best-practice articles, excerpts, or videos for the group to read, dialogue, and apply.

Share meeting minutes and provide needed follow up and support in-between meetings.

Fullan points out, “Structure does make a difference, but it is not the main point in achieving success. Transforming the culture—changing the way we do things around here—is the main point” (2001, p. 43). Schools with effective SLTs create collaborative conditions and supportive structures.

How do you deliberately create supportive structures and conditions for SLT’s to flourish?

**Conclusion**

As Ed Catmull’s leadership team is “one of the most important traditions at PIXAR. . . It’s not foolproof. . . but when [they] get it right, the results are phenomenal.” Similarly, when all six SLT spokes are well tuned, we will start to see phenomenal results. We should carefully consider how our schools can better balance and tune these six spokes of leadership teams to create a more efficient and effective leadership ride toward our school vision.

Leverage the power of ratios

Assemble the right coalition of people and engage those closest to the work

Work from the inside-out and the outside-in

Have peers lead peers

Focus SLT meetings on building capacity

Create conditions and structures to build capacity

We recognize the challenge of distributing leadership through a high functioning SLT. Principals have “been genetically and culturally programmed to take charge and make it happen.” But what we really need is “to give control and create leaders” (Marquet, 2013). Instead of “command and control,” schools need principals that understand “climate control” (Robinson, 2013). With time and practice, distributing leadership through an SLT will be like riding a well-tuned bike. We will get much further with less time and energy, employing an effective SLT, than is possible on our own. As Dufour and Marzano wrote, “School improvement means people improvement,” (DuFour & Marzano, 2015, p. 5) and the SLT is the vehicle for people improvement in schools. At the end of the day, “individual principals cannot go it alone.” (Seashore Louis et al., 2010, p. 32). We will be much more likely to move a
whole school toward the school vision and goals by employing a highly effective leadership team. This is definitely a bike worth riding.

References


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