1

Create a focused mission to improve student achievement and a vision of the elements of school, curriculum and instructional practices that make higher achievement possible.

Successful leaders have a very targeted mission to improve student achievement. They have a vision of the school as a place that makes a difference in the lives of students, and they value every student in their present and future world. Middle school leaders believe their primary mission is to get students ready to succeed in challenging high school studies, and high school leaders see as their primary mission preparing students to make a successful transition to postsecondary studies and work.

School leaders need a deep and comprehensive understanding of changes in curriculum, instruction, school practices and organization that will produce gains in student achievement. Successful school leaders reject "one-shot" projects that do not fit seamlessly into a larger improvement initiative. School leaders should have sufficient knowledge about research-based school and classroom practices to develop or adapt, with the involvement of faculty, a set of guiding principles and goals that keep them focused on student learning. All school principals need to know how school leaders who have improved achievement in low-performing schools were able to get the faculty, students and parents to buy into the belief that being "smart" is based on effort and effort and hard work and is not limited to students at the top of the ability chart.

2

Set high expectations for all students to learn higher-level content.

Successful school leaders understand that increasing academic rigor and eliminating low-level courses have a positive impact on student achievement. They know how to use study groups to engage faculty, parents and others to give more students access to demanding courses with a minimum of social tension by proving it can be done. Leaders who have realized significant gains in student achievement made college-preparatory/honors classes the standard for all students. They are committed to providing schools where all students succeed and where all students have access to high-level content.

Educational leaders need to know how to help their teachers share the belief that all students can learn what their schools have previously taught only to their best students. Exemplary leaders use meetings, discussions, staff development activities, interviews with former students, visits to other schools and data to help faculty become dissatisfied with a system that does not educate all students well and to develop ideas about changes the school can make to raise the achievement of all students. As leaders, they help parents, teachers and even community members who are accustomed to the labeling and sorting of students to find value in giving more students access to demanding courses.

3

Recognize and encourage implementation of good instructional practices that motivate students and increase student achievement.

Future school leaders need deeper knowledge of content fields and instructional methods that motivate and engage students and connect subject matter content to real-world problems and projects. Well-prepared principals know how to select effective professional development for their schools, evaluate high-quality instruction, and understand and support teachers as they struggle to learn new ways of teaching.

School principals for the future must be well-versed in national, state and local standards and the curriculum and instructional methods that can help students meet standards. They must give leadership and support to teachers in aligning teacher assignments, student work and classroom assessment to higher content and performance standards. As school leaders deepen their knowledge of research-based instructional methods and classroom assessment, they will become skillful at keeping a constant focus on quality classroom instruction. They will be prepared to support a variety of successful practices, such as making observations, asking probing questions of students and teachers, and creating a setting for teachers to share their successes (and failures) with each other.

Future school leaders must use the computer and the Internet to enhance their own learning. Beyond that, they need to understand how technology can engage students in learning, what a classroom looks like when technology has been successfully integrated into instruction, and how to support teachers in learning how to use technology to advance student achievement.

4

Create a school organization where faculty and staff understand that every student counts and where every student has the support of a caring adult.

School leaders need to know how to organize a school to achieve a personalized learning environment where every student counts and has a personal relationship with a caring adult. All students are more motivated to learn in such a setting.

Successful leaders work in schools of various sizes, but these leaders always establish some way to personalize learning. If the school is large, they are aware of the research on "small learning communities" and they reorganize to create schools within-a-school. They have an adviser-advisee system so that every student has an adult mentor in the building who can help him or her learn about options, set goals, choose courses and get extra assistance to meet course standards. The adviser/ advisee process promotes intense parent involvement in supporting students to meet their present and post-high school goals. Successful leaders get parents to visit the school with their children at least once a year for an advisement session.

5

Use data to initiate and continue improvement in school and classroom practices and student achievement.

The literature is clear on this matter. Collecting, understanding and using a wide variety of data are crucial leadership skills in these times of accountability. Successful school leaders must be adept at leading their faculty in action research and in using technology to analyze data. They know how to disaggregate data and connect assessment results to school and classroom effectiveness.

Future leaders need to understand how to use data as a discussion tool for reshaping the attitudes of teachers, parents and students about changing course offerings and instructional strategies. Principals in schools that have made significant improvement in student achievement did not hide bad news but used data as a tool to get people to take ownership of the problems and to do something about them. School leaders must have the persistence and courage to change a faculty mind set that everything in their school is fine. When change is mentioned in some schools, teachers exclaim, "This can't be done." Persistence in the use of meaningful data will eventually result in new behaviors and higher student achievement.

Principals need to understand how to present data to faculty and parents in a format that is understandable and clearly defines courses of action. This includes disaggregating data to show where the weaknesses are — by standards and by different groups of students. Successful leaders use data to make decisions about school and classroom practices and to provide curriculum interventions for students.

Successful leaders go beyond student achievement data to look at school practices, what students are taught, how they are taught and what is expected of them. They use data to prove to their faculty that low-achieving students have been exposed to inadequate schooling experiences and need a more rigorous curriculum and more engaging learning experiences to catch up. Research verifies that, in schools where teachers analyze data and study research about teaching methods that have proven successful for students, more effective instructional strategies emerge in the classrooms.

 Successful schools that are "data-driven" rely on many sources of information, including student feedback, instruments that measure student progress, and statistics that are collected formally and informally.

Successful leaders do not wait for data from the "big tests." They support teams of teachers to collect and analyze students' work against performance standards, to use common end-of-grading period exams and collectively study the results, to prepare common scoring guides and apply them to students' work, and to help guide instruction on a day-to-day basis. Future leaders need to understand that it is hard to know if you are making progress if you do not measure along the way.

6

Keep everyone informed and focused on student achievement.

Exemplary school leaders are very visible in their schools. They spend the majority of their time in classrooms with the teachers and students. Their actions communicate a belief system that principals should stay in touch with the classroom and dedicate their time to curriculum, instruction and issues of teaching and learning. They must have a clear message that constantly communicates to everyone about the things that matter the most to student achievement:

➢ Providing demanding courses and engaging assignments;
➢ Getting smart by working hard;
➢ Helping students make sense out of what they are asked to do; and
➢ Giving students needed extra assistance to meet course standards.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of a schoolwide focus on student achievement. And the definition of "effective communication" is changing. In many schools, the traditional newsletters, presentations at civic club meetings, and mailings have been replaced with Web sites, electronic distribution lists, group e-mails and listserv discussions. The work of a leader at the highest level is to use personal contacts and technology to lead the conversation about what is essential and what is not.

Future leaders must understand the need to create opportunities for themselves and their faculty to communicate with teachers, leaders and parents from feeder schools about rising standards and expectations, and about what entering students need to know and be able to do. At the same time, they need to create opportunities for themselves and their faculty to get feedback about their strengths and deficiencies from schools that receive their students.

7

Make parents partners in their student's education and create a structure for parent and educator collaboration.

There are documented positive relationships between high parental involvement and high student achievement. The school leaders who reported that they reached out and involved parents had schools with higher student achievement. Successful involvement includes a deep and intense effort on the part of the school to include parents in many aspects of the education of their children. This may mean sending staff to a student's home to explain how the school operates, asking parents to sign a learning contract, or establishing community and family traditions that encourage school involvement.

Successful leaders make parents partners and create a structure for parents and educators to work together. For example, in high school they build long-term plans for students that outline four years of high school and two years beyond. Successful leaders are committed to telling parents the truth about their children's progress. They explain that in order for students to succeed, there must be shared ownership of any problem. Parents know what the school will do, what they must do, and what the students must do to produce higher student achievement. Successful leaders understand that the school cannot do it alone, and they understand how to get teachers, parents and students to work with them. This support benefits the students and results in more students taking more challenging courses and achieving at a higher level.

8

Understand the change process and have the leadership and facilitation skills to manage it effectively.

Future school leaders need to understand how to provide their staff with experiences and conditions that will create dissatisfaction with the current level of student achievement and with current school and classroom practices. Successful leaders encourage meaningful discussion and dialogue focused on the education of the student — even if it generates different ideas and conflicts. Study groups and discussion groups are part of the staff development program.

Effective principals understand that change occurs when other school leaders agree there is a problem and take ownership for it and for the solution. Part of the process of being an effective school leader is understanding how to organize, lead and facilitate experiences that result in consensus among the faculty, parents and community leaders. Leaders need opportunities to gain broad knowledge of "change" literature in education and other settings, to study case studies of effective school change, to observe and participate firsthand in such experiences, and to have their own leadership and facilitation skills critiqued.

Further, future leaders need to know how to orchestrate an array of experiences that result in more staff changing their beliefs about how much some students can learn. Through these experiences, the staff gains insights into how to raise expectations and teach a demanding curriculum to more students. Successful leaders challenge people in a way that requires changes in their priorities, their values and their habits. It is never comfortable to be a lightening rod, but successful school leaders understand how to deal with the change process. They are persistent and decisive and they take action.

School leaders must learn how to separate "skeptical resisters" from "professional resisters." They need to know how to identify the "skeptical resisters" and involve them in thinking about the best ways to implement a major change. And they must learn how to prevent the "professional resisters" from becoming a barrier to major school improvement.

Successful leaders are not afraid to involve others in meaningful discussion and dialogue about change and to earn their "buy-in." Because they are true leaders, they have the ability to take people where they would not go alone. In the process, they build schools that support greater student learning.

9

Understand how adults learn and know how to advance meaningful change through quality sustained professional development that benefits students.

Leaders need to understand how to tie professional development to a school improvement plan; make it ongoing; and provide professional development opportunities that will make a difference in student achievement. They make sure teachers are well-trained in new instructional methods and the effective use of "blocks" of instructional time. They create a strong support system for new teachers that orients them to the school's vision and provides long-term mentoring.

Future leaders must know how to get beyond the traditional passive model for staff development that relies primarily on one-shot afternoon speakers and travel to professional conferences. They need to gain skills in leading a community of learners and must serve as models of professional "life-long learners" themselves. They must know how to support staff development through study groups, problem-solving sessions and regular meetings to discuss students' needs. To ensure continuous professional growth in the school, the successful principal must develop a network of teacher mentors and master teachers who can serve as on-site staff developers. Leaders who know how to give faculty the time and opportunity to adjust and learn new strategies and plan for follow-through will create a school where everyone is always improving.

Exemplary leaders are committed to making the most of every professional development opportunity. Rather than send one or two individuals to a conference, they take a team that might include the principal or other key leaders from the staff. They will organize a time at the conference for the team to meet and share what they have learned and to plan what they can share and implement at their school that will improve student achievement. This is a powerful model, because when the team returns to the school, it takes ownership of the ideas and supports their implementation.

10

Use and organize time in innovative ways to meet the goals and objectives of school improvement.

Future leaders cannot be prisoners of time. They must know about and advocate a variety of scheduling models that promote extended school days, extended school years, tutorial programs, innovative summer school programs and other methods to increase time for student achievement. "Time" must be seen by everyone as an important commodity that makes it possible for faculty to discuss students' needs, improve instruction and align classroom assignments and students' work to higher standards.

Successful leaders know that teachers must spend more time planning classroom instruction if they are going to help all students achieve at higher levels. Teachers have to plan instruction that goes beyond the textbook if they are to add relevancy to lessons and convince more students that the learning they are being asked to master is important.

Successful leaders also know that some students need extra time and support to meet standards. They provide that time through a variety of methods like tutoring, extra sessions during breaks, and summer school. One leader rearranged summer school so that each student was assigned to a teacher for special tutoring. Teachers had no more than five students each and the freedom to schedule help for students as needed.

Effective principals do not water down the curriculum or slow the pace but use extra time and support to help students meet course standards. They believe that effort is a far greater indicator of success than ability and believe, given enough time and support, that most students can achieve at high levels. They use time to promote a continuous improvement model for their students and their schools.

 The successful school leaders we interviewed were not willing to lose instructional time to interruptions, athletic events, pep rallies, teachers' meetings or extracurricular activities. Instructional time was guarded. One principal saw that excessive use of the intercom was eating up precious classroom instructional time. She also realized that the school's Friday prom schedule curtailed instructional time, because students checked out early or did not come to school on prom Friday. She eliminated the use of the intercom, changed the prom to Saturday, and refocused her school on the necessity of giving instructional time the highest priority.

11

Acquire and use resources wisely.

Future leaders must be entrepreneurs, with the knowledge and skills to secure needed resources from a variety of sources. With the help of faculty, they need to know how to write grants or develop partnerships with businesses, universities and community agencies.

Exemplary leaders will not wait for someone else to provide what may be needed to improve their schools. They are constantly searching for dollars to support staff development, technology, time for teachers to plan, curriculum alignment, Saturday morning tutorials, make-up classes and summer transition programs. Some leaders we interviewed even made arrangements with a college to support the statistical analysis of their performance data. The list is almost endless. These leaders essentially search for resources that support anything that helps students achieve. Technology is especially important to these leaders, since it is not just a management tool for them but a teaching and learning tool for their teachers and students.

12

Obtain support from the central office and from community and parent leaders for their school improvement agenda.

Future leaders need to understand how to develop key "champions" for their improvement agenda. They can do this by continuously sharing with parents and community leaders meaningful information about: the current state of student achievement and of school and classroom practices; what the school is doing to improve; how parents and the community can help; and the progress being made. Learning how to use key central office staff and community and parent leaders as friendly critics and advisers in developing and carrying out an improvement agenda can provide leaders with key spokespersons in the larger community.

Exemplary leaders develop relationships with central office personnel who give them the necessary support for their improvement agenda. They nurture allies among community and parent leaders who provide critical support when things become confrontational. One principal who fostered a non-traditional schedule was confronted with a board that wanted to return to a traditional high school schedule. The principal never had to address the problem, because the community, already aware of the success the school was having with the new schedule, protested and the issue was dropped.

13

Continuously learn and seek out colleagues who keep them abreast of new research and proven practices.

Learning, for exemplary leaders, is an ongoing endeavor and they model lifelong learning to their teachers. They create ongoing professional conversations among their peers in their own school systems. They establish relationships with a variety of professional groups and with organizations like High Schools That Work (HSTW), the Coalition of Essential Schools, New American High Schools and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, to name a few. They find that these networks give them a comprehensive set of key practices that they and their teachers can use as a framework for school improvement. These networks provide access to resources and opportunities to learn from other schools.