
A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a monarch butterfly. The butterfly's wings are spread, showing vibrant orange, black, and white patterns. The background is a clear, bright blue sky with some light clouds. The text is overlaid on the lower left portion of the image.

A VISION THAT CHANGED A SCHOOL



Creating a transformative vision statement is all about optimizing essential skills for students

BY BRIG LEANE

I have been an administrator at several different schools, taught at several different levels, and worked outside of the education space for organizations that had vision statements that did not influence behavior. I saw little value in these wordy statements until our school created a shared vision that—having been research-based to increase student achievement—could be “pictured.” Now, I can’t imagine running a school without that kind of vision statement.

In 2010, I became principal of Fruita Middle School, a school built in 1936 in our 21,000-student school district in western Colorado. We have about 600 sixth- and seventh-grade students in our suburban community, with about 40 percent receiving free and reduced-price lunch.

When I took over, independent teachers had been running their classes and did not get along particularly well with each other or with school or district administration. Due to high variance in teacher quality, parents made numerous specific teacher requests. There were pockets of cohesiveness, but no schoolwide expectation of learning-centered collaboration. The vision of the school was just words—nothing that could be truly envisioned.

There were two important items to note when I became principal. First, there was lackluster performance of proficient and advanced students, as well as those in measured subgroups—low-income, special education, English-language learners, and minority students—on state testing. Second, the annual organizational health index—a standardized, anonymous survey every staff member takes measuring indicators such as morale, cohesiveness, adaptability, and goal focus—were at some of the lowest levels in the district. The bottom line: We had to change.

I had read John Hattie's research on the impact of teacher collaboration and the power of helping teachers focus on what matters most. I also knew firsthand the power of a true professional learning community on both students and staff (having been part of a powerful collaborative team as a teacher). I was also very familiar with the research backing the effectiveness of the PLC process written by Richard DuFour and his colleagues. With this knowledge, it became my goal to adopt a vision statement that clearly targeted a collaborative culture in which essential skills were not just taught to students, but learned by them. We needed clarity and specificity on what we wanted, as people cannot become what they cannot envision. Easy, right?

Those first three years were the toughest of my career, with many unknowns, and often it was hard to know how it would all turn out. But I wanted to know whether the culture

of a school could be improved along with student achievement. I knew if we could make our vision a reality, our school could become a joyful, well-oiled learning machine for both students and teachers. "Deep shared vision creates great unity and tremendous commitment," says Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. "It creates in people's hearts and minds a frame of reference, a set of criteria or guidelines, by which they will govern themselves."

Creating a New Vision

At meetings, I had teachers read excerpts from books and articles about shifting from a focus on teaching many things to a focus on verifying the learning on a few things. We discussed how narrowing our focus to essential skills could truly impact students and, when done collaboratively, how it could also impact the skills of teachers. Through many discussions and with lots of input, we adopted a new school vision: "*Fruita Middle School's interdependent teams work together to define, measure, intervene, and extend essential academic skills.*"

We didn't have to pick the perfect vision for our school. As Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen wrote in *Great by Choice*, "the critical step lay not

in finding the perfect program or in waiting for national education reform, but in taking action; picking a good program; instilling the fanatic discipline to make relentless, iterative progress; and staying with the program long enough to generate sustained results."

Focusing the Vision

To help our staff know of our consistent commitment, we ensured that our resources of time, money, accountability, and celebration reinforced our vision. Here's how we attacked each of the elements necessary to produce a successful vision:

Time: To grow in *interdependence*, we changed our master schedule to ensure teachers who taught the same subject and grade (such as sixth-grade math) had time to collaborate at least twice weekly during the school day. This was time to complete products that guide the PLC process. When teachers could not complete these required products, I hired subs so the teachers could do the work expected. We also altered our schedule so that students who needed academic interventions and extensions got that time and support during the school day.

Money: We sent teachers to conferences that focused on our vision, and the enthusiasm of those teachers

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impacted our instructional leadership team. In addition, when staff members spend money, they fill out an expenditure request that must explain how the purchase will advance our vision.

Accountability: At each evaluation, a note is made reflecting the teacher's progress in meeting our school's vision. Additionally, I meet twice per year with each subject team to go over a collaboration rubric to clarify expectations and set goals.

Celebration: We looked to win early and often. When teachers co-created a simple, common formative assessment, or when a collaborative team had compared learning results, I made it known. These vision "reinforcers" helped everyone see what would be celebrated at our school. Using my cellphone to take pictures of teams working together and then sharing those photos at staff meetings helped everyone see the progress along the way.

Impact on Stakeholders, Achievement, and Culture

We went from superficial and infrequent meetings to frequent meetings where trust and constructive candor was expected and nurtured. Synergy also grew, as teachers were working

smarter, not harder, and learning from one another in the process.

In 2014, our school was recognized for achieving student academic growth that exceeded the state median for growth in every grade, in every tested subject, and with every subgroup of students—we were the only middle school out of eight in the district to attain this accomplishment!

Teacher classrooms show student progress toward agreed-upon essentials, encouraging a growth mindset that reminds students who haven't mastered an essential skill that they just don't have it "yet!" I have heard it said that "if you think you can catch the bus, you are willing to run for it—otherwise you don't even try." The clarity and feedback teachers are providing are causing at-risk students to believe in themselves.

The cycle of improvement and feedback for both students and teachers continues to energize novice as well as veteran staff. Starting in 2014, our organizational health index showed marked improvement, and by 2016 our health was at some of the highest levels in the district. Not only were we growing students academically, but the culture had also greatly improved. It is important to keep in

mind that this was a "slow-cooker"—not a "microwave"—change process.

What's Ahead?

We are now aligning our academic awards ceremonies to acknowledge students who have mastered essentials instead of GPAs. Parents also have increased clarity of our expectations for our students through simple changes to our website and grade books that highlight essential skill attainment. These next steps are further transforming our vision into our reality.

We were a group of independent teachers who mostly just shared a common parking lot in an old school. We are now an interdependent learning machine in which both students and teachers are growing together. We have a lot more fun, there is more constructive disagreement, and the students can sense our sharpened focus. It was fewer things—not more—that we envisioned, and making the shift by starting with a research-based vision helped direct everyone's actions. It was deceptively simple. Not easy, but simple. 🚩

Brig Leane is principal of Fruita Middle School in Colorado.



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