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Introduction

It is quite a remarkable feat to turn around a failing school, and it is an even more improbable one to continue to sustain and improve student achievement year after year. However, there are schools that are sustaining student achievement in spite of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or the policy pressure of the hour. How is it then that some schools, regardless of political pressures, sustain student achievement and seem to get better each year? What seems to be the magic formula for these schools? I do believe that the desire to sustain student achievement lives in the heart of every educator. Yet, very few schools are successful and do in fact sustain student achievement.

These questions about sustaining student achievement arose from my own experience of leading the Disney Elementary school community out of a "failure mind-set" to an "achieving mind-set." I recall fellow principals asking me in the midst of the intense work of reversing a failing student achievement pattern, "How can we keep this going?" Sustainability is a perplexing problem faced by every public school, let alone a school forced to improve. The work of sustaining achievement is in fact relentless for, at any time, the pattern of improved student achievement can be reversed. On every front, a sustaining school must continue to persevere through obstacles such as poverty and second-language issues, or it will become mediocre and allow student achievement to slide. It was not good enough for Disney teachers to relax in their pursuit of improving student achievement. These teachers had come too far to settle for becoming just a good school; they wanted to be a great school.

The goal of being a great school had always been in the hearts of the Disney Elementary staff. In 1997, Disney Elementary was recognized as a California Distinguished School. Just two years later, Disney became an underperforming school. The shock of the underperforming label propelled the Disney staff to embark on an improvement process initially forecasted to take three years to exit the "underperforming" status. The initial improvement process instead transformed Disney from underperforming to a sustaining school that continues to sustain achievement as of this writing. As principal, my role was to set the improvement process in motion to exit the state's Immediate Intervention of Underperforming Schools Program (IIUSP). However, this short-term goal turned into a long-term one as the Disney community embraced the notion of being an excellent sustaining school. Even three years after I left my role as Disney principal, student achievement has continued to be sustained.

According to many, Disney broke the "mold" of the high-poverty underachieving school. It became and is to this day one of the highest performing schools in Burbank. From the story of Disney Elementary and my own experience, I began to wonder if the variables that led to our success were the keys to sustaining student achievement at other schools. Are these variables that sustained Disney Elementary the same for other high-poverty, high-achieving elementary schools? These and other questions propelled me into my study of five extraordinary sustaining elementary schools in California. The object of the study was to tell the story of these five schools and identify their key elements that sustained their student achievement.

SELECTION OF FIVE TITLE 1 SCHOOLS

To study why certain schools sustained, I decided to look at high-achieving, Title 1 elementary schools in California similar to Disney Elementary. Additionally, these schools had to have sustained student achievement for a minimum five-year continuous period as demonstrated by the California Academic Performance Index (API), California Standards Test (CST), and federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data. Selecting just Title 1 elementary schools further narrowed the focus of investigation. If these elementary schools could sustain student achievement in the face of poverty, second-language issues, and a number of other obstacles, the information brought forth could be of real benefit to the field of education.

To identify the top schools, I referenced the Title 1 Achieving Schools state list for specific schools that had sustained student achievement for at least five years. Schools were selected representing both northern and southern California that had sustained achievement so as to give a broad scope of sustaining schools, not just localized to southern California. Each school's record of achievement was rigorously examined to meet the selection criteria.

Variables such as size, mobility, subgroup percentages reflecting English-language learners and socioeconomically disadvantaged were taken into consideration. The schools selected had to have similar challenges and demonstrated sustained student achievement. A few schools initially selected early on in the study were eliminated later because they did not sustain achievement over the course of the study's time frame.

It was further decided that each school would be visited to capture the real story of why these schools were sustaining student achievement. Merely looking at test data or having teachers and the principal complete a survey would not reveal the essence of why that school was sustaining achievement. Thus, a qualitative study with on-site research was selected as the best means to uncover the "story" of the school. Next, each school's principal was contacted for his or her agreement to participate in the study. Additionally, in some cases the district office representing these schools was contacted for permission to participate. Funds for on-site school visitations were obtained through a university grant.

Once each school had agreed to participate, a letter was sent to each principal along with a list of focus areas from which interview questions would be derived. These areas, based on the research on effective schools and my own experience, included (1) developing an achieving culture; (2) empowering staff and parents; (3) standards-based instruction; (4) the use of student data; (5) prescriptive student intervention; and (6) continuous refinement processes. The actual interview questions were not sent ahead of time so that on-site responses would be spontaneous. Schedules for visiting schools were then set with each principal.

In preparation for the visit, an interview guide was developed for the principal and leadership team, with the principal's interview being videotaped. Each principal agreed to be videotaped. In return for the permission to videotape, a DVD record of the interview was created and sent to the principal. The leadership team was interviewed at some schools as a group and individually at other schools, depending on the visitation schedule. It was made clear to the principal that interviewing the leadership team or other staff members separately from the principal was not intended to elicit opposing points of view but to provide clarification and depth for each study area.

Other individuals were also interviewed, especially at schools that had sustained student achievement longer than five years and where the principal and/or key teachers were no longer at that school. Each school's office manager was also interviewed because of his or her important role in managing the school. The office managers also gave me school documents that provided further clarification regarding the culture of the school, such as school policies and the parent handbook. Classrooms were visited, with observations being directed to the study areas. For two schools, a second visit was made to verify key information or obtain more comments from teachers.

FOCUS AREAS FOR STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The focus areas were based on research from the California State Board of Education's study of the IIUSP results (1999–2002) and the research of Samuel Casey Carter. According to Carter (2000) in *No Excuses*, there are seven traits of a high-achieving school: (1) excellent leadership; (2) high expectations for ALL students; (3) high-performing teachers; (4) ongoing assessment; (5) improved student discipline; (6) effective parent relationships; and (7) commitment to extraordinary effort by students and staff to achieve outstanding results. Alan Blankstein's (2004) *Failure Is Not an Option: 6 Principles That Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools* further defines principles that undergird the focus areas for this study; namely, (1) common mission, vision, and goals; (2) ensuring achievement for all students; (3) collaborative teaming; (4) using data to guide decision making and continual improvement; (5) active engagement from family and community; and (6) building sustainable leadership capacity. The research derived from the IIUSP helped to illuminate the program execution of each school's IIUSP plan and improved API results. From these and other sources (e.g., Rosenholtz, 1991) of effective schools literature, the following focus areas were selected and are described with sample questions.

1. **Developing an Achieving Culture.** Establishing an achieving culture in a school where students are not performing is a complex and all-encompassing task. Each school selected had overcome its poor performance inertia to not only improve but to sustain achievement. Each school additionally had developed an achieving culture formed from the beliefs, practices, and principles that set student achievement as the highest priority within the school community. Two questions asked of principals and leadership teams about their achieving culture were "What were the most important steps in establishing this culture?" and "What are your nonnegotiable core values?"

2. **Empowering the Right People.** To create a sustaining school, these schools needed to relentlessly pursue improving student achievement. Early in the development process, it would be the case that not everyone was "on the same page" with this objective. A question such as "How were the leadership team, teachers, and classified staff empowered?" was critical to revealing the various roles that the principal, teachers, and classified staff took in the improvement process. According to Neuman and Simmons (2000), effective school leadership is no longer viewed as a function of age, position, or job title, but shared by all. Another question asked of principals and teachers was "How did you work with reluctant staff?" It was vital to understand how each school dealt with reluctant teachers when it was creating a shared leadership structure.

3. **Standards-Based Instruction.** High-performing schools have high-performing teachers. These teachers are excellent in their instruction and

also work effectively in grade-level teams or departments. However, they typically don't start out that way. It was critical to determine what made the difference in transitioning to quality coordinated instruction with every teacher taking responsibility for student learning. In probing this issue, the following questions were posed: "What processes are in place that monitor how students are mastering state standards?" and "How is student data used to affect ongoing instruction?"

4. Use of Student Data. Ongoing assessment should be another characteristic of these high-performing schools. Effective schools research contends that frequent assessment of all students during the year is the best way to determine if every child is learning according to the second edition of the Consortium on Reading Excellence reading sourcebook (Diamond, 2007). Consequently, putting a coordinated system of assessment in place is an important transition schools must achieve. Questions such as "How did you put a system of assessments in place?" and "How do teachers use student assessment data?" were intended to search out in detail how the school developed its own internal accountability system.

5. Prescriptive Student Intervention. Response to Intervention (RTI), a new requirement in the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), contends that intervening with struggling students early is essential to improving their achievement. At each selected school, student deficits must be addressed through intervention. Again, a shift in the culture of the school must occur to establish student intervention processes. Both principals and teachers were asked, "How do you identify struggling students?" and "What is the role of the principal, leadership team, and teachers in intervening with struggling students?"

6. Persevering Through Refinement. In *No Excuses*, Carter (2000) contends that extraordinary effort will yield extraordinary student achievement results. He documents this conclusion through the successful schools he has profiled across the United States. It is so impressive that each selected school did sustain student achievement for five years or more. However, sustaining achievement does not occur by happenstance. Identifying the important processes and attitudes that created sustaining practice was critical. Questions such as "What are your key processes in sustaining student achievement?" and "How is staff continuously motivated to persevere toward improvement?" sought to describe each school's motivation to continue to pursue higher and higher student achievement.

THE FIVE SUSTAINING SCHOOLS

The story will be told of five remarkable schools that are getting the job done year after year. These schools are true success stories, stories that are not being told on the political front pages of education publications. Each

school consists of heroes and heroines who every day make a difference in the lives of their students. We have much to learn from these schools: Sylvan Elementary School, Camellia Elementary School, Jefferson Elementary School, Rosita Elementary School, and Martha Baldwin Elementary School. This book is an effort to tell the whole story of sustaining practice. For the teachers and principals of these schools, sustaining practice consists of making their students successful.

1. *Sylvan Elementary School* is a Title 1 school located in Modesto, an urban agricultural setting in central California. Student mobility is high, and Sylvan is the first to receive students and the first to relocate students and teachers to new schools due to growing enrollment within the district. To add to its challenges, the school has four educational tracks running continuously. Sylvan additionally faces the challenges of poverty and English-language learners.

2. *Camellia Elementary School* was known as a "school out of control" in the early 1970s, with its performance scores at the very bottom of all schools in California. Located in the Sacramento area, Camellia is now one of the highest performing Title 1 schools in California and the United States with literally no achievement gaps between any subgroup populations. Parents wait in line to get their children into this school.

3. *Jefferson Elementary School,* located in Carlsbad, on first glance looks like a private school. However, this school is a Title 1 school where a large percentage of students come from poverty and are English-language learners. In this school, teachers are known for their collaboration and work ethic even beyond the school day.

4. *Rosita Elementary School,* located in Garden Grove, is a Title 1 school with 70 percent first-generation immigrant Americans from Mexico, and the remaining 30 percent of the students are from Vietnam. Of all the schools studied, this school has the highest number of English-language learners. Yet, this school is sustaining achievement in spite of principal changes. The district office plays a dominant role in helping to maintain a structure that sustains student achievement.

5. *Martha Baldwin Elementary School* is a rare "triple crown" school in Alhambra, having received Title 1 Achieving School in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007; California Distinguished School in 2002, 2004, and 2006; and National Blue Ribbon School in 2003. These accolades are rare for a K–8 elementary school also dealing with middle-school students. However, this school is relentless in continuing to improve student achievement.

In the following chapters, the stories of each of these schools, which were derived from data analyses of the visits, observations, and interviews, are told. One chapter is dedicated to each school. Every school's story is told in depth to illuminate the sustaining elements that make each of these schools successful. Further, beyond the analysis of the sustaining elements these schools have in common, the story of how each school uniquely addresses sustaining achievement is analyzed. The final chapter presents a discussion of the findings and recommendations for other schools that seek to become successful sustaining schools.