# Leading to Change / Closing the Implementation Gap

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Domino's Pizza estimates that it delivered more than 1.2 million pizzas on Super Bowl Sunday. I estimate than more than a million of those pies were delivered to people like me who had, only a few weeks earlier, resolved to give up pizza. If our annual tradition of leaving our

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New Year's goals in tatters has any redeeming value, it's the lesson it offers about the foolishness of believing that creating a list of goals is enough. Just as New Year's resolutions rarely survive until February, many promising school plans never break out of the confines of three-ring binders. We have the goals and the plans. The challenge is closing the implementation gap.

The good news is that we know what to do. Education research has equipped us with abundant evidence on instructional and leadership strategies that are likely to result in improved student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Evidence, however, is strikingly powerless against the forces that drive human behavior. Despite medical research establishing the association between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, educated people, including physicians, still smoke. The same people who would never buy a washing machine without consulting *Consumer Reports* sometimes use risky, untested medications in response to late-night television testimonials. And yes, teachers and school leaders persist in using ineffective teaching strategies, toxic grading policies, and counterproductive leadership tactics despite an avalanche of evidence that suggests better alternatives. The challenge before us is not a shortage of evidence or a lack of goals, but a collective failure to implement strategies to reach those goals.

Every organization—indeed, every person—suffers to some degree from a gap between intention and action. Leadership can make the difference. Here are a few specific strategies that school leaders can employ to bring implementation closer to reality.

*Create short-term wins*. Psychologist Martha Beck (2006) marshals impressive evidence that individuals need immediate, continuing reinforcement to sustain meaningful changes. Tom Peters (2003) makes the same case for organizational change. Too many school initiatives provide their chief feedback through annual test score reports—results that are almost never delivered until it's too late to reinforce or modify teachers' or leaders' behavior.
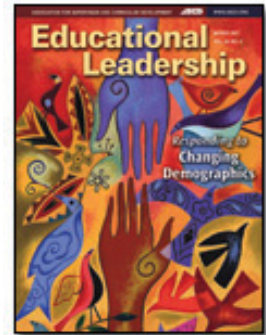
Effective leaders design plans in the spring and summer that will produce short-term wins within the first few weeks of school. For example, counselors can post behavioral data, signaling that as expectations have been communicated more consistently during the early days of the semester, the school climate has improved. Teachers can post visible evidence of interdisciplinary assignments and the resulting student work, showing colleagues and students a commitment to professional collaboration.

Formative assessment (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Stiggins, 2004) is another important way to provide short-term wins throughout the year. Formative assessment provides meaningful feedback that students and teachers can use to improve professional practices and student achievement. Formative assessment need not be long or formal. Consider what happens in music classes every day. When a student plays a note incorrectly, the music teacher does not record the error in the grade book and inform the student's parents nine weeks later that the student really needs to work on F-sharp. Music teachers continually assess student performance, stop when necessary to give specific feedback, and then immediately use that feedback to improve student's work.

The key to effective short-term wins is that the objectives are meaningful, are attainable, and provide immediate feedback to reinforce effective practice and modify ineffective practice. Without short-term wins, the pain of change often overwhelms the anticipated long-term benefits.

*Recognize effective practices simply and clearly throughout the year*. The Connecticut Department of Education holds an annual "adult science fair" in which professional practices that teachers have carried out and the achievement data of their students are displayed on simple three-panel boards showing student data on the left-hand panel, adult actions in the middle panel, and inferences and conclusions on the right-hand panel. Last year, more than 200 schools contributed displays.

In Clark County, Nevada, 81 teams of teachers and administrators are involved in action research projects. They display not only achievement scores on formative assessments, but also the professional practices associated with the scores. For example, one teacher found that during the first semester, his students who made the most extensive use of Cornell note taking scored twice as high on a national physics test as those who made the least use of this technique. These displays are living documents, updated to provide a regular focal point for celebrating best practices.

*Emphasize effectiveness, not popularity*. Too many change efforts fail because leaders have underestimated the power of the prevailing culture in undermining change. To challenge that culture, leaders must be prepared to stand up for effective practice even if changes are initially unpopular. Teachers in every school know right now which students are in danger of failure at the end of the year, and they know that with immediate intervention and extra time, many of those failures could be avoided. Yet one of the least popular actions any teacher or school leader can take is to change a student's schedule or curriculum during the year. It is easier to wait for failure at the end of the year and even attempt the same practices in the following

year, all the while hoping for different results.

If the litmus test for goal achievement is the short-term popularity of the changes necessary to implement the goals, then the strategy is doomed. Change inevitably represents risk, loss, and fear, a triumvirate never associated with popularity.

*Make the case for change compelling, and associate it with moral imperatives rather than compliance with authority*. An announcement that "We have to do this to comply with state and federal requirements" will never arouse the emotional engagement of the school staff. Instead of citing administrative requirements, inspire staff members with a call for their best: Student literacy is a civil right. Faculty collaboration is the foundation of fairness. Learning communities are the essence of respect.

You won't close the implementation gap with another set of three-ring binders or announcements about the latest initiative. Close the gap with immediate wins, visible recognition of what works, a focus on effectiveness rather than popularity, and an appeal to the values that brought us all into this profession in the first place.

## References

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