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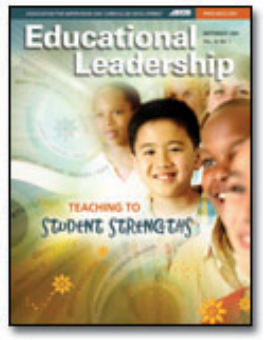

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Leading to Change / Pull the Weeds Before You Plant the Flowers

Douglas Reeves

> Reform, restructuring, improvement, innovation, change—*these are perennial bywords in education. In this new column, Douglas Reeves will give readers his insights about how schools can implement changes that make a real difference in teaching and learning. A longtime educator, a well-known presenter, and the author of more than 20 books, including* The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results *(ASCD, 2006), Reeves is President of the Center for Performance Assessment and a faculty member of leadership programs sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In future columns, Reeves will address such topics as using data, mentoring new and experienced teachers, and involving students in school leadership.*

Imagine a gardener who sees row upon row of beautiful flowers in a nursery. He enthusiastically loads a cart to overflowing in anticipation of placing each new plant in a special place in his garden. The nursery salesperson is encouraging, explaining that these flowers are special hybrid varieties that research has shown will do well in the local climate. But on arriving home, the gardener faces an unpleasant reality: His garden is full of thistle, crabgrass, dandelions, and other weeds. Here are some choices the gardener might consider:

- Drop the new plants at the threshold of the garden and leave them there, hoping that delivering the plants close to the intended location will be sufficient.
- Plant the new flowers among the weeds, hoping that the nutrients in the soil will support both.
- Give the new plants a stern lecture about "growing smarter" and making wiser use of the available nutrients.
- Pull the weeds. Then, and only then, plant the flowers.

Although the last choice may seem like simple common sense, it is decidedly uncommon in schools. All school districts, schools, departments, offices, job descriptions, or programs have a few weeds. If we fail to pull them, we can anticipate conversations like this:

> "We'll have professional learning communities—just as soon as we finish making announcements in the faculty meeting."
>
> "We'll do common scoring of student work—just as soon as all members of the teaching

team finish their parent conferences and discipline reports."

"We're happy to embrace 'writing across the curriculum'—just as soon as we finish covering a curriculum that has never yet been completed within the school year."

Try this simple experiment. Ask your colleagues to list the initiatives and programs that your school has started within the past five years. Then ask them to list the initiatives and programs that have been discontinued as the result of careful evaluation and weeding. I have never been in a school where the first list is not significantly longer than the second.

Educators are drowning under the weight of initiative fatigue—attempting to use the same amount of time, money, and emotional energy to accomplish more and more objectives. That strategy, fueled by various mixtures of adrenaline, enthusiasm, and intimidation, might work in the short term. But eventually, each initiative added to the pile creates a dramatic decline in organizational effectiveness. As the academic growing season continues, we should not be surprised when new flowers are choked by the omnipresent weeds.

Fortunately, there is an answer to initiative fatigue, and that is the common sense of the gardener. The strategic leader must have a "garden party" to pull the weeds before planting the flowers.

Some school principals have a simple rule—they will introduce no new program until they remove at least one or two existing activities, plans, units, or other time-consumers. These principals have time in faculty meetings for collaborative scoring of student work because they stopped making unnecessary or routine announcements in such meetings and committed every possible administrative communication to e-mail or written notes instead. Teachers have time to guide students through more writing in science and social studies because a team of educators identified the standards that matter the most and made a deliberate decision not to engage in frantic and ineffective coverage of the entire text. Faculty teams make a game of it, finding weeds that seemed small when they started, but that are now collectively robbing students and teachers of one of their most precious resources—time.

Research and common sense make it clear that initiative fatigue is rife in schools. We must identify some things we can *stop* doing. To begin the weeding process, consider the following three ideas:

First, use intergrade dialogue to find the essentials. Ask a 2nd grade teacher what can be given up, and he or she may say "Nothing! Everything I do is important!" But ask a 3rd grade teacher to explain what students need to know as they enter 3rd grade, and that teacher will provide a list that is brief, balanced, and precise. I have asked this question of hundreds of teachers and not a single one has said, "For students to enter my 3rd grade classroom confidently next year, the 2nd grade teacher must cover every single state standard." Entire school districts can conduct this exercise, and they will find high levels of agreement on the essentials, casting doubt on the necessity of some of the more idiosyncratic elements of the curriculum.

Second, prune away the small stuff. We can recover hours of valuable instruction time when teachers share their best time-saving tips. Within the same school, some teachers have transitions among centers that require almost five minutes, while their colleague across the hall accomplishes the same transitions in under 20 seconds. Some secondary teachers collect homework as students walk in the room, saving several minutes of classroom time. Some elementary schools have fewer

but longer science periods so that teachers lose a smaller percentage of class time setting up and taking down labs. Some technology teachers ensure that every computer is turned on and ready for log-in before students enter the room. These small matters take seconds or minutes during the day, but collectively, they amount to exceptionally large time savings.

Third, set the standard for a weed-free garden. Respect teachers' time: start and end meetings on time, never make routine announcements aloud, and cancel or shorten meetings that are not contributing to student achievement. If leaders will not pull the schoolwide weeds in meetings, conferences, and interruptions, they can hardly ask teachers to weed their classroom gardens.

Leaders at every level might want to try this experiment. At the next gathering of educators, raise your right hand and pledge: "I will not ask you to implement one more initiative until we first take some things off the table." Then listen. It might be the first round of applause you've had in a while.

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