



## Critical lessons in school reform as states Race to the Top

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**L**eon Uris, American novelist and author of the classic work, *Exodus*, flunked English in the 10th, 11th and 12th grades. He once remarked that it was a good thing that English had nothing to do with writing! Too often, the same is true for school reform and student improvement. They aren't always related in clear, discernable ways and we often confuse activity for accomplishment.

In arguably the greatest education reform effort since LBJ's "Great Society" and George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind," the Obama administration and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have offered \$4.3 billion in Race to the Top (RTTT) funds to states that competitively agree to reforms with assurances to adopt standards for competing in a global economy, build longitudinal data systems, increase educator effectiveness and turn around the lowest-achieving schools.

Battelle for Kids, a not-for-profit organization created

nearly a decade ago to accelerate student achievement in Ohio, has been working on reform issues with schools and states since that time with a hands-on approach with practitioners to share, learn, grow and, ultimately, change day-to-day practice in schools. This work has given us a unique perspective on what works and what doesn't. In working with large urban districts, affluent suburban districts, rural schools and statewide systems in a variety of states that include Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, New York, Louisiana and others, we have learned lessons that are applicable to states and districts that will most likely be receiving one-time federal aid to transform education. And it is in the understanding of these lessons that reformers can successfully connect school reform and benefit students, as envisioned by RTTT.

In many respects, our work at Battelle for Kids has been just the opposite of what it is for students — in school, students get the lessons, followed by the test; in real life, you get the test, followed by the lessons. Here are some of the key lessons we've learned in doing school reform for student improvement.

## People are down on what they aren't up on

Reform must start with the end in mind. Key stakeholders, especially teachers, must be engaged early as partners. Successful school reformers focus on student benefits, not simply the changes that must be made by adults. Communicating is much more than simply distributing fliers to the staff and community on the district's new vision or mission statement. It's planning, communicating, doing, re-doing and communicating again. And again. It's connecting staff substantively to a higher calling and showing them how their day-to-day activities contribute to reform and student improvement.

## Enthusiasm is rewarded by enthusiasm

Let's be honest. If leaders look and act as if they were weaned on a dill pickle, no one is following them anywhere for long — even if they have money. Successful change is led and works when leaders are honestly engaged themselves, believe in what they are doing and model firsthand the behaviors they are expecting of other adults in the system. There is no leadership without “followership.” And followership comes from enthusiastic, confident and passionate leaders. If you don't believe in why you are doing something, why would someone else?

## To go fast, go alone, but to go far, go together

We've learned that day-to-day complexities can cause district leaders to lose focus. Engaging an implementation partner that helps you keep your focus, maintains direction for you and stays the course with you is essential. It's the reason individuals employ personal trainers, life coaches or nutritionists. Your implementation partner has the expertise, knows the landscape and keeps the necessary changes in front of you while you continue the myriad other responsibilities that come with running a school, district or state.

## Build champions internally and externally

No one wants to play in a band where

the leader gets all the solos. Successful school reform for student improvement requires an orchestra with section leaders. Successful reformers seek out leaders from all constituencies, get their input, keep them informed and let them lead. This also ensures that reforms remain institutionalized and are never about a single person. Powerful coalitions are built when leadership is shared and supported; it also makes it harder to give up when the going gets tough.

## Training and support matter

In the book, *Influencer*, the authors suggest two critical questions that must be answered for successful change: is it worth it? and can I do it? If you've connected stakeholders to the larger vision through meetings, communications and input, they will believe it's worth it. People will make great sacrifices in the “how” if they know and believe in the “why.” But far too often we shortchange the support piece. It's not unlike the recalcitrant teenager who would rather say he won't do something than to say he doesn't know how. It's not enough to tell teachers to expect more of students or differentiate instruction. That's like a track coach simply telling athletes to run faster. You must show teachers the behavior required on their part to increase expectations and change classroom pedagogy. Practice it. Give feedback. Share results and improve. This is how individuals get better with their craft.

## Measurement counts

There's no question that what gets measured gets monitored, and what gets monitored gets improved. Battelle for Kids has learned firsthand that schools and districts that create multiple measures around the right things,

monitor them relentlessly and ask the right questions, get better. It's also better to have an imperfect measure around something worth measuring than the perfect measure of that which tells you nothing. Value-added analysis has been a powerful motivator because it levels the field and measures the progress of individual students, classes, schools and districts year-to-year from where they started. Basically, it's the distance between where you would expect kids, classes, schools and districts to be and where they are — hence, the value that has been added, expected or lost.

## Make it about improvement, not judgment

In the contentious argument over tying teacher performance to salary, we focus on the hole in the doughnut and not the doughnut. It's a disservice to the complexity of teaching and learning to suggest that student learning can ever be captured by a single measure and, on that basis alone, make important judgments on that person's future. However, learning can and should be measured by tests over time. Of course,



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it's not perfect, but when used to diagnose and prescribe improvement, it is very powerful — especially when viewed over time. Value-added analysis, in particular, can be a tremendous tool for improvement, but is misused when it's the sole measure for judgment.

### It's better to intervene than remediate

Years ago, as a superintendent involved in a major construction project, the general contractor asked me, "Why is there money for a change order, but never enough money to do it right the first time?" Now thinking about students, I would ask, "Why do we have to wait for a student to fail before we add resources to do what should have been done right in the first place?" Successful reformers review student projection data and act now. For example, if they know two years in advance that a student has less than a coin-flip chance of reaching a specific benchmark goal, they intervene now. It's not a self-fulfilling prophecy, but a trajectory, based on current reality, that can be changed for students with intervention. We've seen firsthand the incredible power of formative assessment strategies when used effectively by teachers to dramatically improve student achievement before students fail.

### Your 'I do' matters more than your IQ

Attitude counts. If you think you can or you can't, you're right. Anyone who has ever spent a warm spring afternoon on the second floor of a school building in an un-air-conditioned 90-degree classroom teaching seventh-graders how to convert fractions to decimals to percents, understands how very difficult

this work really is. It's challenging, exhilarating, satisfying, frustrating and demanding every single day. Hope may not be a concrete strategy, but an environment where classroom leaders and others are fixated on success, possibilities and opportunities is more likely to facilitate real change.

### Own it

Ownership is as important as leadership. Successful reform is almost always accompanied by accountability. But accountability, when transferred appropriately, becomes ownership. And where you have ownership you have student success. Student performance does reflect upon a teacher. Years ago, when I began my teaching career, I was evaluated on what I did. Today, my daughter, also a teacher, is evaluated on how her students perform. That is not a trivial transformation. Successful reformers aren't afraid of results. In fact, they've embraced them to learn, sometimes wail, share and grow together, by constantly asking questions. The wrong question to ask is, "Where do these students come from?" Because it doesn't matter. The right question successful reformers ask is, "What am I going to do about it?"

### Nothing is impossible for those who don't have to do the work

Good teachers matter a lot. A competent, caring and nurturing teacher, with the right support, environment and training, can change the world. Even today, if you ask any successful adult why they are successful, the story often begins with, "Well, I had this teacher, this coach ..." In our study of hundreds of highly effective teachers

who ratchet up academic progress year after year for students, it's obvious that they are not the ones who try to suck every last multiple choice question out of a student. They are not the "drill and kill"-ers. They are creative, passionate, "never give up" educators who go to any length to make learning interesting, engaging and relevant for students. We've learned this through identifying these teachers empirically, in Ohio and Texas, then spending countless hours in appreciative inquiry to learn from them so their behaviors can be replicated by other teachers through training and development.

### Culture trumps strategy

A highly regarded businessman once shared this with me. It's true in business and it's true in schools. Expect more and you get more from students and teachers. Develop mutual trust and it becomes the lubricant for action. Celebrate success and people develop an appetite for it. Make it about kids, and not tests, and it will be. Add "and then some" to whatever you do, and abundance expands student opportunities and success. Connect the dots among initiatives. Insist on urgency, and you get persistence and focus. It's not only about learning, but also creating a culture where a "love of learning," is the norm, not a test score. Good test scores are simply a byproduct of an improvement culture.

That's it. A partial list of critical lessons that we've learned firsthand. With Race to the Top funding and other reform efforts, before us lies an incredible opportunity that can be the point at which we look back and some day say, "This is where we changed forever how we prepare students."

What's at stake? Our future. Students may represent 25% of our population, but they represent 100% of our future. There is no higher calling than their adequate preparation and inspiration. The pain in changing the system is temporary, but the pride is forever. And think of it — is there really anything anyone has ever done in life that is of consequence or of value, that wasn't filled with pain, doubt, controversy, high stakes and argument? Probably not, but like Nike says — "Just Do It." □

## You are constantly communicating

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