



Getting to Great Results

Superintendents and school board members serve for the same reason: they are committed to making a difference for the community's children. Yet how often do board members bemoan the trivial nature of discussions and decisions that involve so much of their time? How frequently do superintendents express frustration about the difficulty in achieving breakthroughs in student achievement?

Superintendents, boards, teachers, and staff in fourteen New York school districts from Albany to Rochester, from the Adirondacks to the southern tier, are engaged in a common effort to lift student learning and achievement. The group includes rural districts of 500 students, suburban and small city systems with enrollments up to 7,000. The initiative unites superintendents, boards, and leadership teams around the mission of taking good school districts to great results.

The premise is simple - instead of engaging in endless process and planning - just do it! Set five or fewer district goals that are truly results, measurable outcomes that express the community's aspirations for students - goals like every student graduates. Then train the district's leaders to use their time and energy differently in leading and coaching for results. Organize and support teacher teams in reaching ambitious targets for achievement in areas of student under performance. From the start, engage administrators, board members, and teacher leaders as a coalition for results.

These fourteen districts are working with a program called Get to Great directed by Les Loomis, 21 year retired superintendent from Bethlehem Central. It is offered through the Capital Region BOCES and The Rensselaerville Institute, called by the Wall Street Journal, "the think tank with muddy boots." Four of the districts are in their second year with the program: Hartford, Hoosick Falls, Palmyra-Macedon, and Queensbury. Ten have begun their first year: Binghamton, Catskill, Edmeston, Guilderland, Lyons, Marcus Whitman, Odessa-Montour, Saratoga, Union-Endicott, and Voorheesville.

During the first year the focus is on developing leadership for results, running multiple prototype projects that hit their targets, establishing the five or fewer districts goals as measurable outcomes, and making sure the board, administrators, and teacher leaders are partners in the push for results.

Each member of the first year leadership team designs and implements a prototype. By setting an ambitious target for student performance and being flexible about doing whatever it takes to get there, these specific prototypes model the process to be used

across the district for greater achievement. Prototypes are designed to yield achievement gains, provide practice in results leadership, and serve as a window on larger school-wide or district changes which will lead to even greater results.

Here are a few examples of prototypes. At Queensbury an intermediate school principal increased the number of special education and Academic Intervention Service students achieving at grade level by establishing an approach to pre-teach essential skills and content to these students before the material was covered in class. Other classroom examples include increasing the number of graduates among seniors who were on the cusp, decreasing sixth grade course failures and discipline referrals, increasing the number of elementary students mastering math facts. The approach applies equally well to the support areas. At Hartford the business official and custodians teamed up to significantly improve the cleanliness of the building, to rave reviews from the staff and community.

During the second and last year of the program, the leadership team coaches others in the approach, organizes teams of teachers in setting and achieving targets for gains in areas of student weakness, and tracks progress through school and district scorecards. The focus is also on promoting learning across teams about what's working, and what changes need to occur in educational programs, school organization, and resource allocation, all driving toward greater results on the five or fewer district goals. The culture changes, "Here we are all about results."

Superintendents and school boards commit to Get to Great for one year, then decide whether to continue for the second year of the program. By January of the first year board members are actively involved in reviewing the prototypes and progress. In most of the districts teacher leaders are part of the initial leadership team and are running prototypes like everyone else. A couple of the teams include school board members. Presentations and discussions at board meetings help to keep the focus on making a difference for students.

The core of Get to Great is leadership development and a district-wide organizing framework for improved student learning and achievement. Yet each district approaches the work differently based on their culture and characteristics. The program includes year-long consulting support and conferences and calls where district teams come together and learn from each other.