



NECESSARY CONDITIONS

A Perspective on Success for All Students in Low-Performing Schools

During the past two years, our organization – Performance Fact, Inc. – served as *external evaluator* for nearly 50 schools selected to participate in California's *Immediate Intervention / Underperforming Schools Program* (II/USP). That experience, plus 12 years of service to schools and districts across the USA, has coalesced into the perspectives that follow. While the ideas are neither 'new' nor 'revolutionary', most of them are notably absent in low-performing schools that need them the most. *This need not be.*

Five Fundamentals

Low-performing schools are more alike than they are different. While their challenges may *seem* quite different on the surface, in truth, they share identical root causes. Therefore, similar solutions apply to a great extent across such schools, even as those approaches take on 'flavors' that are unique to each school. We suggest that success for all students rests on addressing the challenges facing low-performing schools *at their root*. Nothing else will produce the lasting effect we all desire.

The five fundamentals offer a guide for designing and operating strong schools where adults and the students in their care can thrive. And while the fundamentals could be of some value to all schools, they are *imperatives* for low-performing schools.

Fundamental #1: Community Purpose – With few exceptions, low-performing schools tend to be *misaligned* organizations, rife with mistrust and conflict among stakeholders. Success is impossible in such a setting, so the first step in the turn-around is *always alignment on common purpose*. Like a magnet, alignment on common purpose coalesces and focuses all stakeholders and propels them forward as one. Through such unity of purpose, extra-ordinary outcomes can be accomplished and sustained.

Fundamental #2: Connectedness & Continuity – Students perform better in schools where they are well-known by and connected to adults who care about them. Furthermore, students learn at higher levels in schools where the adults themselves are well-connected to and care about one another. The growing trend towards small learning communities is a key to creating personalized learning environments for students and adults.

Fundamental #3: Community of Learning – All students will learn when instruction is responsive to their needs; what students have not learned, therefore, is merely that which we have not taught well. While many factors contribute to student learning, all roads lead to the conclusion that *good teaching* is the single most important predictor of student learning. It is the 'elephant among mice.'

Quality professional development, i.e., the continuous learning of *adults*, is key to enhancing the quality of teaching, especially in low-performing schools which have a disproportionately higher numbers of inexperienced or partially credentialed staff. And adult learning is most effective within a culture that promotes collegiality, 'accountable talk', and the *expectation* that the goal for every practitioner is to meet the standards for her/his profession. That is not the case today.

The California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP) and California Standards for School Administrators (CSSA) offer recognized contexts for delivering and motivating standards-based continuous learning by educators. As educators make continuous progress towards meeting the standards for their profession, they become more capable of facilitating learning for more students. In other words, the rate at which educators make progress towards their own full potential is a powerful determinant of their ability to facilitate learning for all their students.

Fundamental #4: Creativity & Imagination – The current drive for common content standards for all students, state-wide assessments, and public accountability have had some positive effect on the quality of education for all students, including those in low-performing schools. As public *expectations* have risen, the plight of students in low-performing schools is receiving greater attention than ever before. That is good news!

What must accompany the demand for better results, however, is some flexibility and autonomy in implementation, so that each school's educational programs are tailored to the unique needs of their students. While the root causes of low student achievement are similar across all low-performing schools, the specific approaches must be 'flavored to suit local tastes.'

Fundamental #5: Consequences – This is a powerfully charged word that has positive implications. As used here, the word means 'standing up for the results we produce individually and collectively'. In most low-performing schools, the notion of consequences, or accountability, is often totally lacking, or, at best, selectively applied. Clearly defined consequences – including rewards, interventions, and sanctions for students, staff, and parents – must be clearly defined up front, and equitably and consistently enforced. It is this idea that disciplines the whole process, and reinforces the desired outcomes.

What's Important, What Works

The five fundamentals are guiding principles around which actual programs can be tailored to meet local preferences. What is important is fidelity to the principles, while allowing schools some latitude in program selection and implementation. We refer to this balance as permitting a degree of 'unstructured expectations' for schools, staff and students.

Nonetheless, we have found that persistent attention to the following areas of focus significantly accelerates student success in low-performing schools.

- ❑ Shared vision and trust among stakeholders
- ❑ Reading and literacy as priority #1
- ❑ First-pick at the best teachers available to the district
- ❑ Site-specific professional development that builds teacher capacity for delivering responsive instruction
- ❑ Promotion of individual continuous learning and contribution to the learning of the whole community as non-negotiable values of the organization

In summary, our view of the purpose of education is captured in the "acorn theory" James Hillman mentioned in his book, *The Soul's Code*:

"The acorn theory proposes that each life is formed by a particular image, an image that is the essence of that life and calls it to a destiny, just as the mighty oak's destiny is written in the tiny acorn."

We are convinced that true success can only be subscribed by that which is divinely designed within each person. Our individual and collective aim, then, is a continuous journey towards our full potential. Good teaching and continuous learning facilitate that journey for students and adults alike.

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