Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education

The will is the way for schools where failure is not an option

The pressure is on. For the first time in our nation’s history, schools are being required to produce measurable evidence that all students are learning, and they are being asked to do so amidst fiscal crises at the state and local levels.

While several legitimate criticisms have been made about No Child Left Behind and its unfunded mandates, few can argue that it does not serve as a robust lever for change.

The demand that schools ensure that all students make adequate progress challenges even the most successful schools for many reasons, not the least of which is that educators never have been expected to do this before. Some don’t even believe it is possible; others don’t know where to begin; and still others know more than they have the courage to act upon.

High Performance
Our combined experience as teachers, researchers, consultants (as well as school board service for one of us) has taught us that the attitudes, skills and beliefs of the adults who work in a school are the most important factors distinguishing schools where high levels of academic achievement for all students is the norm from others. School professionals who succeed in elevating student achievement accept responsibility for student outcomes. They avoid attributing student performance to factors they cannot control and pointing their fingers at others.

It is true that students whose basic psychological, physical and emotional needs have not been addressed often experience greater difficulty in school. Nonetheless, there are schools and entire districts where recent immigrants, children of color and poor children are more likely to excel, and where external factors are treated as challenges to be addressed rather than as immutable reasons for failure. It is to these schools and districts that we must look for real ways to help all students succeed.

An examination of the research on effective schools and professional learning communities and the U.S. Department of Education’s criteria for excellent schools confirms what we have learned through our work at the HOPE Foundation with high-performing education leaders. High-performing schools share six elements:

- A common vision, mission, values and goals. Collectively developing a mission statement that articulates what students should learn, how they will learn it, how we will know whether they have learned it and what will happen if that learning does not occur is the first major pillar for school success. The vision provides a compelling and achievable long-term direction. Values describe how school personnel will behave in moving toward that vision. Goals break that vision into manageable, time-bound, results-driven pieces.
- Systems for prevention and intervention to ensure achievement for all students. High-performing schools adopt comprehensive systems for prevention and intervention that accelerate learning opportunities for students who are behind academically rather than separating them and slowing them down.
- Collaboration among staff to maintain a focus on teaching and learning. In high-performing schools staff members take collective responsibility for the success of every student. This entails devel-
opining and adhering to a coherent and deliberate approach to educating children.

- The use of data to guide decision making and continuous improvement. High-performing schools rely on data to evaluate programs and monitor initiatives implemented to help children. They reflect on the efficacy of their practice and assess their efforts to continually make modifications and improvements toward their students’ progress.

- The active engagement and participation of family and community members. High-performing schools make efforts to involve parents as partners in helping children learn. They work collaboratively with community agencies to address needs that have neither the capacity nor expertise to serve.

- A commitment to building leadership capacity at all levels. Given the high rate of turnover among principals and superintendents, successful schools and districts develop a “deep bench” by cultivating leadership teams, creating alternative paths for teachers to demonstrate leadership and developing succession plans.

High Standards

Emerson Elementary School in Berkeley, Calif., and the Newport News, Va., school district provide concrete examples of how successful schools and districts promote achievement and demonstrate the power of a genuine commitment to serving the needs of all students.

For more than 10 years, Emerson Elementary School has had the highest test scores among elementary schools in the Berkeley district. One of us (Noguera) came to know of Emerson and its accomplishments while serving as an elected member of the Berkeley board of education from 1990 to 1994 while enrolling two children at the school. Emerson consistently has been a high-performing school and despite changes in leadership, it continues to produce high levels of achievement among all of its students.

In 2000, it received an Academic Performance Index score of 9 out of a possible 10, and a 10 when compared to schools with similar demographic populations. All students score above national norms in literacy and math on standardized tests, and what makes this accomplishment so significant is that like other elementary schools in Berkeley, 60 percent of the children at Emerson are minority and qualify for free and reduced lunch.

All adults associated with Emerson—teachers, administrators, and parents—work together to ensure that students who are behind academically do not slip through the cracks. This requires a thoughtful and deliberate approach to serving the needs of all students and high level of collaboration among stakeholders.

At the beginning of the school year each child is assessed in math and literacy, so that teachers have a clear sense of each child’s learning needs. At the first parent-teacher conference an individualized learning plan for the student is presented and discussed. The plan includes details about monitoring student progress and use of the school’s supplemental resources to reinforce classroom instruction, as well as explicit guidance for parents on what they can do to sup-

port learning at home.

Parents are actively involved at Emerson even though most do not live in the school neighborhood. Their children are bussed to the school and they must travel across town to get there. Consistent outreach to parents takes place throughout the year. Activities aimed at encouraging participation include family math and literacy nights, family fun night, a special event for Black History Month, and workshops on various challenges faced by parents such as discipline and setting limits and talking to children about sex and drugs.

Parents respond to the support they receive by supporting the school. In response to concerns about safety caused by traffic in the morning as children are dropped off at school, parents volunteered to coordinate traffic and serve as safety monitors.

Perhaps Emerson’s most impressive feature is its consistent focus on delivering quality instruction. Every staff meeting focuses on professional development. Teachers share their expertise and materials, and they discuss ways to ensure they reach all students. They discuss how to align instructional strategies to the curriculum and state-mandated assessments in creative, compelling ways.

The goal of faculty meetings is to ensure that each teacher understands what the academic standards are and how to teach to the standards. The meetings also serve as a time to discuss the needs of individual students known to be struggling. Strategies for providing these students with the additional support they need are devised, and plans for monitoring their performance are implemented.

The key to Emerson’s success seemed to relate to the strength of its leader, Laura Monroe, who served as principal for 10 years. She was a resourceful and innovative leader who constantly sought to enrich the educational experience of her students through the continuous pursuit of best practices. A task master and stern disciplinarian, she found ways to get teachers and parents to put our extra effort in support of children and the school by providing a clear and compelling vision that all could un-
derstand and identify with.

In the middle of the 1999-2000 academic year, Monroe was forced to take an extended leave of absence due to illness. Fearing that the district might assign a replacement who would undermine all their hard work, the faculty notified the district that they would not need a replacement while she was away. Instead, a senior teacher at the school stepped in to serve as the acting principal and a frequently used respected substitute assumed responsibility for her classroom.

Though Monroe had been a fixture at the school for years and a source of strength for students, teachers and parents, Emerson did not falter during her absence. Because she had taken time to cultivate shared leadership with her staff, they knew what to do when she was gone, and the systems of academic support continued to operate.

Ultimately, the success of the school was confirmed once again when the scores on the Stanford 9 achievement tests were released in the fall of 2000. Emerson was again among the highest ranked schools in California.

In the pursuit of high achievement at Emerson, nothing is left to chance.

Systems for Success
The professionals in the Newport News, Va., school district, a diverse, K-12 urban system of 33,000 students, half of whom are on free or reduced lunch, are uniformly committed to the success of each student. Since 1982 the district has won 12 Blue Ribbon School awards from the U.S. Education Department, more than any other district in Virginia.

Each school in the district systemically ensures student success through an approach similar to the “Pyramid of Interventions” used by mental health professionals. Staff collectively evaluate existing prevention and interventions and create new ones as part of a coherent continuum of support to ensure all children get what they need to succeed.

Every teacher along with the school administration within a school is involved in determining the following:

- What interventions are working well, and which could work well if modified?
- If we were to place them in a pyramid such that the lower-level intensity interventions (such as summer orientation) were at the base and more intensive interventions (such as referral to a school psychologist for individual counseling) were at the top, what holes would we have within this pyramid?
- What changes to current programs and additional programs are needed to ensure success for all students?

When teachers have weekly grade-level meetings (in the elementary schools) and department-level meetings (in high schools), the pyramid that was created by these same teachers is used as a tool to determine appropriate interventions for students who are falling behind. In most schools in the district, the efficacy of many of the programs within the pyramid is evaluated quarterly. On an annual basis, the entire pyramid is reviewed as both the means to orient new teachers to the options they can access for low-performing students, as well as to improve programs within the pyramid.

The base of the pyramid (Level 1) consists of prevention strategies and activities. Level 1 programs typically involve a large number of students in widely implemented prevention activities. For example, the PALS Program in the Newport News middle and high schools match all incoming students with upperclassmen who serve as men-

tors. This reduces the number of students who get “lost” in the system.

Other Level 1 prevention strategies include a summer orientation for all incoming freshmen to teach them “survival” skills (how to study, how to avoid getting into trouble, whom to see for information on everything from questions on picking appropriate classes to what to wear for the prom and using the automated homework hotline system). Part of this orientation is taught by upperclassmen.

Those students who are “red flagged” as likely needing more support coming into high school become part of 9th grade teaching teams that carry through on the middle school team concept. The same four teachers work with about 80 students in English, math, science and social studies for one year. This helps ease the transition for these middle schoolers while affording teachers more time to evaluate each student’s progress.

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The remaining levels of the pyramid include increasingly intensive interventions needed by fewer students, such as afterschool study halls, reading and math support classes, and counseling groups formed by guidance counselors to address the needs of specific groups of students.

The pyramid of interventions involves coordination among feeder schools, support from families and the community, and systematic application by each teacher. This reduces the stress on any one member of the faculty to single-handedly ensure student success. When a teacher can't meet the needs of one of his or her students, she takes the concerns along with performance data to the team meeting, at which point the student's needs become a group effort.

The pyramid becomes an organized way of looking for appropriate interventions based on data. It was developed collectively, to support a mission statement created by all stakeholders, and the collaborative team focused on learning then jointly solves the challenge posed by the student needing additional support.

Generating the Will

Schools like Emerson and districts like Newport News prove it is possible to serve the needs of all students. Such success stories must become the norm.

The greatest obstacle preventing schools from raising achievement and closing the gap is not a lack of resources or technical expertise, but rather a lack of will.

If we are to make success more common in schools across America, the question we must ask ourselves is "What will it take for everyone involved to resolve that failure is not an acceptable option for public education?"

The fact that we have schools where academic achievement is not the norm and where large numbers of children are written off as unteachable is unacceptable.

The changes necessary to close racial, economic and second-language learner achievement gaps are not easily made. The toughest among them, however, is mustering the courage and will to commit to real success for all children. The rest becomes the far easier task of determining how to go about it, a task clearly being handled effectively in districts genuinely committed to the success of all learners.

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