

Staying the Course

BY MARK MCLAUGHLIN



The dilemma faced by educational leaders is this: Facing the daily challenge to be accountable to students, parents, state and federal overseers, and taxpayers, many of whom have competing, even conflicting interests and concerns, leaders must navigate the turbulent space between establishing initiatives to address curriculum and instruction challenges and maintaining equilibrium in the face of those many challenges. Despite their best efforts, educational leaders often find themselves mired in a deeply uncomfortable thicket as they attempt to simultaneously be accountable, stay current, maintain tradition, blaze a new trail, pilot, research, justify, communicate, respect the community, lead the conversation, honor teacher time, and stay within budget but grow the results.

So, more often than we might like and most always in spite of our better instincts, educational leaders find themselves supporting multiple initiatives that individually may represent best practice but collectively more likely suggest what chaos might look like if put into an action plan. We've seen it all before. Math results on New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tank, a committee forms, research is conducted, questions are asked, survey

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results are compiled, stakeholders are consulted, and a decision is made. We will adopt this program because research supports it, the community accepts it, the teachers understand it, and our students will profit from it. Plus, it's not too expensive. At about the same time, we review our literacy program and recognize that the plan we've had in place for some time, while producing steady results, doesn't help us keep up with Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks and so a committee forms, research is conducted, questions are asked, survey results are compiled, stakeholders are consulted, and a decision is made. We will adopt this program because research supports it, the community accepts it, the teachers understand it, and our students will profit from it. Plus, it's not too expensive. Science, meanwhile, is beginning to emerge as an area that needs attention since, for some time now, it has languished in the shadow of initiatives targeting literacy and numeracy. What to do? Are our kits still effective? Are they even complete? Should they be replaced? If so, by what? How much will it cost? How much training will be required of teachers to implement it? What does best practice suggest we should do? What is our sister district doing? Can we do it better? And so a committee forms, research is conducted, questions are asked, survey results are compiled, stakeholders are consulted, and a decision is made. We will adopt this program because research supports it, the community accepts it, the teachers understand it, and our students will profit from it. Plus, it's not too expensive.

But a strange thing is happening as all this activity is taking place, sometimes in the shadows of daily practice, sometimes in the wide open. Teachers are struggling to keep up with what's new, all of it, all at once. Students are struggling to keep up with expectations and new routines, all at once. And parents, many of whom might even have been part of the approval process of a particular initiative, are beginning to question why nothing seems familiar anymore and why they cannot help their children the way they used to. And since so much seems so new and everything is moving so fast, it may be difficult for a parent to discern where to put their energies when trying to help their child. So, teachers may begin to lament the passing of an era where change came

more slowly and with more rationale. Parents may begin to question the efficacy of so much change so fast when *this is such a critical year for my child*. Taxpayers too may begin to ask, "Given the expense associated with the adoption of these new initiatives, where are the results? Have NECAP scores improved sufficiently to warrant such an investment?" And those who don't believe much in standardized test results as a measure of programmatic success might ask, "Is my child reading more fluently with Program X than with Program Y, and has it all been worth the effort? After all, it has been a year..."

But none of these questions, many of which are understandable and even appropriate, help the educational leader who is still accountable to the taxpayer for fiscal restraint, the state and federal government for accountability and growth, the student for educational symmetry, and the teacher for a workable action plan. At the heart of the leadership dilemma in the midst of all these challenges is this one constant: there will always be a reason to make things more complicated and an equally compelling reason to make things simpler.

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In our district, whenever we are confronted with this terrible paradox, we say "stay the course." Operationally, this means that once we have determined a plan of action, assuming that determination is made with good data and sound reasoning, we will adhere to it. As a leadership posture, it is that simple, which means that it is quite complicated.

We know what the change research says. Michael Fullan and others have taught us all how to build capacity, set the stage for change, and nurture students and teachers throughout the process. But what is often overlooked in some of that guidance and in much of the change literature is the urgency that attends to so much of what constitutes the "real economy" of schools. Decisions cannot always be put off until the community is ready for them. Conversely, decisions once made cannot and should not be easily dismissed based on a social, political, or even educational fad. Why? Because the parent who says, "But this is an important year for my child," is absolutely right. Every academic year is a critical

step in a child's learning progression and as such cannot be made subject to whim, fancy, or the "moment." A leader's role in the facilitation of change ought to be first and foremost about setting and following a kind of educational North Star. Just as all the great navigators of history did not set sail until they had done their best thinking, aided by good counsel and the best knowledge of the problem extant at the time, so too must the educational navigator be sure of his or her direction before charting a course and shoving off. This is exactly when the hard work of planning must take place. This is exactly when it is right that the committee forms, research is conducted, questions are asked, survey results are compiled, stakeholders are consulted, and a decision is made. Once this process concludes, it is then that we can assert we will adopt this program because research supports it, the community accepts it, the teachers understand it, and our students will profit from it. And if it is not too expensive, all the better. And likewise, it is exactly at this point that a leader must assert that we will now "stay the course."

In our district, the manifestation of this principle of staying the course found its best expression in our elementary literacy redesign, a five-year process that continues vigorously today. As many districts nationwide have discovered, a District in Need of Improvement (DINI) designation can be harrowing. Laments of "Why have we failed?" are quickly replaced by a desperate search for "answers." Data are examined. Focus groups are formed. Curriculum inventories are conducted. And finally, "We will change" is the mantra throughout the district. Inevitably, however, what teachers think when administrators in good faith say, "We will change" is "Here we go again," and what they believe is "This too shall pass." And they are right, because it almost always does. But five years ago, after the sting of our brand gave way to a serious consideration of next steps, our team of administrators did what I believe was bold and sensible and undeniably smart. They focused. Since literacy was the source of our designation, district administrators determined that rather than address the issue of underperformance with broad strokes and thin paint, they would dig deep and attack the root of the problem. If K-12 was underperforming, would it be realistic, they asked, to address the breadth of K-12 literacy with any reasonable expectation of demonstrable success in time to effect a DINI designation? Since the obvious answer was "no," administrators decided to focus on K-6 and, for a time, let 7-12 continue its practices largely unaffected. Like a mother bear who leaves her cubs for a while in search of food, district administrators determined that 7-12 could survive for a time, especially if a model for

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genuine and sustainable growth could be developed and implemented in a manageable context. That context was K-6. And so our district embarked on a comprehensive project to reimagine literacy instruction at the earliest grades, hoping to accomplish two things: First, to commence a student's literacy learning career based on solid research and

best practice. Second, in so doing, develop a model for how it is done so that once retrieved—like the mother bear coming back for her cubs with food—the 7-12 cohort could then be sustained. Not trailblazers, but triangulators.

In order to do this, the district leadership team agreed to respond to this DINI challenge by asserting some nontraditional principles. Redefining what it means to "stick with it," administrators promised teachers that financial commitments to long-term professional development in literacy would be the hallmark of a new approach to improvement. Additionally, leadership determined that for an initiative like this to be truly successful, it would require the active participation of a cadre of early adopters to help lead the initiative alongside administrators so that long after the blush of novelty turned gray, the engine of change would still be animated. And with those two commitments, the Merrimack School District's Collaborative Assessment Project (CAP) was born out of the proverbial ashes of a DINI designation. The details of CAP are not what matter here; that's another article for another time. But what does matter is this: five years into it, CAP has fundamentally transformed elementary literacy instruction in our district. Professional Learning Teams have been formed and are the engine of a coherent, consistent data-review process based on the administration of formative assessments that inform teachers about what students understand more than any weekly vocabulary test ever did.

Specialists have become integral to students' literacy instruction, teaching literacy in the context of their unique content area. To see a physical education teacher instruct students about purpose, audience, and main idea by helping them read and understand nutrition labels is to believe that change sometimes really can be transformational. Rubrics and model products now help both teachers and students define and demonstrate particular learning goals and have become part of the students' expectations. And throughout the course of introducing, practicing, and institutionalizing these changes, our district has been supported by a small team of literacy and instructional coaches/consultants who have been with us from the beginning and are in every sense with us today still. While the substance of their conversations with teach-

ers now reflects the enormous growth of teachers over time, their omnipresence five years into this initiative suggests that our district's commitment to this project and the teachers who are its engine has not wavered. We have, in fact, stayed the course. Parents, school board members, students, the general public, and even some educators and others outside our district know not only what CAP means literally, but what it stands for symbolically as well. It is the manifestation of a sustained, monumental change in the way we do business that has at various times caused great anguish, considerable frustration, much reflection, and profound revelation.

Teachers understand that the promise made five years ago was kept. Long-term and consistent professional development has been at the core of this initiative. The cadre of early adopters has now given way to wave upon wave of new teacher leaders, a critical mass of literacy specialists, in a way, coherently delivering a district-wide program across four buildings, linked by a common vision born out of a much earlier and more concerning time after that long-ago DINI designation. And just as the mother bear returns to her cubs finally, the model is now in place to effectively retrieve 7–12 just in time for the first cohort of students grown up in this new system to feel no significant change in the way they have always learned. The coach/consultants who brought K–6 to this point of growth and who sustain them now through continued evolutions of refinement are the very same ones working with those upper-grade teachers now. They have, and we have, truly stayed the course.

The real challenge of change is getting to the point where the adopted change makes sense to the array of stakeholders, is supported by good reason and sound thinking, is demonstrably good for students—or will be with practice and support—and can be operationalized by teachers. The further challenge of change is to stay the course when, once the proverbial ship has set sail, the seas get rough and some individuals clamor to return to port while others argue that calmer waters lie to the right or to the left, but certainly not ahead. The urgency of life in schools, both for teachers and for their learners, suggests that there must be faith in the direction a leader sets, faith in the preparation for the sail and in all that may come afterward. The alternative is this: the developmental nature of the learner and the capacity of the teacher to adequately prepare for and execute the plan will suffer

equally as those in charge react to each challenge to the plan, each wave that rocks the boat. Learners can learn in the context of reasoned and appropriate change to the substance of their learning, but they cannot learn sufficiently, given what learning in the 21st century really means, when the context for that learning changes with the tide. We might better call that “knowing.” I have yet to meet a parent, community member, or taxpayer who is satisfied with a cadre of knowers, yet the result of being too easily blown off course is just that consequential. Results take time. Understanding takes time. Rough seas blow the ship off course, but it is the skipper's responsibility to stay sighted on the North Star so that when the seas calm—and they always will, if only for a while—the destination will still be visible.

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There may always be an uncomfortable tension between the status quo and moving forward. There will always be a question about when to move forward, when to reverse, and when to veer, but these can and should be managed. The leader's responsibility in managing change, particularly when staying the course is the avowed goal, is to elicit community support in the rationale for doing so. It is the leader's vision in the midst of all the reasons to turn back, change course, or stay in place that ought to compel the others on board to stay the course. There will always be reasons to complicate the delivery of education. But that does not mean the leader should let that happen. The leader, in turbulent times especially, must recognize that the best way to navigate everything that makes learning and the system that supports it almost intolerably difficult is to stay true to one overriding vision: stay the course and the rest will follow.

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