
Preface

In the coming year, the number of students needing to achieve proficiency under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal guidelines will dramatically increase not only in California but also across the nation. This will be a wake-up call for “business as usual” schools. It is one thing to look at the number of students across the school scoring proficient and quite another to make sure that every single subgroup is meeting the new proficiency target at the increased level. To make the challenge even more difficult, the number of students scoring proficient will continue to increase steadily along a severe trajectory every subsequent year toward the goal of 100 percent in 2014. Unless schools learn how to sustain and accelerate student achievement for every subgroup, they will not meet each year’s increasing target. Additionally, many schools have not had to worry about achieving the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets but now will be faced with the possibility of becoming a Program Improvement school if they miss the target for every two consecutive years. That target will increase from 35.2 percent in 2008 to 46 percent in 2009 for language arts and from 37 percent in 2008 to 47.5 percent for mathematics. These targets will become a matter of grave concern for almost every school and every school district.

There are, however, Title 1 schools among the most challenged within the state of California, working with English learners and high-poverty children, that have not only achieved but have sustained their student achievement year after year. They have solved their achievement problems and have gone on to improve and sustain achievement for every subgroup. Five such schools are profiled in this book. These schools were forced to change through state-imposed or district-imposed reform efforts. Many such schools facing similar circumstances did not improve. However, these schools learned first how to achieve and then learned how to sustain achievement.

Each school’s story is told based on actual interviews and on-site visits. The secrets of their achieving and sustaining practices are revealed within the context of each school’s unique culture. Every school was studied from the point of view of the prevailing culture rather than how a district perceived its

achievement; that is, the sustaining elements embedded in the culture are not merely cited as a laundry list of effective practices in isolation. These schools are actually implementing these practices, as demonstrated by student achievement scores. Often schools that are trying to improve can articulate elements of sustaining practice but cannot bring about the actual substance of real achievement. School reform can often become relegated to reform du jour or form without substance.

Much of the effective schools' research cited is consistent with the findings of this book. Effective schools research even concurs with much of the sustaining practices reported by this research. Yet, what was uniquely discovered was how the context of these elements works together within the school to produce such outstanding achievement. Research studies often discuss the elements of an effective school but do not focus on how all the elements work together as a whole. Each of the sustaining elements alone will not produce sustaining practice. All must be present within a school's culture.

There is much to learn from each of these schools. Districts, principals, and teachers need to know and understand how to create a high-achieving culture with all essential elements, where everyone is successful—students, teachers, principals, and support staff. Where a low-achieving culture exists and teachers are unsuccessful with student achievement challenges, the school environment becomes caustic and frustrating for everyone. Students or parents are very often blamed for the lack of success. More importantly, low achievement doesn't remain static. It continues to spiral downward, creating more frustration and lower achievement. It then takes a concerted effort to turn around a low-achieving culture to one that is high achieving.

The first task for each of these schools was to build a high-achieving culture. In each case, a crisis triggered the beginning of positive change and leaders emerged from the crisis to facilitate change. At all schools, a set of nonnegotiable core values emerged with a new commitment to high student achievement. Essential elements such as shared leadership, use of data, and strategic intervention were uniquely woven within each culture. The low-achieving mind-set was replaced with a high-achieving culture over time when students began to be successful.

From my own experience in working with teachers to lead Disney Elementary School from an underachieving school to a high-achieving school, I began to wonder how we could sustain the momentum of our student achievement. Disney became an Immediate Intervention Underperforming School in 1999, two years after being named a California Distinguished School. Through this point of crisis, and with the partnership of teachers, parents, and support staff, we grew from an Academic Performance Index (API) of 603 in 1999 to an API of 795 in 2003. It was our goal to be a great school—not merely meet the growth target from year to year.

In the first chapter, the reasons for this study are introduced that led to my investigation of five sustaining elementary schools in California. Sylvan Elementary School, located in the heart of Modesto, is the focus of Chapter 2. This high-mobility school with four different tracks of students learned how to sustain high achievement. Chapter 3 tells the story of Camellia Elementary School, one of the lowest achieving schools in California in the 1970s. Now this school is one of the very highest performing schools in the state. Jefferson Elementary School in Carlsbad is discussed in Chapter 4. Jefferson is noted for its highly collaborative staff, who will do whatever it takes to help students achieve, even if it means working on Saturdays. Rosita Elementary School in Garden Grove (Chapter 5) is an example of a school that continues to sustain student achievement despite four principal changes. Baldwin Elementary School in Alhambra is the focus of Chapter 6. This school is a “triple crown” (California Distinguished School, Title 1 Achieving School, and a National Title 1 Blue Ribbon School) K–8 school that is relentless in helping students to achieve. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the findings from the study of all five schools with the essential elements that enable these schools to continue to sustain high achievement.

The principles and practices of these five schools can be replicated in any school. Thus, this is an important book for the professional development of principals and those preparing principals at the university/college levels. Additionally, districts can use this book as a basis for developing in their staffs the understanding of how to create a high-achieving culture to improve student achievement. Then school personnel can see what is needed to sustain and continuously improve that achievement.

It is my hope that principals and teachers everywhere will be inspired and confirmed in their quest to not just simply meet the NCLB student achievement targets but to become truly great sustaining schools year after year. It is important to think beyond just meeting an achievement target to becoming excellent in every way for the sake of the children we serve. These schools provide a pathway and an insight on how to become excellent.

The stories of each of these schools are real and the student achievement is real. I am confident after studying these schools that every school can become a sustaining school. There are no excuses! Embracing sustainability begins with a group of people determined to reject the poor performance of their students and change their practice for the sake of helping their students improve. What are the rewards for taking the risk? For these schools, taking this risk brought the satisfaction and teacher efficacy they now have in seeing their students soar to greater excellence. What a fulfilling legacy for any educator! One of the principals articulated the reward for addressing student achievement well when she said, “When you are successful, it doesn’t seem like work.” The following pages present the real realities and the exciting results of deciding to be a sustaining school.