

## Finding Clarity Amid the Fog of External Demands How Rapidly Improving Schools and Districts are Taking Control and Putting Students First

by Bill Daggett, Ed.D.

**T**o be an educator today is to exist in a constant state of moving targets and new mandates. New standards, new tests, new evaluation guidelines—who can keep up? It's head spinning. Teachers feel like they are losing control of their classrooms. Principals feel like they are losing control of their buildings. And superintendents feel like they are losing control of their districts. Too many in the system are overwhelmed and burnt out. And worse, all these external demands are putting content—not students—first.

I call this the fog. Today's educators must somehow try to stay on top of all these new demands and still connect with each student in a way that is meaningful and relevant. Administrators must somehow keep outside forces satisfied and still support their schools and teachers. It's no wonder so many educators and administrators cannot find focus amid the fog of external and conflicting demands.

As my colleagues and I continue our work with the nation's most rapidly improving schools, we have found that these schools have managed to cut through the fog. They are not losing control amid external demands and they have continued to keep students their main priority. What sets these schools apart? They share the following common practices, and—importantly—have realized that *central administration must begin to take a more active role in sustaining instructional success*.

**Culture Trumps Strategy.** In any organization, culture is the most important factor in how it faces challenges. In schools lost in the fog, educators and students are so drained that they are losing their enthusiasm and excitement. In rapidly improving schools, everyone is united in a commitment to students first. They believe we must develop students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills to be successful, not only in school, but in the world beyond school.

**The most rapidly improving schools focus on the art, not the science, of teaching.** As I've said, the most rapidly improving schools have managed to avoid burn out amid the many urgent challenges in front of them. All schools are under demands from outside forces—from local and state governments, to the federal government, businesses, and the media—that are trying to force

school reform by formula. This approach treats learning like a science and it forces teachers to ask the students to adjust to them. But the most successful teachers know that teaching is an art and must be tailored to students. By not kowtowing to the pressure to focus on content reform demands, improving schools keep their focus on students. In doing so, students perform better and teachers and administrators remain energized and have the capacity to manage many conflicting external demands.

**The most rapidly improving schools are taking control and not being controlled.** These schools are not succumbing to outside forces. Instead, they adopt a holistic approach to learning and remain in control of how they instruct students. But in control of what, specifically? The following four critical components of student-centered learning, which include but are not directed by external demands and, importantly, are addressed in this order:

### *Component 1: Academic Tenacity or Grit*

Rapidly improving schools realize that for students to be successful at content, they must motivate students. These schools identify how students feel motivated and create systemic strategies around them. Key areas of student motivation are:

- A sense of academic and social belonging
- Seeing school as relevant to their future
- A willingness to work hard and postpone immediate gratification
- An ability not to get derailed by academic or social difficulties
- A willingness to seek out challenges
- The desire to remain engaged for the long haul (Dweck, Walton & Cohen, 2014)

Does your school or district merely pay lip service to these important factors? As an example, how many of us have been willing to have the difficult conversations around race, poverty, English language learners, mental health issues, sexual orientation, and similar areas of social impact? Is your school or district silent on the topic, while students are more engaged in the discussion through social media than we are?

The most rapidly improving schools develop thoughtful implementation plans to create an environment where students feel comfortable, safe and encouraged in their pursuit of tenacity. And those of you who have used the Rigor/Relevance Framework know that each area of motivation is naturally addressed when teaching to the B and D quadrants. (Daggett, 2014)

### ***Component 2: Proactive Parent and Community Engagement***

Through regular outreach, rapidly improving schools engage parents and community in dialogues around the aforementioned topics to gain their support in fostering student motivation. These schools do this at times and in environments where the families and communities are most comfortable, not the other way around. They reach out to parents and community on their turf at times that are most convenient to them, not vice versa.

### ***Component 3: Methodology***

Rapidly improving districts support their schools in adjusting instructional practices as needed to be more engaging for students. For those familiar with the Rigor/Relevance Framework, they shift instruction from the A and C quadrants to the B and D quadrants. (Daggett, 2014)

### ***Component 4: Content***

Rapidly improving districts focus on what needs to be taught and to what level of proficiency.

A focus on content first is a recipe for program fatigue. What rapidly improving schools understand is that when you focus first on academic tenacity/grit and parent/ community engagement, methodology and content naturally take care of themselves. We have seen this time and time again in our study of the nation's most rapidly improving schools: Those teachers who keep students at the center of motivated learning, with parent/community support, naturally find methodology and content solutions that move the needle.

**The most long-term rapidly improving schools gain support from an actively involved central administration.** Rapidly improving schools have learned that it takes a system-wide approach to gain control of the four components of student-centered learning. Central administration is key to providing schools with the tools and leadership they need as they adopt a systemic approach to successful instruction over the long-term. In an effort to support sustainable improvement, the most rapidly improving districts have made the following changes:

***The most improving districts and schools leverage technology to do things differently.*** Rapidly improving schools embrace the new technologies and data systems/analytics that are transforming our world. Their administrators and teachers avoid the common trap of trying to improve methods of the past; instead their focus is on the future. They find application-based tactics to incorporate the technologies that will shape tomorrow into their instruction. Their districts empower administrators and teachers to innovate instruction to help students develop the skills they will need in the real world.

***Rapidly improving districts are rethinking and rebuilding school leadership teams.*** Many districts see their schools' instructional leadership teams as the principal and some form of department chairperson. Rapidly improving districts have identified two problems with this view: 1) In the next 2½ years, 40% of principals will leave their posts. At this rate and when the principal is the instructional leader, will a school be at the whim of a new strategy every few years? 2) The department chair model silos instructional programs and fails to connect disciplines in a way that prepares students for life beyond school. It also puts the focus on the content, when it needs to be on students' instruction.

Rapidly improving schools know that instructional leadership has to be more than just one person; it must be systemic to the building and broader than a group of isolated disciplines. They also know that the collective skill set of the leadership team must allow for an equal focus on academic tenacity, parent/ community support, methodology and content. With the encouragement of their district, schools making significant strides are innovating how they form leadership teams and building them to be resilient to team member departures.

Leaders, find clarity amid this fog. Take control of your schools and districts by adopting and adapting these best practices to put your students—not external demands—first.

### **References**

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### **About the Author**

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