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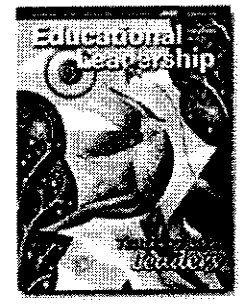
Leading to Change / Teachers Step Up



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As this issue of *Educational Leadership* makes clear, teacher leadership is a concept that extends far beyond a slogan and has become an integral part of education reform. It is no coincidence that award-winning school districts have made teacher leadership a key part of their strategies for continued success. Another characteristic of such school districts is their insistence on continuous improvement. Consider Jenks Public Schools in Oklahoma, winner of the 2005 Baldrige Award for school quality. The cooperative efforts of teachers and administrators have led to remarkable progress for some of the most challenging students in the system.

Intervening to Prevent Failure

Although Jenks has enjoyed a history of academic success, the district recognized that too many students continued to face failure. The faculty of Jenks High School worked together to find the most accurate early-warning indicators of student course failures. For example, when they considered the factors that predicted math failure, the faculty learned that any 9th grade student who earned a *D* in English or math in 8th grade and also failed a criterion-referenced reading or math test was almost certain to fail his or her next math course. That's right: Trouble in reading is a clear predictor not only of trouble in future English courses, but also of trouble in future math courses. In the past, these students would not have received intervention until after failing one or more 9th grade courses. Now Jenks uses its data analysis to intervene to prevent failure.

The strategies that Jenks High School uses have three striking characteristics. First, intervention is proactive, not reactive. The school does not wait for a failing grade to institute intervention strategies. Second, intervention is delivered by outstanding faculty members. In a remarkable example of teacher leadership, expert faculty members, including those who have taught advanced placement courses to the school's most successful students, have volunteered to take on the classes that contain the school's most challenging students. Third, intervention strategies include time—twice the classroom contact hours that had been provided in the past. These interventions are mandatory for students who need them. Teachers and administrators are relentless in their determination that all students will succeed—even students who resist the requirements imposed on them to prevent failure.

Of course, extra time alone does not ensure success, but time is a crucial variable. Even great teachers equipped with an excellent curriculum cannot erase a multiyear deficit in learning if students do not have the time necessary to acquire essential background knowledge and also master grade-level requirements. For example, Jenks students who need intervention in English receive not only the regular grade-level course but also an extra reading and composition class. In math, students receive not only the regular Algebra I class but also an "Algebra Lab" class in which they are taught the essentials of number operations, problem solving, and analysis.

The results speak for themselves. In the regular math classes populated by students who had no apparent need for intervention, 38 percent of the students received a grade of *A* or *B* and 36

percent received a *C*. In the math lab classes, populated by students who started the semester significantly behind their peers and were considered at high risk of failure, 46 percent earned an *A* or *B* and 25 percent earned a *C*. Lest skeptical readers attribute this performance to positive bias on the part of the lab teachers, consider the following: On the state math exam, 42 percent of the students enrolled in the lab classes scored at the Advanced or Satisfactory levels, compared with 20 percent of students enrolled in regular classes.

What is the secret of this award-winning system? Superintendent Kirby Lehman credits teacher leadership. "Outstanding teachers have chosen to be directly involved in the remedial courses," he notes. "We are making the correct decision by doubling the time for our high-challenge students in both math and language arts and using the best instructors available to provide such remediation."

By intervening decisively and immediately—before failure takes place—Jenks High School has already achieved a dramatic reduction in failures. The superintendent's comment on this success is particularly telling: "We are not yet satisfied with the results." Lehman and his colleagues will not be content until 100 percent of students achieve proficiency.

Does Intervention Hurt Electives?

Whenever a school provides extra time for students and teachers to prevent failure, the short-term effect on elective courses is inevitably a source of controversy. Students who take an algebra lab, composition class, or reading course are losing a 9th grade elective. Of course, students who fail English or algebra courses and then retake those classes as 10th and 11th grade students are losing electives in these grades, often accompanied by increasing levels of frustration for teachers and students alike. As the results from Jenks make clear, preventing failures in 9th grade leads to fewer course repetitions later in high school.

Leadership at Every Level

In their determination to help struggling students succeed, Jenks and many other schools face challenges that cannot be addressed by one more program, inspirational speaker, or administrative command. Their success is the result of great leadership, to be sure. But leadership in these systems takes place at every level, including leadership by example from teachers who place the interests of students first.

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