

## One More “Brutal Reality” for Superintendents

by Stephen W. Hefner, Ed.D.

For more than a year now, I have been using *Good to Great*, Jim Collins’ bestseller, in my ongoing professional development for all members of our administrative staff and teacher leaders. The members of our leadership team have drawn great inspiration from Mr. Collins’ bottom-line conclusion: “Greatness is not a function of circumstances. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice.”

According to Collins, one of the defining characteristics of a “great” organization is that it has identified and confronted the brutal facts of its current reality. One brutal fact we have identified in our school district is this: *At a time when an increasing number of our students are achieving at levels higher than ever before, an increasing number of our students are at greater risk of dropping out than ever before.* I suspect that this is a brutal reality common to many other school districts in our state and nation.

Confronting and successfully addressing the aforementioned emerging brutal reality brings to mind a long-standing, unchanging brutal reality: *The leadership of the superintendent is essential in devising and implementing strategies to solve systemwide problems.* As more and more students struggle to meet today’s higher-than-ever proficiency standards in all content areas, superintendents are compelled to ensure that appropriate services are provided for students who are at risk of dropping out.

One of my first major actions as superintendent of Richland School District Two was to establish Blythewood Academy, an alternative school for chronically disruptive students. Over the course of the past decade, Blythewood Academy’s mission has expanded to include students who are at risk for many

other reasons as well. While the school has gained a great deal of positive recognition, it remains a continuous “work in progress.” Unquestionably, I have a lot yet to learn about dropout prevention programs but a few things I have already learned include:

1. Simplify the mission. A simple, easy-to-communicate mission is essential for selling an alternative program.
2. Remember the moral of “The Tortoise and the Hare”: Slow and steady wins the race. Start small; think big. Start by building a solid foundation. As confidence in the program is earned, support for adding components to the program will be more easily obtained.
3. Creating a long-term, sustainable advocacy coalition for alternative education at the local level is virtually impossible. Parent and/or community booster organizations are natural outgrowths of competitive sports, academic, or performing arts groups; such organizations serve as forceful and effective advocates for their respective causes. Because of the lack of such an ongoing local advocacy group for an alternative program, the superintendent’s leadership role is paramount. For all practical purposes, the superintendent is the alternative school’s de facto booster club.
4. Do not ignore individuals and groups who oppose such programs and/or oppose the expenditure of funds for them. In our district, we invited the leading opponent to our initial alternative school proposal to become a member of the task force charged with developing an implementation plan for the school. The opponent became the leading advocate for our program by the

end of the first year of program implementation.

5. Facilitate visitations to your program by all constituencies in your community. There is no better way to build support for a good program than for people to see it in operation. One tip: Invite your critics to visit with no advanced notice. This sends a clear signal that good things are happening and that the program is well managed every day.
6. Make teaching and learning relevant to the students served. At-risk students embrace service-learning initiatives and are highly motivated by civic engagement activities.
7. Assure the highest quality faculty and staff members in an alternative school and provide them the same level of professional status and respect as their counterparts in all other schools.

As I think about the responsibilities I have as a superintendent, I am reminded of yet another brutal reality: *What we do really matters.* Providing an appropriate, quality education to every student requires the superintendent to be a leader for *all* students.

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