

The Superintendent's Leadership Matters in Dropout Prevention

by Henry L. Johnson, Ph.D.

As a student of the writings of W. Edwards Deming, I believe that the responsibility for improving outcomes of any organization rests with its leadership. If lowering the number of dropouts and ultimately eliminating dropouts is the target, then leadership must directly address this issue.

One role of leadership is to create conversation. Leaders must identify issues and generate dialogue to solve issues of concern. If we want to improve dropout rates, first we must make certain the right people are discussing ways to improve dropout rates. Data must be identified and collected to inform the discussion. Beyond conversation, leaders must ensure that appropriate structures and processes are in place to address the issues. As has been said numerous times, "Talk is cheap." The question is: What actions do we put in place to support the rhetoric?

Leaders must establish and set guiding principles that support talk and deed. Reducing dropout rates is a straightforward goal. We must be clear with our stakeholders what our goals are and begin with an accurate dropout rate. In the past, reported dropout rates were lower than experience told us they actually were. Often, the rates reported were between four and six percent, but if high school freshmen were tracked across four years, one would discover that between 25% and 40% of these students were not graduating. As

leaders, particularly as superintendents, we must clearly define the term "dropout," and make sure the public understands the real picture.

Superintendents and other school leaders also must advocate the idea that students who have experienced success in the past tend not to drop out, so we must find ways to generate success. The greatest predictor of future success is past success. This does not mean lowering standards. In fact, it means just the opposite. We must increase academic rigor. There is a strong body of research to suggest increasing rigor for all students produces better learning outcomes for all students. Students understand what is deemed important in a school environment.

Students will develop a more positive self-concept when they are successful academically. Teachers must demonstrate high expectations in curriculum offerings, both through the tasks assigned and the assessments used to measure progress in meeting standards.

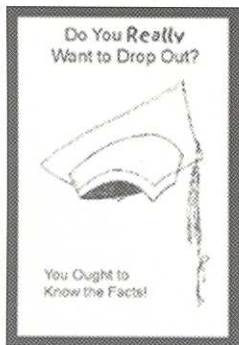
School leaders must reinforce the expectations of teachers and support teachers as they strive to maintain academic rigor. They must provide the resources needed by teachers to create a learning environment that fosters excellence. Teachers must have the flexibility to teach with creativity, but also have the assessment measures in place to assure that the appropriate curriculum is being taught.

School leaders also recognize the essential role that parents and family members play in dropout prevention. Family members are the first and most important teachers of their children and have the greatest influence in shaping their children's values. One of the most important values we can instill in our children is the value of education. Parents must talk with children about the importance of education and be involved in their children's education throughout the school years.

School leaders also recognize and support the important role a community plays in dropout prevention. By assuring an economic climate that provides good jobs for graduates, a community encourages students to stay in school and prepare for a future that includes a good job with good benefits and financial stability. The superintendent and other school leaders must encourage all community stakeholders to demonstrate commitment to education through support of the school and school activities.

School leaders, parents and family members, community leaders, and students must all participate in the task of helping students to stay and succeed in school. The success of our schools and communities depends upon the success of our individuals. The superintendent's leadership matters in helping create this success.

—Henry L. Johnson is
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