



... the source for instructional leadership

## *Stay the Course*

Welcome back to this adventure we call teaching and learning! While some need only be concerned about individual performance, educators are evaluated on the impact they have on another's performance. What road is more challenging to travel than the one which inspires another to revise their own work?

Such a noble cause produces weary travelers, making it difficult to stay the course. In the Cedar Rapids Community School District, we are influenced by Richard DuFour's work on professional learning communities, so we focus continuous improvement on learning, collaboration and results. Like many school districts, we work on several value-added projects that deserve our best efforts. Like numerous educators organizing professional development, we struggle with cynics who question motives, pessimists who question resolve, and realists who question the capacity of a system to change. In the complex world of changing expectations, our school improvement efforts must demonstrate purpose, commitment and progress. Consequently, staying the course means traveling responsibly, traveling carefully and traveling wisely.

### **Traveling responsibly**

To stay the course requires a sense of destination, direction and judgment. As educators, we often travel with grandiose plans of lofty educational goals that overwhelm district resources. It is difficult to maintain momentum when you doubt destination, don't have sufficient resources and worry whether your efforts really make a difference. Traveling responsibly means a common sense approach to allocating resources of time, people and professional development.

- Context is critical: frame issues appropriately. Background provides big picture, perspective and vision--foreground provides detail, specifics and focus. Know the difference.
- Time is an ally, not an excuse. There is always time for things you put first. Not everything is of equal importance, so big ideas deserve priority. There should be no doubt why this work requires utmost attention. File this under working smarter.
- Purpose unifies. Transition from explanation of rationale to resources needed to effort expected. Provide tangible evidence of progress that will help focus expectations. Tight goals can lead to loose roles--in other words, context plays an important part in realizing how best to move beyond original consensus.

Three scenarios undermine responsible travel: over-promising, numerous and complicated tasks repeated simultaneously; under-delivering, different tasks with little

evidence of reasonable risks taken; and delaying, the never-ending pretense of preparation with frequent review. Each represents a calculated effort to circumvent responsibility by treating symptoms rather than causes. Such efforts waste time and energy and breed cynicism.

### **Traveling carefully**

Understanding purpose is a starting point, but it must be followed by a recognition that community can become a means for supporting momentum. Whatever your role, your influence at promoting a sense of collective accomplishment--shared decision making and lateral accountability--will be more dramatic if the process has transparency and integrity. Questions at this juncture focus on technique--the ability and interest of individuals and groups to direct the process in a positive way based on new information.

- How is the journey different as the landscape changes?
- Is momentum/support/understanding increasing?
- Does the system have the confidence and capacity to adjust as necessary?

Major issues during this phase of travel surface periodically: moving beyond self-interests, the ability to adjust as necessary; mixed messages about what is structured and what is negotiable; and tangible examples of negotiated authority. Traveling carefully means strengthening the confidence of those travelers who need to know that purpose remains visible, opportunities for influence are genuine and the response from the system to address difficulties remains intact.

To assist during times of doubt, expectations deserve further explanation, especially in the context of new information. This, of course, complicates the journey as some will cite any changes as examples of an inconsistent purpose. Instead, these changes indicate progress and are an expected result of learning through experience--a necessary part of negotiating the challenges of traveling carefully through uncharted territory. Done well, these changes have the chance to stay because they are a result of a careful analysis of changing circumstances.

To this end, never apologize for a critical review of technique; it is important to reaffirm original purpose. Expectations are not suggestions. Confront the difficult and negotiate process, using original purpose and expectations as anchor. Be persistent, apply pressure gradually, incrementally and appropriately and recognize effort. Listen to the kinds of questions you receive for they are insights into understanding. Always work to inform rather than convince.

### **Traveling wisely**

At this point in the journey, significant progress has been made through a validation of the original purpose, a rethinking of resources and evidence of adjustments based on new information. It is during this third phase when celebrating success; reaffirming intent; and examining consequences become critical.

- Celebrate collectively. Value people, cherish relationships and model the positive. Take the time to reflect on accomplishments and use this time to refresh and recharge. It is time well spent!
- Reaffirm intent. Traveling wisely becomes a direct response to those who question the ability of the system to affect change. This begins a critical time for a credible and honest evaluation of progress, coupled with any recommendations about what is compared to what might be.
- Examine consequences. In our district, we pursue collegial conversations as the best resource available to examine student performance collectively. Such conversations, based on mutual benefit and mutual respect, confront individual teaching practices by comparing them to collective student performance data.

The road to collective wisdom comes at a tremendous price. While not all change is improvement, all improvements are change.

If we wish to embrace the notion of community--working for a common good--then it is critical that we consider the nature of change and the nature of our work. First, there are a variety of reasons why our colleagues question reform. Change implies dissatisfaction with the status quo—successful teachers and schools question the effort involved to change when the present situation seems to work. Change appears unpredictable, unyielding and never ending. We are suspicious of changing faces, cycles that resurface, old ideas with new names, and options that are really foregone conclusions. We understand the messy side of implementation because our practice requires the constant application of ideas in a variety of different contexts.

Traveling wisely toward change requires patience and restraint, both qualities demonstrated daily by educators. Questioning plays well in the classroom, but not as well among adults when it becomes the only response to every idea. There remains an irony in many classrooms: how adults prefer to teach and how adults prefer to learn stand in stark contrast. Generally, educators prefer to work independently, not in collaboration, and confess to feeling somewhat awkward when asked to participate actively in the role of learner. For some, the expectation that educators need to work well with their colleagues has accelerated, unfortunately, an exit to a quieter, safer and more comfortable place. What is a number that everyone knows? It is the number of years left before retirement. As learners, educators remain reluctant and unwise travelers. That's the bad news: we have let those things outside our control become an excuse for not taking control of those things we can determine. The good news is that we really do control what, when and how we say things, how we react to difficult people, how we treat others, how we spend our time, how we reward effort, and how we model exemplary behavior. Traveling wisely is knowing that change can become a teachable moment--a personal time for reflection and growth and a collective opportunity to demonstrate compassion for fellow travelers.

## **Belonging to a community of travelers**

Stay the course—these three words promote purpose, technique and progress. Educators are realists who expect honorable intent, but doubt the short-term resolve of colleagues and question the long-term commitment of institutions. The good news is the large majority who stay the course—those who choose to influence and enrich the lives of others—learn more about teaching when they begin to focus on learning.

Our fight is a good fight when we provide reasons for others to persevere, strategies for improving performance and interventions that expect others to take responsibility for their own learning. Our travel is productive when we choose to challenge our peers, especially those colleagues who admit to the difficulty of the work—yet manage and shape it around the needs of their students. Teaching is such demanding work done so well in so many Iowa classrooms. We learn when we explore together: sharing insights, observing different classrooms, discussing lesson design and supporting self-reflections. Simply stated, the opening of classrooms to colleagues is an exemplary professional development opportunity and an acknowledgement of the joy of a job done well.

The best way to stay the course is to understand the course. To do so requires judgment, perspective, people skills and a sense of humor. I suggest we admit our natural tendency to work independently and instead, pledge to work collectively to create formative assessments that will engage our students with tasks worth doing. As a young teacher, I valued my autonomy, distancing my students and myself from our peers. Unfortunately, I had my ladder up against the wrong wall. Operating under youthful bliss, I thought I knew best; yet, my purpose was unclear to my students, my instructional strategies insufficient and my review of data arbitrary. How many of our colleagues are also impostors, operating independently with the best of intentions, afraid to let others know they lack the confidence or competence to assess their own performance accurately?

The more I worked with adults, the more I realized the importance of belonging to a community of learners who spoke a common language about student performance. We knew our destination; we valued the opportunity; we adjusted as needed; we expected best effort; we celebrated accomplishments; we arrived safely and we began again. In a world of too many good ideas, let us promise to travel together, reflecting through collegial conversations on what is most important in continuous improvement. Our best efforts are when we influence others to see themselves doing the right thing at the right time in the right way. Such is the work and the world of an educator. Enjoy the journey, my friend, and remember to stay the course by building educational opportunities through responsible, careful and wise travel.

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