

A Tsunami of Reform: Hard Moments Preparing for Change

Wednesday, January 4 2012, 2:37 PM

The School Administrator March 2011 Number 3, Vol. 68 | Leading a School Turnaround | 14-15

Spotlight

A Tsunami of Reform: Hard Moments Preparing for Change

by HEATH E. MORRISON

A tsunami of reform. That phrase will be embedded in my mind for years, not just because it accurately describes the current state of education, but also because of who said it.

I remember sitting down with one of my principals at the time news about the federal government's School Improvement Grant program was making headlines around the country. I had just told her that her middle school in Reno, Nev., was identified by the state as a school in need of improvement based on its lack of progress over four years on state assessment tests.



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We had the opportunity in Washoe County, the nation's 57th largest school district, to compete for millions of dollars to improve education for every child at her school. There was just one caveat — she could not lead her school through the reform she envisioned. All four reform models affiliated with the School Improvement Grant required a change of leadership at the school if the funding was granted.

After thinking it over, the principal, who had been in her current post for two years and an educator in Washoe County for more than 25 years, looked at me and said the line I will never forget: “There is a tsunami of reform coming. Either we have to ride the wave or we will be wiped out by it, and we cannot let that happen to our children.”

Required Dismissals

Her analogy was prophetic. School districts are under pressure from every level of government to raise academic performance. The federal government is demanding accountability through No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants and other competitive programs offering financial support. State and local governments are contributing loudly to the same message: If you want the funding, improve educational outcomes for students.

In the case of the School Improvement Grant, the acceptance of funding mandated the difficult act of removing devoted principals.

There were other factors to consider. Our district already had chosen a pathway of reform. I had been the superintendent for less than a year, and we were enmeshed in creating a new strategic plan to improve educational quality. Did the four alternative reform models attached to the grant align with what we were doing in our district?

Every decision we make is based on improving the learning opportunities for children. We decided to move forward and apply, as the SIG could accelerate our reforms in Washoe County. The funds could provide badly needed resources, especially in a state like Nevada, which is strapped for money.

With the decision to proceed, we developed a comprehensive plan to inform our community. We realized the money we’d receive could become a public relations nightmare if the messages about the grant were not managed. Rumors and hearsay could not rule. Accurate information was the mandate.

Facing Principals

We wanted to ensure our principals heard the news from us. We did not want them to learn through the newspaper that their school had been identified as a targeted school, requiring them to be displaced as the site administrator.

As soon as the state education department finalized the list of schools needing improvement, my team and I immediately contacted the seven affected principals. We sat down with them face to face to tell them the news.

These were not easy conversations, but we focused on the why — improving the learning outcomes for our children. We discussed the value they as leaders added to our school district and worked with them to find every one of our displaced principals another position within the district. I truly believe these personal meetings convinced the principals to support the grant. It showed the district appreciated and valued them and their service to children.

Keeping our seven-member school board involved in the process also contributed to the grant’s success. Ultimately, the board had the final word on whether to apply for the federal funding. For that reason, I met with each board member regularly during the months we worked on the application to keep each informed and

address individual questions.

Our employee associations — particularly those representing principals, teachers and classified workers — played a major role, too. They did not agree with parts of the grant, particularly the staff and principal change requirements, but they did affirm applying for the grant was the right thing to do for our students. We were partners in this process, and they worked with us through every step. I met several times to update them on the progress, and we considered their input when writing our application.

Involving every group that could influence the end result was central. This can sometimes be difficult and time-consuming, especially if the group might be in opposition, but in the end, working with every group proved to be a major benefit.

Squelching Misinformation

The next big hurdle was informing the staff and parents at the seven affected schools. If we chose to use the turnaround reform model, some staff members would have to be relocated to other schools.

We organized meetings so staff and parents could ask questions. District leaders attended these meetings to explain the grant requirements, the process to be designated a SIG school and the potential impact. If we didn't know the answer, we researched it and quickly responded.

I'm not suggesting everyone agreed when they found out about our pursuit of the grant. We had to answer some tough questions and be extremely honest about the need for the resources. It was this candidness that helped rally support for the grant.

Our next move was to inform the community through a news conference. While this could have been disastrous because of misinformation circulating through the mass media, we already had informed the people who would be directly impacted. The support we built made a difference because the community noticed a united front and understood our need for this funding.

Our plan to stay ahead of the news cycle and openly communicate with every individual and group was the redeeming factor that made the grant possible in our community. We may have received the money even if we did not communicate in this way, but we would have faced too much opposition to make effective change.

Riding a Wave

Our district received \$8.8 million over three years, the largest portion of Nevada's allocation under the federal School Improvement Grant initiative, and our seven schools in need of improvement are working hard to implement their reform plans toward becoming breakthrough schools that model excellence.

Additionally, we are executing our districtwide initiatives, riding that tsunami of reform to ensure our children are prepared for the demands of tomorrow. The territory of change comes with difficult decisions and conversations, but we have to ensure we are focused on what matters most — our children's future. As we say here in the Washoe County School District, it is about "every child, by name and face, to graduation."

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