

"If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix it"

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*A Problem Based Learning Activity about Creating a Shared Vision
(Site Based School Improvement Planning Processes)*

Introduction

The purpose of the following Problem Based Learning Activity is to deepen the understanding of participants around issues relating to ISLLC Standard #1. During the last 10 to 15 years much has been written about the creation and maintenance of a shared vision – one that would truly drive the decision-making processes of the school. The research is clear, in schools where there is shared ownership for the vision (regarding what we want and how we are going to get it), student achievement is higher and all-around school effectiveness exists.

While most site based school leaders can intellectualize this phenomenon, many have great difficulty in achieving a true, shared vision in their school community. It is hoped that this PBL activity will provide participants with an opportunity to wrestle with, reflect on, and learn about the issues that surround the facilitation, development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

ISLLC Standard #1

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

Knowledge

- principles of developing and implementing strategic plans
- learning goals in a pluralistic society
- systems theory
- information sources, data collection, and data analysis strategies
- effective communication
- effective consensus-building and negotiation skills

Dispositions:

- the educability of all
- a school vision of high standards of learning
- continuous school improvement
- the inclusion of all members of the school community
- a willingness to continuously examine one's own assumptions, beliefs, and practices

Performances:

- the vision and mission of the school are effectively communicated to staff, parents, students, and community members
- the vision is developed with and among stakeholders
- the school community is involved in school improvement efforts
- the vision shapes the educational programs, plans, and actions
- progress toward the vision and mission is communicated to all stakeholders
- the core beliefs of the school vision are modeled for all stakeholders

- an implementation plan is developed in which objectives and strategies to achieve the vision and goals are clearly articulated
- assessment data related to student learning are used to develop the school vision and goals
- relevant demographic data pertaining to students and their families are used in developing the school mission and goals
- the vision, mission, and implementation plans are regularly monitored, evaluated, and revised

The Problem

About The Community:

Centerville is a suburban community served by the school district of Centerville R-IV. The community is middle to upper middle class and is considered to be an excellent place to raise a family. It is mostly a bedroom community with some shops and light industry. Centerville has grown considerably during the last ten years as a result of movement from a nearby urban area. Reasons vary as to why families have moved to Centerville, but many have moved as a result of the perception of "good" schools and an excellent community environment.

Parents are generally proud of their schools, athletic teams have done well and students score well on the state standardized tests. The school district is on very sound financial ground and the buildings are all new or have been updated to reflect a sense of pride in the school community. The town mayor is always quick to brag on the schools and surrounding communities often think of Centerville as an excellent community with a high performing school district.

The Centerville school district has six elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. The student body is 84 percent Caucasian, 12 percent African-American and 4 percent Asian and other minorities.

The Situation:

You are the new principal of Centerville High School. You have been on the job for one month and after much dialogue with the school community and considerable review of student performance data, you have begun to formulate some conclusions about Centerville High School.

You have found that Centerville High School has a rich tradition of high levels of student academic and athletic performance. There is a proud tradition of school performance at Centerville High, which no one seems to question. Most parents seem very satisfied with the school and those who don't, rarely seem to complain. There is a sense of pride that permeates the community, which no one really questions. Parents are supportive of the school and many are involved in the support of athletic and extra-curricular programs. Few get involved in the academic work of the school and seem to trust the teachers in their design and delivery of course work. Most parents have very high expectations for their children and place considerable pressure on them to achieve.

Student morale among the 2,100 students seems to be very high and there are many clubs and extra-curricular activities for students to be involved. Students get along, discipline problems are minimal and attendance is above 95 percent. Seventy Five percent of the graduates go on to college, 20 percent go into a work setting and 5 percent dropout. Centerville has consistently produced 10 to 15 national merit scholars every year.

The former principal had served Centerville High for 15 years and was respected by the school community. He maintained positive relations with parents, students, and faculty and always worked for a win-win in difficult situations. His motto was always "hire the best people and let them do their jobs."

The 125 faculty members at Centerville High have an average tenure of 12 years and are clearly talented. They have been very successful in educating the majority of students and feel a sense of confidence and pride in what they do. You have observed that there is a high regard for individual academic freedom among the faculty and most prefer teaching behind closed classroom doors. There is little discussion about pedagogy between faculty members and rarely an opportunity to observe each other teach with any intent to learn from each other. There is clearly a sense of acceptance and satisfaction in the faculty that makes raising questions about status quo a difficult proposition.

The curriculum has changed little in the last 20 years other than buying new textbooks. Centerville High has a very large honors program and many students in the regular track. Interestingly, almost 15 percent of the student population is in some sort of basic (remedial) track courses. Fifty percent of the basic track students never get out of basic courses and 30 percent of those students have failing grades and many eventually dropout of school altogether. By your estimation, the school has turned a blind eye on these students and no one seems to care.

In a conversation you had with Bill (who is a 15 year math teacher), he made it clear that the best thing you could do as a new principal was to "let Centerville's great teaching staff do their jobs."

Margaret, who has been an language arts teacher at Centerville High for 22 years, has said to you on many occasions that we must maintain the basic level courses for all those students who simply "don't have it" and could never function in regular courses.

In a casual conversation with Alice who has taught honors chemistry for 12 years, she said, "I'll teach any honors or regular level course, but don't make me teach any basic courses ! I just can't deal with those kids."

When you asked a few teachers about the school's mission and vision for what good schooling here at Centerville should look like, these are some of the answers you got:

"We did a vision statement about five years ago, I think it's on the faculty lounge wall;"

"We have such a quality staff here at Centerville, we don't really need a vision statement;"

"We did a lot of talking (doing strategic planning), but nothing ever really changed so we don't hear much about it anymore;"

"We have a lot of respect for each other, we trust each other, we don't need to spend time trying to change things."

John, a history teacher for the last 17 years at Centerville High probably summed up the sentiment of the faculty best when he said "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Your Challenge:

After 30 days on the job you realize that while Centerville High School produces some very fine students, many students do not achieve at high levels and to make matters worse, there seems to be a cruel acceptance of the situation.

A greater concern for you is the lack of focus or "sense of community" in Centerville High. There seems to be this respect for each other based on "you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone." Who knows how great Centerville could be if we were able to build a clear sense of mission and vision based on collaborative relationships. Those conversations would have to deal with the fact of "how do we feel about the fact that up to 15 percent of our students don't succeed in our quote 'good school?'"

You realize that you have a huge task ahead of you as you begin to select and utilize school improvement processes that will collaboratively move the entire school community to a "sense of oneness" which must dramatically change the way we do business around here. Obviously, one of the most difficult aspects of this situation will be dealing with the perception of - if it ain't broke, don't fix it!

Notes for Students
for
"If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix it"
Laverne (Scotty) Scott
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Notes To Students:

The written paper should represent a joint effort of the team and be of sufficient length to adequately cover/explain the task. Use appropriate citations and include a reference list. The grade will be a team grade based on the scoring guide.

Individual assessments will be given by the instructor throughout the PBL activity to further assess individual performance.

The presentation should be a team performance lasting 15 to 20 min. The team is encouraged to be creative and may use any appropriate learning strategy, audio-visual equipment/materials that would enhance the learning of the other class members. The written paper should provide the basis for the presentation, but please, do not read it. Handouts for all students are appropriate. The grade will be a team grade based on the scoring guide. It is expected that teams will need to do considerable research/writing and conduct team learning/planning meetings between class periods.

The team reading list should include, but is not limited to, the reference list in the Instructors' Notes.

Learning Objectives:

- To recognize the challenges of facilitating site based school improvement around a shared vision and mission.
- To gain a deeper understanding of the change process and it's impact on people.
- To learn the value of collaboration and some processes for facilitating it.
- To learn about effective models of shared decision-making.
- Acquire the skills of effective work teams.
- To develop communication skills that will serve the entire school community.
- Learn best practices for creating professional learning communities.
- To gain knowledge about systems thinking and how change in the organization impacts all segments of the school community.
- Learn strategies that will allow the school community to recognize the value of personalization (all students performing at high levels).

Guiding Questions:

- What are some effective ways for a principal to get the school community to focus on a shared vision?
- Who are the stakeholders in the process and why?
- What are the different phases (steps) of good school improvement process?
- How can the principal help the members of a school community acquire a mindset of continuous improvement?
- How do you get commitment/ownership for the vision and the process for getting there?
- How do school leaders use data to drive decision-making?
- How do school leaders create a professional learning community?

- How does a school community collaboratively create long and short-term goals, prioritize them, and identify resources and strategies to implement them?
- Would personalization help all students achieve at higher levels in Centerville High? Why?
- What are some effective strategies for communicating with the school community? What should be the focus for effective communication?

Notes to the Instructors
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Intent of Author

The intent of the author is to have the student experience in a very real way what it is like to use an actual school community context and performance data to drive a school based conversation about school improvement. Additionally, the student will be expected to research and reflect deeply about the issue of school improvement process planning. It is not the intent of the author that the student actually prepare a school improvement plan, for that to be realistic it would have to be created in a more fully developed (real) school community context. The primary goal for the student, at the end of the PBL activity, is to acquire a deep understanding of the knowledge, dispositions and performances related to ISLLC standard #1.

About Problem Based Learning (PBL):

PBL is a self directed, group activity that primarily uses constructivist learning strategies. Essentially the students are the workers and the instructor serves as the facilitator/coach. Students work in teams as collaborators, problem solvers, designers and information gatherers to create some sort of product that is representative of their learning. As a facilitator/coach the instructor establishes the structures for student success and serves as a resource when appropriate. The instructor should provide additional information "just in time" or when appropriate to add a powerful dimension to the learning process. Assessments and products should be created that will assess both individual and team learning. It is often helpful to have students reflect on their team thinking by responding to the following questions. What do we know (facts)? What do we need to know more about (as we begin to select what we need to learn more about)? And what are some possible actions/solutions at this time?

This cycle of questioning will cause students to constantly reflect on what they know as well as what they need to know more about before they bring their learning to a conclusion. To some degree, there is a routine of students establishing what they know, then gathering information as individual team members to bring back and share with the entire team and/or class (this cycle could occur over several class periods). This reflection/constructivism is where a considerable amount of powerful learning takes place. The instructor should facilitate this phase very carefully to take advantage of the teachable moments.

Team size could be as small as four or as large as eight, five or six is a good size. Teams can be leaderless groups or you may choose to have each member rotate facilitation duties. In addition, recorders from each team may be used to record the learnings/findings of the team in order to share with other teams and/or instructor.

Possible Tasks: (Instructor can assign all or some of the following tasks).

1. In small teams (4-6 students), assume your team is functioning as the new principal of Centerville High School, you are now responsible to review the appropriate research and prepare a report/recommendation to the superintendent on how you will address your concerns about the need for a

- new school improvement process that would create strong ownership (on the part of the school community) for a new vision that would lead to all students achieving at high levels. The guiding questions should drive your work as you prepare your report/recommendation.
2. As an individual, prepare a presentation or paper for the school community and the media explaining the current status at Centerville High; the problems facing the school, the solutions chosen, the rationale for those choices and how you plan to implement the change.
 3. Role-play a meeting of the school improvement team, with individual PBL members taking on roles of supporters and resisters to the vision. In your meeting, discuss why you think the way things have been done at Centerville has served the students well and conversely, why the way things have been done at Centerville has not served the students well.
 4. As an individual, write a two-page article for the local newspaper on the new school improvement efforts going on at Centerville High School.
 5. In small teams (4-6 students), develop a three-year action plan for Centerville High School. Include in your plan the vision, one or two goals, implementation strategies, timelines for implementation and monitoring and evaluation processes.
 6. As an individual, design a written (4-6 page) staff development plan that would speak to the new changes at Centerville High School.

Selected Reference List:

- Barth, R. (1990). *Improving Schools from Within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Block, J., Everson, S., & Guskey, T. (1995). *School Improvement Programs*. Jefferson City, MO: Scholastic Inc.
- Deal, T. & Peterson, K. (1999). *Shaping School Culture, The Heart of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Website for Missouri:
www.dese.state.mo.us
- DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1992). *Creating the New American School, A Principal's Guide to School Improvement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- DuFour, R & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional Learning Communities at Work, Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Fullan, M. with Stiegelbauer, S. (1991). *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1999) *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.
- Glickman, C. (1993). *Renewing America's Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hall, G. & Hord, S. (2001). *Implementing Change, Patterns, Principles, and Potholes*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Ohio Department of Education, Reference Guide. (2000). *Continuous Improvement Planning, Second Edition*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Department of Education.

Senge, P., McCabe, N.C., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J., & Kleiner, A. (2000). *A Fifth Discipline Resource, Schools that Learn*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Schlechty, P. (1997). *Inventing Better Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Suggested Time Line

First Class Period (2 hours)

Explain Problem Based Learning, assign teams and tasks to be used in PBL. Work in teams for remainder of class.

Second Class Period (1 hour)

Work in teams, share learnings (inter or intra team), plan for additional information search. Do an extended learning activity. Debrief session.

Third Class Period (1 hour)

(same as above)

Fourth Class Period (1 hour)

(same as class two) Begin to assess where the team is in relation to final product, monitor and adjust as necessary.

Fifth Class Period (1 hour)

(same as class two) Begin to bring closure to PBL activity with the intent of doing the presentations during the sixth class period.

Sixth Class Period (2 hours)

Do presentations, turn in written assignments and debrief learnings and PBL activity. (Two good questions: What did you learn? And how did you feel?)

Extended Learning Activities

The instructor may choose to extend the learning through any or all of the activities listed below:

- Have students maintain journals of their learning
- Duplicate recorder reports and share among teams
- Have students write for 10 minutes (in class, as an individual assessment) on questions such as the following [at the appropriate time]:
 - What do you think is the most critical phase of school improvement process?
 - What are the issues around planning team selection?
 - What is the role of the principal in school improvement processes?
 - What is frustrating you the most in your learning right now?
 - If the instructor could share any information with you right now, what would it be?
- Others as you might design.

Suggested Websites for the Instructor:

www.vanderbilt.edu/lead/PBL/

www.samford.edu/pbl/

Key Terms and Concepts:

School Improvement
Change Process
Systemic Thinking
Decision Making
Shared Vision
Shared Ownership
Student Achievement
Facilitation Skills
Professional Learning Communities
Collaboration
Communication
Use of Stakeholder Groups
Effective Team Skills

Rubric for Student Evaluation
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Team Presentation

Score: 3

Presentation was detailed, specific and convincing. The responses addressed the larger issues of ISLLC standard #1 and its appropriate knowledge, dispositions, and performances. All team members participated and it was apparent that each member contributed to the development of the product. There was synthesis and interpretive use of the data, rather than mere repetition of the information. The responses provided strong evidence that the team members understood the goals of the problem based learning activity.

Score: 2

Presentation was somewhat detailed, specific and convincing. The responses addressed 80% of the larger issues of ISLLC standard #1 and its appropriate knowledge, dispositions, and performances. All team members participated and it was clear that 2/3 or 3/4 of the team members contributed to the development of the product. There was some synthesis and interpretive use of the data, rather than mere repetition of the information. The responses provided some evidence that the team members understood the goals of the problem based learning activity.

Score: 1

Presentation contained little detailed, specific and convincing information. The responses addressed 60% of the larger issues of ISLLC standard #1 and its appropriate knowledge, dispositions, and performances. Most of the team members participated and it was clear that 50% of the team members contributed to the development of the product. There was little synthesis and interpretive use of the data, rather than mere repetition of the information. The responses provided little evidence that the team members understood the goals of the problem based learning activity.

Score: 0

The presentation failed to address any of the larger issues of ISLLC standard #1 and its appropriate knowledge, dispositions, and performances. It was unclear if the team members worked together to produce the product. The responses did not provide evidence that the team members understood the problem based learning activity.

Team Written Plan:

Score: 3

The written plan was detailed, specific and convincing. It was clear that all team members participated in the research, development and writing of the paper. There was synthesis and interpretive use of the data, rather than mere repetition of the information. The paper provided strong evidence that the team members understood ISLLC standard #1 along with the identified knowledge, dispositions and performance criteria used with this problem based activity.

Score: 2

The written plan was somewhat detailed, specific and convincing. It was clear that 80% of the team members contributed to the development of the product. There was some synthesis and interpretive use of the data, rather than mere repetition of the information. The paper provided some evidence that the team members understood ISLLC standard #1 along with the identified knowledge, dispositions and performance criteria used with this problem based learning activity.

Score: 1

The written plan contained little detailed, specific and convincing information. It was clear that 50% of the team members contributed to the development of the product. There was little synthesis and interpretive use of the data, rather than mere repetition of the information. The paper provided little evidence that the team members understood ISLLC standard #1 along with the identified knowledge, dispositions and performance criteria used with this problem based learning activity.

Score: 0

It was unclear if the team members worked together to produce the paper. The paper did not support an understanding of ISLLC standard #1 along with the identified knowledge, dispositions, and performance criteria used with this problem based learning activity.

Individual Assessments:**Score: 3**

The response showed considerable understanding of the issue(s). The response was articulate, well written and demonstrated an obvious connection to the research. There was synthesis and interpretive use of the research, rather than mere repetition of information.

Score: 2

The response showed some understanding of the issue(s). The response was somewhat articulate, and demonstrated some connection to the research. There was some synthesis and interpretive use of the research, rather than mere repetition of information.

Score: 1

The response showed little understanding of the issue(s). The response contained spelling/grammar/punctuation errors and little connection to the research. There was little synthesis and interpretive use of the research, rather than mere repetition of information.

Score: 0

The response failed to address the issue(s). The response was difficult to understand and did not connect to the appropriate research. There was no synthesis and interpretive use of the research.