COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
AN ARGUMENT AGAINST TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL REFORM
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Every school division within the Commonwealth has developed a plan and has expended an enormous amount of time, energy, and financial capital to improve student achievement. Most of these school divisions are staffed with a number of quality educators who desire to have the best school division in Virginia. However, after a careful review of longitudinal data, it is clear that the vast majority of these school divisions have made little or no progress throughout the years of school improvement.

Countless books have been written on how to improve student achievement. This literature and research have produced a multitude of concepts, educational jargon, models, strategies, and silver bullets to transform a low performing school division into a division of excellence. With all of this literature and research, there should be two driving questions: why are so many school divisions struggling, and why can’t they create steady and consistent academic growth?

This manual is not designed to be utilized as a model for other school divisions to follow, and it has not been created to advocate only one way to improve academic achievement. Instead, it is intended to document the story of significant academic success within a small school division in rural southwestern Virginia. While many of these strategies and ideas can be duplicated within other school divisions, this document is designed to help instructional leaders focus on the right questions. It is also an attempt to highlight the relevant issues which are closely connected with sustained academic achievement. It is our belief that most school divisions can’t work any harder, but they can work smarter. Too much effort, time, and resources are dedicated to initiatives that will not have any significant impact on student achievement. We must distinguish between what
matters and what is simply a trend and white noise. We must begin to invest our time and energy into the elements which will improve student achievement.

**Organization**

This work is organized to help the reader understand what happened in Wise County Schools. Different individuals may attach different connotations to the same word. In an effort to successfully relay our story, we have included a fictitious story to convey specific ideas. The story is based on events and discussions we have had in Wise County. Hope N. Reason is the heroine of our story and she embodies the epiphanies we have encountered along our journey. The other characters represent actions and projects in which we were engaged in Wise County. Eventually, we had to address each of these issues to overcome specific challenges which were preventing us from realizing success. We also included a section entitled “The Wise County Experience” in each chapter to provide an overview of what actually happened in our school system relative to the content of each chapter. “The Wise Principles” were included to provide the details relative to each subheading.

**Background History of Wise County Schools**

Our school division endured years of political strife, struggled with the issue of consolidation, and experienced a $20 million reduction in the budget. We also work with a student body in which nearly 60% are eligible for free and reduced lunch. For years, we worked relentlessly on improving student achievement. Throughout those years, we saw little sustained growth relative to the rest of the state. Experts were hired to provide professional development, and the division partnered with individuals at the Virginia Department of Education to enact
change. Different initiatives were implemented and attention was given to multiple solutions. During this time of frantic activity, student achievement in the division fluctuated and there was no sustained growth.

In 2012, we began to take a different and more deliberate approach to improving student achievement. From these efforts, we began to see a number of positive changes. In 2014, we ranked 3rd in the state in math, 4th in history, 6th in reading, 14th in science, and 6th overall. We ranked in the top ten school divisions in 15 out of the 33 tests which were administered by the VDOE (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a). We were one of only two school divisions in 2014 that had all schools fully accredited and meeting all AMOs (Virginia Department of Education, 2014b).

Table 1

*Data aggregated from Virginia SOL Assessments Build-A-Table using Standards of Learning test data only- ranked highest performing to lowest performing (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a).
**Data aggregated from Superintendent’s Annual Reports- ranked highest to lowest (Virginia Department of Education, 2014c).
***Data aggregated from Fall Membership table tool- ranked highest percentage to lowest percentage (Virginia Department of Education, 2014d).
Table 2

Data for school divisions that finished in the top ten in overall SOL pass rates in Virginia during the 2014 school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>2014 SOL Pass Rate Rank+</th>
<th>2013 Per Pupil Expenditures ++</th>
<th>2013 Instructional Personnel per Student ++</th>
<th>2014 Economically Disadvantaged +++</th>
<th>2014 Enrollment +++</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Point</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>$11,084</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>29.26%</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falls Church City</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>$16,693</td>
<td>10.99</td>
<td>5.98%</td>
<td>2426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poquoson City</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>$9,258</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>13.47%</td>
<td>2123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roanoke County</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>$9,130</td>
<td>12.79</td>
<td>24.71%</td>
<td>14333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loudoun County</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>$12,158</td>
<td>13.36</td>
<td>17.47%</td>
<td>70759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise County</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>$9,396</td>
<td>12.54</td>
<td>57.32%</td>
<td>6192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botetourt County</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>$9,626</td>
<td>13.13</td>
<td>20.82%</td>
<td>4856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanover County</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>$8,845</td>
<td>12.32</td>
<td>15.33%</td>
<td>18264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York County</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>$9,743</td>
<td>14.07</td>
<td>20.66%</td>
<td>12471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlington County</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>$18,555</td>
<td>9.61</td>
<td>33.92%</td>
<td>23499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+Data aggregated from Virginia SOL Assessments Build-A-Table using Standards of Learning test data only- ranked highest performing to lowest performing (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a).
++Data aggregated from Superintendent’s Annual Reports (Virginia Department of Education, 2014c).
+++Data aggregated from Fall Membership table tool (Virginia Department of Education, 2014d).

Table 3

SOL pass rate rankings* for Wise County Schools relative to the 132 school divisions in Virginia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>All Tests</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>45th</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>14th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data aggregated from Virginia SOL Assessments Build-A-Table using Standards of Learning test data only- ranked highest performing to lowest performing (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a).
CHAPTER 2: THE INTANGIBLES

Hope N. Reason: Improvement Mindset

Once upon a time, there was a principal named Hope N. Reason who moved from a very successful school division (Bright Futures County Schools) to Crossroads County Schools. Crossroads was a school division which had been struggling to meet the challenges associated with the rigor contained in the new state standards and assessments. Many of the schools in Crossroads County had failed to meet full state accreditation. Reason hoped to make a difference in Crossroads by bringing some of the successful strategies that were employed in Bright Futures.

Reason was working through a doctoral program and intended to begin her internship at Crossroads. The first person she was to work with in this process was Dr. Biden Time, the division superintendent. Dr. Time shared with Reason that Crossroads had been considered a successful school division in the days before state standards became so rigorous.

Reason began the interview with asking Time about the long term plans for the school division and his vision for academic growth. Time’s reply included a myriad of educational jargon, but he was unable to identify anything of substance that would actually improve a school division. Reason asked him about expectations for administrative and teacher performance. She followed up by inquiring how he handled tough decisions when staff members failed to perform at an acceptable level. Again, his responses were unclear and disconnected.

She finished the interview by asking him if he was willing to take abuse and to serve as a shield for his teachers and principals so they could focus on educating children. Time spoke a great deal about
shared-responsibility, calculated risk management, and conflict avoidance, but it was clear that he only had a few years left until he could retire and he wouldn’t assume a significant amount of risk during this time. Reason reflected that Time didn’t have a good response to the questions she posed. However, she respected his position and was committed to learning all she could.

At the end of the interview, Time asked Reason to provide him with a summary of how her previous school division had enjoyed so much success. She told him about how her former superintendent had a vision that Bright Futures County Schools would one day be the highest performing school division in the state. That superintendent had high expectations of everyone and fought many political battles to ensure that student achievement was the primary focus of the school division. While the superintendent had maintained his employment, he hadn’t done so by avoiding conflict. He was committed to doing the right thing instead of the politically correct thing.

As Dr. Time listened to the voice of Reason, he began to understand that he had not been doing his job. He had allowed Crossroads County Schools to flounder without any direction due to his lack of leadership. Many of the division’s schools were in the state-led school improvement process and schools were continuing to slide into even further despair. Dr. Time decided that if he did not change his personal involvement and commitment, the division would continue to decline. It had taken the voice of Reason to bring him to this conclusion.

The Wise County Experience

Just like Hope N. Faith, we were very interested in improving student achievement. We reflected a long time on why we experienced success over the last three years and failed to see improvement over the other four preceding years. We quickly understood there were a number of intangible factors that are critical to the success of any school division. Without these foundational structures, no significant change will occur within a school division. Although many of these elements would be considered intangible, their importance is perhaps the most essential ingredient in the entire process.
The following is a summary of the most critical elements that are the foundational structures that must be in place for success to occur. It is our belief that school divisions will experience little consistent success if these elements are not present. It doesn’t matter how beautiful the stained-glass windows are in the cathedral if the foundation is unstable. The windows will look good for a period of time and people will feel pleased with the appearance of success. However, eventually, the windows will begin to crack, and the effort of many well-meaning people who constructed the windows will be for nothing. The same is true for our efforts in improving academic achievement. We must begin with the foundation, and this work is not easy or glamorous. It can also have a detrimental impact on employment because it will involve a number of difficult decisions.

**Practical Principle: Have the Vision**

One essential foundational element that will help promote success is a specific vision. There has been so much written about vision that it has become virtually meaningless - but it is important. Every superintendent will state that he or she wants to have the best school division in the Commonwealth, but few truly understand what this means and most are unwilling to make the personal sacrifices to achieve this goal. They possess the vision to see various unconnected elements of a great school division, but they can’t see it as a unified whole. They attempt to attack the problem by addressing various elements without understanding the importance, sequence, priority, or timing associated with each of those elements. For example, there is no legitimate chance of success if a superintendent requires principals to evaluate and dismiss ineffective teachers if the school board refuses to terminate employment for incompetent educators. It is essential that the school board and superintendent have a clear vision of what they hope to accomplish and that both are willing to make difficult decisions.
After some initial reflection, we understood that we didn’t have the necessary vision to be successful because we were not dealing with the process as a whole. We paid attention to various elements and some of those elements became better. Unfortunately, they were not connected to student achievement and had little impact on academic success. As a result, we focused our attention on those issues that would increase our students’ academic success. The following chapters are dedicated to highlighting the truly important issues which are connected with academic success.

**Practical Principle: Be Willing to Lose Your Job**

Most leaders are too concerned about keeping their jobs as opposed to doing their jobs. It has been our experience that a number of difficult programming and staffing decisions have to be made for a school to be successful. Often these decisions are controversial, and not everyone will be supportive of these decisions.

A successful football coach may not be the most effective math teacher, and many superintendents and principals have made the decision to have a winning season in football instead of making the difficult decision to dismiss a successful coach or a politically connected teacher. This failure to act originates from a long history of why educational leaders have lost their jobs. Few superintendents and principals have been dismissed over the lack of academic success but many have experienced adverse employment action because of an unsuccessful athletic season. It is also dangerous to recommend dismissal of a school board member’s relative. No significant growth will occur unless difficult decisions are made.

In the last few years, we decided to make a number of tough decisions about veteran staff members, coaches, politically connected staff members, and well-meaning teachers who were simply not effective. We offered retirement incentives, conducted honest evaluations, non-renewed teachers, negotiated mutually-accepted severance packages, and counseled staff members out of the profession to ensure our schools had the best teachers. The superintendent, directors, and principals absorbed a significant amount of abuse for many of these decisions. These experiences made us realize leaders must
consciously decide if they are willing to assume this level of commitment. Many leaders are too close to retirement, need the insurance, have no other place to go, and are so deeply rooted in their current community that they simply refuse to engage in tough personnel decisions. School divisions and schools will never experience growth if they don’t assume responsibility for difficult decisions.

**Practical Principle: Accept No Excuses – Failure is Not an Option**

A third element to a strong foundation leading to success is for all administrators and teachers to have high expectations for all students. We were in the process of creating a school improvement plan for all schools in our division. During one of these meetings, a principal stated that the fourth grade students were very low achievers, and the staff had done all they could to help those students achieve but their efforts had been unsuccessful. In developing an action plan to reverse this course for next year, the principal responded that there was little the school could do to help this group of students because they had already implemented everything they knew to do. A director then asked if the principal and staff could only educate high ability students and if we needed to take the low achievers to another school for instruction. We don’t need teachers and administrators who can only teach the bright students. We must have educators who can successfully teach all students.

Terms such as low achievers, struggling academically, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk are often used by educators as an excuse to release them from a sense of responsibility. They have low expectations for these students, and they are not motivated to intervene because they think their efforts will be fruitless. They are not surprised when students fail because that is actually what they expected.

Successful schools have adopted a “failure is not an option” mentality, and they don’t see any child as lost. They do not see these students who are highly at-risk as a burden. Instead, they simply understand that our job is to educate every child and that every single child counts. Most educators will state that every child counts, but few actually transfer this statement into practice. Successful schools
refuse to let their staff develop low expectations, and they approach each child with a positive attitude and belief that he or she will be successful. We should accept no excuses and fully expect everyone to possess high expectations and to visualize success.

**Practical Principle: Superintendent Must Absorb the Abuse**

Another foundational element needed for division success is a strong, supportive superintendent. Someone once said that he was willing to take a bullet for a friend as long as it didn’t hit any vital organs and if it didn’t hurt that much. This type of conditional protection is not adequate. The superintendent must be willing to absorb a significant amount of abuse and to clear the way for the directors and principals to do their jobs.

The daily life of a building level administrator is often very complicated. His or her attention is constantly diverted away from being a strong instructional leader. Most principals will begin the school day committed to the premise that he or she will be in the classrooms that day observing teachers and being a strong instructional leader. Bus problems, calls from board members, requirements from central office, irate parents demanding time, and a host of other distractions normally consume precious time and the day is gone with little attention given to the instructional program. The superintendent must alleviate as much pressure as possible from these principals and allow them to be instructional leaders. The superintendent must be willing to shoulder an enormous amount of the burden from board members, the community, parents, and staff members to ensure the principals are successful.

Too often, the superintendent will attempt to blame others for failures, and this erodes the foundation of trust that is essential to school improvement. Those in the trenches must have the confidence that the superintendent will act as a shield and protect them from the various distractions and dangers that can take place in the school division. The principal must be free to lead the school and to serve as a strong instructional leader. The principal must have supreme faith that he or she will be supported when the focus is on making the right decisions which are not the always the best political moves.
Practical Principle: Have the Right Combination

The final foundational piece to a successful school division is to have the right combination of leadership styles, personalities, character, and attributes at the central office level. Although we didn’t plan it this way, we discovered that we had an excellent blend of leadership styles and approaches. We had a healthy mix of people who were analytical, creative, thoughtful, visionary, detailed, big picture, theoretical, practical, humorous, serious, technology oriented, people oriented, tough, sensitive, data driven, relationship driven, and a host of other balancing personalities. We discovered that no one person could embody all of the elements of an effective leader. All of us found our niche in the organization and we provided balance and moderation to the school system. Too many divisions may have a similar personality and leadership style throughout the central office, and there are seldom divergent thoughts. There are times where we need to focus on the person, and there are times when we need to focus on the data. A central office is the most effective when it has a healthy mix of leadership styles. However, it is important there be one leader who allows all the different voices to be heard, but a decision and direction is made quickly to unify the team and to move forward in one direction. There must also be acceptance that different challenges will require different approaches, and everyone must have considerable investment in the process and the eventual decision.

Summary

There were several intangibles that paved our path to success. First, we had the vision that we were going to become the school division with the highest SOL pass rates in Virginia, and we had a legitimate road map to reach that destination. Second, we had individuals in key leadership positions who were more concerned with making the right decision than maintaining their own employment status. Third, we
simply ignored excuses and began to internalize that the success of each student was critical and adopted
a personal commitment to the “failure is not an option” mentality. Fourth, the superintendent was willing
to make the difficult decisions. There were a number of times where he created a protective cocoon
around the central office and the principals. He absorbed the political hits for his staff and gave them the
time, freedom, and energy to deal with the instructional program. Fifth, the central office contained the
right mix of personalities and leadership styles to address a variety of situations.
All new principals in Crossroads County Public Schools were assigned a veteran principal as a mentor. Reason was assigned Dunham Wong, the principal of De’ Nighl High School. Mr. Wong had served in the division as a principal for more than 20 years.

During their first meeting, Mr. Wong stressed to Reason the importance of the image of the school. He stated that it was critical to maintain the nicest, prettiest, most attractive school in the division because that was what his community expected. Mr. Wong stated that he invested many hours each year leading fundraising efforts to purchase new athletic and band uniforms, to have an attractive front entrance, to have the largest library, and to have the most current LED sign out front. He spent most of his workday inspecting every nook and cranny around his campus to ensure it was the most pristine school in the entire division. Faculty meetings were religiously held every month to keep teachers informed of fundraising efforts, to ensure the school was kept clean, and to constantly ask for input on school beautification efforts. Mr. Wong told Reason that if she were to be successful in this school division that it was imperative to keep her custodial staff in line. Her school had to be presentable at all times because central office staff visited the school from time to time, mainly for publicity opportunities and they wanted the schools to look good.

It seemed very strange that throughout his explanation of duties, Wong did not mention anything about working with teachers or central office staff to improve academic achievement. After listening to the discourse, Reason tried to steer the conversation toward her primary interest which was improving student achievement. She wanted to be successful, and she was eager to hear how Mr. Wong had
remained in a leadership position for all of these years. Reason asked Wong about how he worked with his staff to improve student achievement. She was distressed by the answer she received.

Mr. Wong explained that he had been a principal for a long time and had never really engaged his staff in this type of activity. This was the responsibility of the central office, and he would take direction from them on how to improve the instructional program. He was hired to be a manager and to keep the building running in an effective and efficient manner. High stakes testing and accountability was not part of the original deal when he was hired to be a principal. He would assist and provide instructional leadership when the central office provided the necessary guidance, but his daily managerial duties were his main priority. Prior to the new state standards and state assessments, De’ Nighl High School had always done well with state and federal accountability. He was proud of that fact and that his school was consistently recognized as the best school in the county as reported by the local paper on people’s perception of the schools. Wong addressed the image of the school and the central office addressed student achievement.

Mr. Wong did admit that when the rigor increased on the state assessments, everything seemed to become more challenging. After receiving the results from the first new state assessments, a few teachers began to increase the rigor in their classrooms, but the majority of the teachers were waiting on someone to tell them what to do. As a result of a lack of instructional leadership, the school continued to struggle. The problem was further complicated because some teachers actually adopted the more rigorous curriculum, but the students were not prepared for this challenging curriculum. Grades plummeted and parents began to complain that teachers expected too much. Mr. Wong mitigated this problem by implementing a no-fail policy. In actuality, this was not a “failure is not an option” mentality but a no-fail policy in which teachers were not allowed to give a failing grade regardless of student performance. The most dedicated teachers resented this policy and became either passive aggressive or simply took the path of least resistance and reverted back to the old way of teaching.

Reason asked Wong if he had engaged his staff in a conversation about new state assessments and how the school’s performance had plummeted. Wong replied that he had not. Reason respectfully
replied that the classroom is where the rubber meets the road in education and teachers control that environment. She explained how important it was to have a principal as the key instructional leader. It was her belief that principals had to work collaboratively with the teachers. She commented that teachers were the most important asset that a school division had. Teachers had to be involved, and they had to possess a shared vision on where the school was going and how it would arrive at that destination. Open and honest conversation and team work was the only way to realize consistent growth. Mr. Wong was quiet for an extended period of time, and Reason was concerned she had said too much.

After the meeting, Wong reflected upon his conversation with Reason. He understood that he had found himself in a new paradigm with a more challenging curriculum, new standards, and new state assessment system. He was horrified when he realized that he had done very little to personally respond to these changes and that even worse, he had not prepared his school for the changes. Without question, he had failed to understand his role and the importance of taking care of his teachers. He had failed his school by failing to involve teachers in the instructional program and curriculum alignment. Throughout the day, he could recall the voice of Reason explaining the important role that teachers played in the entire educational process.

**The Wise County Experience**

Wise County was embroiled in a tumultuous debate over whether or not to consolidate its six high schools. This debate grew heated at times and became the major plank for school board and board of supervisors’ elections. Every two years, four of eight seats on the school board and board of supervisors were up for election. The political winds blew back and forth many times over a period of twelve years and during that time, it was very difficult for a superintendent to survive the political landmines. Eventually, it had an impact on the employment status of two superintendents.

When the next superintendent assumed his post, he understood that the staff of Wise County Schools was weary of the ongoing consolidation debate. Everything in Wise County seemed to center on that single topic. The new superintendent also understood that the school division he inherited was
nothing but a loose confederation of schools. There appeared to be a great deal of mistrust, little communication, and the schools didn’t work together as a team. The entire school division was fractured, and there were a number of political camps. He knew that for the Wise County Public Schools to move forward, he had to forge the schools and the central office into one cohesive organization and earn the trust of all stakeholders. He began by working collaboratively with the people of the division.

**Practical Principle: Earn Trust**

The new superintendent did not make any sweeping changes when he first arrived. He spent time getting to know all of the stakeholders and listening to their concerns, suggestions, hopes, and frustrations. Through this process, he learned there was little cohesion and unity within the division. The principals and staff didn’t have trust in the central office. The central office was seen as an enforcer and punisher. The superintendent wanted the central office to adopt a servant-leadership mentality and ensure that all directors realized our primary responsibility was to serve the schools. Everyone at the central office was expected to drop everything when a school called for assistance. Directors and superintendent would do their work after hours but during the school day – we were here to serve. During a principals’ meeting, the superintendent asked all of the central office staff to leave. The central office staff was aware of what was going to happen because he had talked to them about the process during a leadership meeting, but they were very anxious about the outcome. The superintendent announced to the principals that he was conducting an audit of the central office. He needed their input, all responses would remain anonymous, and that all members of the central office were dedicated to their success. Many issues and concerns came out of this meeting and the superintendent recorded all of the concerns.

The next issues involved bringing the central office together as a team. The political debate and unrest of the previous years had created a number of unhealthy alliances within the central office. The
superintendent engaged in a number of deliberate initiatives, formal conversations, informal conversations, and meetings to improve team work at the central office. There was a clear expectation that teamwork was one of the most important elements all directors would be evaluated on during the year. Honest conversations were held and directors were forced to work collaboratively. Slowly, the team began to merge together into a strong and unified leadership team.

After the central office team came together, everyone worked hard to address these issues generated by the principals. There were a number of tangible results from the meeting and there were several key changes that occurred. First, we eliminated all trivial paperwork, projects, and reporting that consumed so much time. Many required documents were eliminated to increase time for principals to be instructional leaders. Second, we evaluated all programs and initiatives within the division to identify the important ones. Many programs were eliminated, and we promised the principals that we would not constantly adopt new programs. We wanted them to focus on instructional leadership; we pledged to “unpack their sacks” to give them time to focus on academic achievement. Third, we promised more responsiveness from the central office, and we would ensure that the needs of the schools came first. Fourth, we pledged to the principals that we would earn their trust and they could depend on us for steadfast leadership. Fifth, the principals would become an active participant in the decision making process. Principals were impressed with the manner in which their concerns were addressed, and the schools and central office began to forge into one strong school division. Each school still had its own personality and character, but there was a growing sense of collective vision, mission, and purpose.

**Practical Principle: Provide Support**

As stated above, the new superintendent instilled a greater impetus to provide as much support to the schools as possible. Principals were supported when they came under siege from outside parties. This support extended even to individuals who may not have made the best decisions but who had good intentions. We adopted a “circle the wagons” mentality when any one of us was attacked. It was made clear that everyone within the circle didn’t have to be concerned about strife or attacks from a colleague.
Everyone would aim their energy outside the circle and we would protect everyone within. It was made clear that we wouldn’t tolerate the action of any individual who would attempt to attack a colleague and “shoot him in the back”. We had to create an atmosphere of trust and faith and realize we were becoming a cohesive unit.

Principals in Wise County feel like they will be supported regardless of the circumstance. Whether it is dealing with an irate parent, working through a contentious teacher improvement process, or dealing with personal issues, everyone knows someone will be there for support. This certainly helps to calm nerves when it comes time to make some tough decisions, and it fortifies courage to make tough calls to improve the outcomes for students. However, we made it clear that principals had to perform. We provided clear expectations, would provide the necessary support to be successful, and we would give them the freedom to lead.

**Practical Principle: Maintain Constant Communication**

We have discovered the most effective principals in Wise County communicate with their director almost daily. These principals have enjoyed some of the greatest increases in student achievement. Whether it is a phone call at 6:30 AM, a text at 6:30 PM, or an email over the weekend, constant communication is critical.

One of the key outcomes of this communication is providing and obtaining formative feedback. Principals are constantly working diligently to improve student achievement and often this is a very lonely position. They have few people to share ideas with, and many don’t understand the complex nature of what it takes to be a successful principal. Central office directors know what has worked and what hasn’t worked in our schools. Principals must have faith
that their leaders have the necessary skill, experience, and professional knowledge to be of assistance to them. Having an experienced and well balanced central office is critical to this process.

The directors also respect the concept that principals often know their own communities better than anyone else, and we often listen to them as they resolve their own issues. Sometimes principals will bring new institutional knowledge and ideas to the table that can significantly improve student achievement. It is important we listen to these ideas so we can share with others. This is certainly a two way conversation.

The other key outcome is that central office directors and principals foster a constant level of communication to help maintain focus and to nurture a sense of mutual respect and teamwork. Principals can easily be distracted by the day to day experiences of running a school and can lose sight of the bigger picture. Central office personnel can easily forget what it is like to be in a school on a daily basis. Therefore, regular conversations between the directors and principals help to maintain balance. This helps us to keep “the main thing, the main thing”.

**Practical Principle: Cultivate Positive Relationships**

We believe that relationships are critical in this business. If a teacher does not develop positive relationships with students, it is unlikely that the students will put forth much effort, especially our economically disadvantaged students. If a principal does not develop positive relationships with his or her teachers, it is unlikely that the teachers will effectively communicate with the principal or develop a common vision. If the central office director does not develop positive relationships with his or her principals, they will be much less likely to communicate on a regular basis. Without this constant communication, there is not ample background knowledge and experience to forge solid relationships that are necessary when difficult situations arise. We are in a
people business, and people function via relationships. Most individuals don’t care what you know, but they certainly know if you care about them.

**Practical Principle: Employ Dedicated Directors**

In our rural southwestern Virginia colloquialism, the phrase “stay after it” means to keep working on it until it’s done. School divisions must employ central office directors (or supervisors, or assistant superintendents, or whatever title you may assign to this position) who “stay after it”. These individuals must constantly maintain the focus of increasing student achievement and make sure the principals do the same. At times, the director may even need to “stay after” a principal to ensure the right things are getting done in a school.

In public education, there are many distractions which can easily divert our attention from the “main thing”. These distractions can take the form of irate parents, poor performing athletic programs, state initiatives enacted or shut down by the General Assembly, as well as a host of others. Someone has to be the leader who “stays after it” and who makes sure everyone else does as well.

**Practical Principle: Ensure a Unified and Talented Central Office**

One of the first steps to move a school division forward must be to unify the central office and make sure that everyone possesses a significant amount of investment in the plan. It is critical that the superintendent spend time talking to his directors and have faith in their abilities. These individuals need to have the autonomy and authority they need to initiate change. The superintendent must realize the most effective way to be successful is to delegate authority to responsible individuals who are capable and willing to assume that responsibility. The superintendent should monitor the process but have faith in the staff and allow them to make the necessary changes.

It is also critical to create well balanced central office staff. No football team would be successful if every player on the team was an all-star quarterback. Linemen, receivers, defensive backs and
linebackers are needed to make a great team. Comparatively, a central office must have diversity in leadership styles and abilities to ensure the success of all.

Summary

Some may argue that central office personnel have no direct impact on student achievement, but we believe there is a direct correlation between an effective central office and improved student achievement. Considerable effort and leadership must be expended to create and foster the necessary level of trust and communication for a school division to be successful. Constant hours and a significant amount of hard work was invested to gain the trust of the principals and key individuals in the schools. Through the relationships cultivated between the central office and our schools, we were able to work with all stakeholders to ensure the right things were done for our students. This is virtually an impossible task unless a school division has a unified central office staff who is committed to creating positive relationships, maintaining effective communication, and is dedicated to the premise the central office exists to serve others.
CHAPTER 4: DATA

Hope N. Reason: Where the in the World are We?

Reason’s next assigned internship position was with the division director of testing for Crossroads County Public Schools. The person who held this title was Irene Blanch Busy (I. B. Busy). Busy had many other duties besides testing such as ordering textbooks, overseeing discipline, managing transportation, managing food services and for fielding all parent complaints at the central office.

During their initial meeting, Busy explained that she had been assigned the role of testing director a few years back in addition to the other roles she had. At that time, Crossroads was struggling with drastic budget cuts and was forced to reduce staff at the central office. Everyone was given additional responsibilities and nothing was taken away. Because of this situation, Busy only had time to conduct the minimum requirements of the testing position.

Reason asked Busy about the data reports prepared for the division and for schools. Busy stated that she made sure that each school had access to school and division report cards which were published by the state each fall. Division and school level administrators also had credentials to log into the state data warehouse and could find any information they needed there.

When asked about how data was used to guide the division, Busy reported that schools were required to create a school improvement plan whenever they did not meet state or federal accountability measures. Then, at the end of the year when the state reports were published, schools would review their plans to see what worked and what didn’t. Basically the division had abdicated its responsibility for data analysis and had given this duty to principals who were always overwhelmed with other tasks.
Reason explained to Busy how Bright Futures used data at every level to improve student achievement. Everything that was measured at the school or divisional level was analyzed to identify areas of concern as well as areas of strength. Reports were generated at the central office level and provided to schools regularly to help monitor improvement efforts. There was little need to look at state results at the end of the year because nothing could be adjusted during the school year to help students or teachers who were struggling. Reason argued that the budget cuts had also impacted the schools and they had fewer personnel to deal with an increasing amount of work and responsibility. It was unreasonable to think that the leadership within the schools would have the time, energy, or focus to produce, analyze, and act upon the relevant data. Reason explained that her old division had employed an administrative assistant, paid at a lower level, to complete some of the paperwork which consumed so much time and allowed the directors to focus on student achievement.

As Reason left the office, Busy returned to work on the transportation report she had begun before the meeting. Busy admired the spirit and enthusiasm Reason displayed and wondered where she had lost her own love of helping others. At one time, Busy had that same unquenchable fire to change the world. She knew that data could play an important role in improving how schools responded to the needs of their students. She looked at the transportation report and knew it could be done by someone else because it really didn’t have much of an impact on the primary mission of the school. Without question, the majority of this paperwork had to be completed, but she wondered if it could be addressed in another way. Busy was concerned that if Hope N. Reason had never come into her office, she would have continued working with her head down and failing to look for a better way. Perhaps it was time to listen more to Reason.

The Wise County Experience

In the beginning, we did not understand the important role that data would play in the successes we have enjoyed over the last few years. We were like everyone else in that we anxiously awaited the spreadsheet reports from the state testing contractor. We could see how we performed relative to the year
before, if our schools would be accredited, and if our schools would meet federal accountability measures. When we used data solely for these purposes, we did not experience any growth.

We knew where we wanted to go, and we also knew that we needed “biopsies” rather than “autopsies”. We believed our students were as capable as any other group and didn’t see any reason why our students should have any less success. However, the path we had been following led to nowhere as evidenced by the lack of growth in student achievement. We slowly began to understand we were wondering through the wilderness without a compass or sense of direction. Despite the many paths to success advocated by state, federal, and professional education organizations, nothing seemed to work for us.

We decided to begin our journey to legitimate improvement by first discovering where we were. Over time we realized it was just as important to know where we were during each step of the trek in order to make the necessary adjustments if we strayed from the path. Each year we became more dependent on data to drive our efforts and to monitor our progress. The use of data was not explicitly planned out in the beginning, but it evolved over time into a very detailed and organized process. Different data sources, analysis methods, and reporting methods were employed, and those that worked were retained.

**Practical Principle: Employ a Data Czar**

Initially, schools were expected to do the bulk of the data work. Data disaggregating software was purchased, and school employees were trained in its use. Principals were specifically trained in the details of how to analyze data from the state testing extracts that included all of the very detailed information. Data was not used because schools had more pressing and immediate concerns. Principals were mired in the day-to-day realities of their school. There was no mechanism in place at the central office to ensure data
was being used effectively within the schools. We also understood that we had no clear comprehensive and coordinated approach to data use or analysis. We were data rich but were analysis poor.

One director at the central office began to take an interest in analyzing the data and creating useful reports. This began slowly with Standards of Learning test data, and over time other data sources and perspectives were utilized. After a few years of this work, it was decided to move this individual into a new position that was responsible for assessment, data analysis, data reporting, accountability, and ensuring that the curriculum and instruction were aligned. All other duties and responsibilities not directly associated with these tasks were assigned to others.

Most school divisions may lack a person who is dedicated to data. There is still much discourse across the state and nation about training building level personnel to be more proficient in data, but we are not confident this is the best course of action. We invested in a person who was dedicated to finding out where we were, where we needed to go, our weaknesses, our strengths, and work to collaboratively develop a plan to guide us to where we needed to be. This individual worked with the schools to provide all of the data they needed to move forward. These simple to read reports, analysis, potential action plans, and suggestions allowed building level personnel to focus on teaching and being instructional leaders.

**Practical Principle: Consider Data from Multiple Sources and from Multiple Perspectives**

In the beginning of our journey to effectively use data, we simply used Standards of Learning test results. We analyzed overall pass rates, pass rates by school, and pass rates by teacher. Later, after considering the requirements for meeting federal accountability measures, we began breaking down the SOL data into subgroups at the school and teacher levels. We used data to identify if we had an instructional issue, a curriculum issue, a grade level/content area issue, a school issue, or a single teacher issue.

Over the course of time, we began to collect and report other sources of data including STAR Reading results, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) results, benchmark results, grades/SOL score correlations, anecdotal data, and many others. Any time data was collected relative to
student achievement, we analyzed it and reported the results. Some data sources proved valuable so we continued to utilize them. Other data sources did not prove as valuable, so those sources and the data were eventually eliminated.

**Practical Principle: Identify Improvement Targets**

Sorting through the myriad of reports we received from the state or produced ourselves from different data sources, we realized that some schools, grade levels, content areas, and teachers were performing well while others were not. At times it is very easy to identify problems, and sometimes it requires digging a little deeper to get to the heart of the matter. In most instances, gathering and analyzing more data paints a clearer picture.

We noticed the scores of most of the teachers in a given grade level were relatively close from top to bottom with one teacher’s scores significantly below the others. Upon further inquiry, we found the teacher with the lowest score had the smallest class size, had no students with disabilities on the class roll, and had similar results for a number of years. In this instance, the problem was isolated to the performance of one teacher.

In other instances, we initially didn’t know we had a problem until we reviewed data from different sources. For example, comparing 3rd grade SOL reading pass rates to 4th grade SOL reading pass rates is much like comparing apples to oranges: different content, different students, different teachers, etc. For some time, our 3rd grade reading pass rates were higher than the 4th grade scores, and we simply chalked that up to the fact that the 4th grade test was harder.

During the fall of 2012, while analyzing the Student Growth Percentiles from the previous year, we noticed a large percentage of our students ranked in the low growth category on the 4th grade reading SOL test. What did this mean? Immediately, we dug into the division level data from the state. This information demonstrated that the 4th graders from that year finished 70th in the state out of 132 school divisions. The previous year as third graders that same group of students finished 14th in the state on the 3rd grade reading test (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a). The low growth reported on the SGP
from the 4th grade reading test dataset corroborated exactly with the drop in rank from 3rd to 4th grade. We had a grade level achievement problem.

**Practical Principle: Create Reports to Demonstrate Location**

Early in our journey to data enlightenment, we began creating reports that identify problems at a very specific level. We believe that student achievement is the responsibility of educators, and we also believe that if individuals are not held accountable, then nothing will ever be accomplished. Many teachers will struggle with this issue while they maintain the same level of accountability for their students on a daily basis. These reports were not meant to be punitive, derogatory, or negative in any manner but were simply designed to shine a light on problems needing attention. As one would expect, there was a bit of unrest when these reports were initially distributed, but reports were nothing if not factual, and people couldn’t complain about that aspect.

The reports we produce and distribute are often sorted from highest performing to lowest performing schools/teachers. We have found that it is very important to let everyone know where they stand. People generally go into education because they want to do good work. If they see their name at the bottom of the list, they typically work to rectify that problem. We didn’t publish this data for the general public, and these reports were only used within the buildings. They were not used to destroy teachers but to highlight areas in need of improvement.
Practical Principle: Use Data to Track Progress Throughout the School Year

We equate working with SOL data to conducting an autopsy. There is nothing we can do to save a school from the fate of state and federal accountability for that year by working with that type of data. It is better to collect biopsy samples (that are correlated to the SOLs) throughout the year and be able to effect a positive outcome.

One way that we have done this is to create and distribute benchmark reports as soon as the assessments have been administered. These reports provide ongoing information that informs schools and teachers where they stand. If a teacher’s scores are the highest, he or she needs to keep on doing what he or she is doing. If the scores are at the bottom, it is time to shift course before a disaster ensues. We do not use benchmarks to predict results. We use benchmark results to identify problems in student learning or teacher performance that can be addressed prior to the SOL tests. We expect teachers to address the student issues and principals to address the teacher issues.

Practical Principle: Effectively Communicate Data to Key Personnel

We began to understand early on that not everyone is a data analyst at heart. We found that simply emailing a report was not an effective method to communicate this information. We now understand that face-to-face, one-on-one meetings are critical to convey the information contained in our data reports. During these meetings, the central office director meets with the principal to go over the data and provide a formative assessment of the school’s/teachers’/principal’s performance. The beauty of a one-on-one meeting is that the director can check for understanding and engage in meaningful conversations. Principals can ask questions to clarify his or her understanding of the data, which may not happen in a group meeting with other principals.
Summary

We found that it was very valuable to staff a position that includes data collection, accountability, and curriculum as the primary responsibilities. This person must investigate many different sources of data from many different perspectives to help everyone really understand where they are. Once this has been accomplished, specific areas in need of improvement can be targeted. The data director must create reports to inform the division and schools about our achievement status. This person must also provide relevant information to allow us to monitor progress throughout the year. Since everyone is not data minded, and many leaders have more immediate concerns, it is also important for the data director to meet regularly with division and building leadership to effectively communicate the data. It is of no benefit to provide patients with their blood pressure scores if they don’t know what these scores mean. It is also of no benefit to inform them they have a problem with their blood pressure without providing them suggestions on how to improve. It is illogical to allow a patient to die because of blood pressure problems when the death could have been avoided. Unfortunately, we often play out this scenario with data in our schools.
CHAPTER 5: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Hope N. Reason: What to Do?

Reason’s next internship assignment was with Oscar Blivius (O. Blivius). Mr. Blivius had served Crossroads County Schools as the director of instruction for a decade. He was very well read in the latest instructional trends and belonged to seven different professional educational organizations.

At their initial meeting in September, Mr. Blivius explained to Reason that the strategy to help all schools earn full accreditation was to implement the new instructional strategy he had discovered at the last state conference he attended. This was a cutting edge instructional approach that was showing a great deal of promise in current educational research. Mr. Blivius knew that if all teachers would implement this strategy with fidelity that student achievement scores would skyrocket.

The division had already invested heavily in the new strategy. All teachers had received training over the summer from the staff of the developer of the Strategy. Instructional materials had been purchased and distributed to the schools. Every teacher was expected to faithfully implement the new strategy.

When Reason asked how the division-wide implementation of the new strategy was going, Mr. Blivius stated it was meeting with resistance from some teachers. He believed these individuals were not team players and didn’t understand why they didn’t want to provide the best instruction to their students. While some of these teachers had been successful with their own strategies, he was confident they could be even more successful implementing this new strategy. He failed to mention that this was the eighth major new strategy that had been implemented within the last two years. None of the other strategies and programs were still in existence because the new program was much better than the last one.
Reason related that part of the success she enjoyed in Brighter Futures Public Schools stemmed from the fact that she allowed her successful teachers to select their own strategies that correlated with their strengths and teaching styles. There was accountability among the teachers, but the true power of teaching didn’t seem to connect with any one strategy or program. One teacher simplified the debate by stating that successful artists are allowed freedom to produce art according to their individual strengths. It would be ridiculous to demand all artists to use one style, one medium, or one approach to producing art. It was equally important to have a common vision for teachers but to allow them to reach that destination through their own path as long as it was effective, moral, and reasonable. She concluded her part of the conversation by stating that constant change and frequent introduction of new strategies/programs into the division only created a sense of instability and fear among her teachers. It was more effective to create a common vision, establish clear expectations, provide support, and allow teachers controlled freedom to implement the curriculum according to their strengths.

Blivius’ attention was captured by the voice of Reason and he began to seriously question his frantic approach to discover the “silver bullet” that would improve education overnight. None of his strategies or programs had produced any academic gains, and Reason began to make more sense as she talked. In fact, Blivius was a little ashamed that he was currently reading an article and had an appointment with the superintendent to advocate a new program to replace the current one. Reason had convinced him that he needed to re-evaluate his approach to staff development and depend more upon quality teachers.

**The Wise County Experience**

Wise County was known for providing high quality professional development. Staff members often enjoyed presentations and training from the biggest names in the field. Some of the greatest educational programs were purchased and implemented with fidelity. Millions of dollars were spent on textbooks, software, and other resources. Each teacher had access to every resource in the division.
After we became more aware of the importance of data, we evaluated our curriculum and instructional program. There didn’t appear to be a relationship between the professional development being provided and gains in student achievement. Similarly, there was no relationship between the purchase of resources and student achievement. However, we did start listening to our staff more, especially when teachers asked for flexibility in how they implemented the curriculum. Our student achievement results improved dramatically when we began to respect the professionalism of our staff.

**Practical Principle: Put the Right People in the Right Positions**

Everyone knows that personnel decisions can be the biggest factor in improving student achievement. Principals and teachers directly influence student achievement at the school and classroom levels. Retaining only the best staff members and placing them carefully in the right roles is critical.

The teacher is the key to student achievement in every classroom. Teacher selection and placement in Wise County is the responsibility of the principal. We understand that many students come to school with fewer of the prerequisite skills they need to master grade level skills and content. Educationally needy students need to experience more than one grade level of growth per year if they have a hope of obtaining at least a standard diploma. Effective principals understand that they are fully responsible for the academic progress of every student regardless of grade level readiness. They understand that educationally needy children can’t overcome their educational issues without a highly effective teacher.

The principal is the key to student achievement in every school. Much care and thought is put into principal placement in Wise County. Principals who perform the best typically share the following characteristics:

1. Fosters a family-like atmosphere among school staff
2. Communicates student achievement improvement goals to teachers through a variety of means, including informal conversations, faculty meetings, teacher evaluation goals, and assignment of resources
3. Constantly monitors progress towards student achievement improvement goals via student achievement data

4. Immediately intervenes if interim targets for student achievement improvement goals are not met

5. Effectively addresses the concerns of staff members, parents, and the community at large

6. Remains in constant communication with central office directors to ensure school efforts are aligned with division improvement goals

**Practical Principle: Make Sure your Curriculum is the Curriculum Frameworks**

The curriculum for Wise County Schools is the Virginia Curriculum Frameworks. All staff members understand that they are primarily responsible for ensuring that students master the skills and knowledge specified therein. The curriculum can be expanded if the minimum standards are taught, but it is critical that students master the essential skills as identified by the Frameworks. The Standards of Learning are the minimum expectations for student achievement, and each school board in the state is required by law to implement a program of instruction that meets or exceeds these standards (Code of Virginia, 2014). The Virginia Department of Education provides Curriculum Frameworks which define the “content, knowledge, and skills that are measured on the Standards of Learning Assessment” (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). Why not utilize the documents used to develop the assessments by which our effectiveness will ultimately be measured?

**Practical Principle: Allow Teachers to Select Their Own Instructional Strategies**

We allow teachers to teach the students the best way they know how to teach and the way that their students learn best. As long as instruction occurs in a moral, ethical, and respectful fashion, how the teacher gets the students to the desired level of proficiency does not matter. What does matter is that each child achieves the desired level of proficiency as measured by valid and reliable assessments. Each teacher comes to the classroom with different skills, interests, and paradigms. Instead of making each teacher fit into our instructional mold, we would much rather teachers utilize their own strengths and
talents to create the best possible educational opportunities for their students. It is relatively clear that students learn in many different ways, and educators should be able to teach according to their individual strengths if they can produce the desired results.

**Practical Principle: Allow Teachers to Select Their Own Instructional Materials**

Few, if any, companies produced instructional materials specifically created for Virginia, even before most states adopted the Common Core. Salespeople who call our office to promote their programs tout how their product is “aligned” to the Virginia Standards of Learning, but very few are created with our curriculum in mind. Most can demonstrate alignment of major topics, but none are consistent with specific content and level of rigor.

Over the years we found that different teachers like to use different materials. During visits to schools we found closets full of division-issued workbooks, manipulatives, and programs that were never used. Each year central office sent those materials, and each year they were put into the closet because the teacher had no use for them.

Eventually, we decided to shift the responsibility of selecting instructional materials from the central office to the schools. Teachers are held responsible for the performance of their students, so why not provide them the flexibility to choose their instructional materials? Funds that were once used to purchase materials centrally were provided to schools on a per pupil basis. Teachers can now decide to purchase individual resources or pool their funds with other teachers for bigger purchases.

**Practical Principle: Ensure Local Talent Provides your Professional Development**

Since expensive professional development demonstrated no return on investment relative to student achievement, we stopped that practice. Instead, professional development shifted to local talent which was very inexpensive and yielded huge gains in student achievement. Highly successful teachers were identified and asked to share their secrets with others.
An example of utilizing local talent for professional development occurred with 4th and 5th grade reading. During the 2011 school year, Wise County’s 5th grade reading scores ranked 68th out of 132 school divisions and 4th grade ranked 70th. Third grade reading finished 14th in 2010 and 14th in 2011. We knew the students were capable of amazing achievement, but we didn’t see this type of growth occur in 4th and 5th grade. A meeting was scheduled with the 4th and 5th grade reading teachers. During this meeting, the highest performing teachers shared how and what they taught their students. We didn’t change programs, didn’t mandate a specific approach, didn’t invest in external professionals, and we didn’t spend an enormous amount of money. Instead, we relied on our local experts to show our teachers how they could be more effective. During the 2014 school year, 4th grade reading finished 10th in the state and 5th grade finished in 5th place (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a).

Table 4

*Data aggregated from Virginia SOL Assessments Build-A-Table using Standards of Learning test data only- ranked highest performing to lowest performing (Virginia Department of Education, 2014a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>4th Grade Reading</th>
<th>5th Grade Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>70th</td>
<td>68th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>5th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was no on-going, job-embedded professional development employed to address this problem. Teachers simply got together in the same room, and those who were highly successful (as evidenced by SOL scores) shared their secrets with everyone else. In the end, the professional development component of the improvement came from teachers in the ranks.

**Practical Principle: Remediation- Do Something Else, Quickly!**

Before discussing remediation, it is important to discuss instruction as we see it. If at least 70% of your students are not successful, or if more than 30% require remediation, you have an ineffective core instructional program. Success in this instance would be measured on assessments that are highly aligned
with the curriculum frameworks. Chances are the teacher does not either align his or her curriculum to the curriculum frameworks, does not possess high enough expectations of the students, or does not have a positive professional relationship with the students. Most school divisions do not have enough resources to remediate large percentages of the student body. Until your core instructional program is adequate, effective remediation cannot take place. It is more effective to have students learn the first time and to eliminate the need for remediation.

Remediation takes several different forms in Wise County. Many teachers work with students daily during their planning period to provide “just-in-time” remediation. This helps get students back on track before they fall too far behind. So much of our instruction is sequential in nature, and if students fail to master the beginning steps, they are lost throughout the entire process. Title I and Special Education services are implemented in the classroom as well as outside the classroom to get students closer to their grade level skill targets. Most schools operate division-funded after-school remediation programs which provide transportation home for students. In the high schools, students who are in academic need are placed into year-long, rather than semester long classes in certain math and English courses. Prior to taking an expedited retake on an EOC SOL, students are provided very specific, individual remediation based on their Student Performance by Question (SPBQ) report. We found a few years ago that remediation fueled by the SPBQ report helped students to be more than twice as likely to pass their expedited retake attempt. The key to remediation is to specifically target where a student is struggling and to teach it differently from the way it was. Talking louder and slower will not help a child be successful. We must take a different approach through remediation to ensure students master essential skills.

**Summary**

We found that more than anything else, it is critical to ensure that the right principals and teachers are in the right places. A teacher may be an excellent 5th grade teacher but be a horrible kindergarten teacher. A principal may be great at the high school level but useless in a primary school. Leaders must
take a considerable amount of time and energy to put the right people in the right places. Instead of adopting expensive textbooks and other resources, we adopted the curriculum frameworks as our curriculum. We hold teachers accountable for student performance, and we have faith in them to choose their own instructional strategies and approaches. We dropped the traditional process of bringing in professional development when we found it was much more effective for our highly successful teachers to share their secrets with others. We also made sure that each school employed an effective remediation program.
CHAPTER 6: ASSESSMENT

Hope N. Reason: How Do You Know?

During the first week of October, Reason met with Inna Dee Cline, the assessment coordinator for Crossroads County Schools. Cline’s primary responsibility was to implement the division assessment program, and she had faithfully served in this capacity for four years. Prior to this assignment, she had been one of the most beloved kindergarten teachers in the county.

Reason was excited to get an opportunity to work with someone with so much experience in assessment. From her experience in Bright Futures, she understood that benchmark assessments that are highly aligned to state standards are critical to improving student achievement. Since benchmarks had not yet been administered, Reason looked forward to discussing this topic with Cline and to see how she developed the division assessments.

Cline began the conversation by stating how important it is to ensure that each child experiences success. She also stated that students in Crossroads faced a variety of hardships outside of school. She argued schools must be safe places that nurture students and must not be places which create any additional stress on the students. Cline further explained that she designed each assessment to be “kid-friendly”, which meant no complicated questions and no questions that contained multiple steps to solve. The answers to all comprehension questions must be included verbatim in the passage and all vocabulary questions must include words that students had already learned.

Reason was quite distressed by these comments, but did her best to disguise her feelings. She sincerely explained that the benchmark assessments given in her previous division had been highly aligned to the content and rigor of the new state standards. It was clear that students struggled with some
questions because they had not mastered the prerequisite set of skills to be successful. However, those students were identified by the test and provided remediation and additional services to ensure their success. There would be no way to identify these students and no incentive to provide remediation if the assessments were not held to the same standards of the state.

Cline began to gain a better understanding of what she should do to improve academic success but she was still confident that her assessments should not be based on the unrealistic expectations of the state. Cline informed Reason that she didn’t understand the poverty level and lack of background experiences associated with Crossroad students. Their students should not be assessed at the same level of more influential communities across the Commonwealth. There was a difference in where students started, and it was not fair to expect the same from children who were not equal at the beginning. It would take time for these at-risk students to catch up with the rest of the Commonwealth.

Reason listened and acknowledged the fact that Crossroads may have students who began preschool and kindergarten with low academic skills. However, they would never gain grade-level proficiency if the division failed to develop high expectations for them. Reason was also concerned that assessments which failed to match the rigor of the current Commonwealth standards would not create more confident students because eventually those children would fail SOL tests. This could have devastating results at the high school level where verified credits were connected with SOL testing. Students and teachers need to have a realistic idea of where students should be academically throughout the year, and we should assess in a manner similar to the state testing format.

The conversation continued, and Cline began to understand Reason. After Reason had left Cline with several ideas to consider, Cline looked down at the assessments that would soon be given. She was disappointed in the low expectations of the division and was concerned these low expectations were a big part of the reason that students performed so poorly on the state assessment tests. There were clear and compelling arguments for change, and Cline believed it may be time to listen to Reason.
The Wise County Experience

In the beginning, Wise County Schools did not have an effective assessment program. Our students took tests quite regularly, but most of these were teacher-designed and administered at the individual classroom level. There were some division-wide assessments, but they weren’t really aligned with the frameworks and didn’t contain the necessary rigor. During this time, no division-wide benchmarks were given.

We understood that we needed to monitor the academic progress of each child throughout the year if we wanted to have the ability to modify our instructional program to respond to their instructional needs. Like real biopsies, our quarterly benchmark assessments caused some pain and discomfort among our staff members. Teachers complained that we were testing our students too much and asked when they were going to have time to teach. While some of this concern had a degree of legitimacy, much of this discomfort came from the fact that we were publishing the results of these assessments to principals, and teachers were held accountable for their performance or lack of performance.

We implemented the new mathematics Standards of Learning in 2012 and the new English Standards of Learning in 2013 by aligning our assessments to the new curriculum frameworks. This process ensured that our teachers understood what was to be taught, and all of our staff knew when our students were learning on par with the new expectations. The strategy of implementing highly aligned assessments yielded better achievement results relative to other divisions.
Practical Principle: Measure the Right Things

An assessment is only effective if it is valid. Validity refers to the relationship of the assessment and what the assessment is supposed to measure. In education we call this alignment. Assessments will become an exercise in futility if they are not aligned to desired learner outcomes. No competent physician would use a blood pressure cuff to measure body temperature because that instrument is not designed to record temperature. We must make sure our assessments measure the right skill set.

In Virginia, the state controls the beginning of the educational process by establishing expectations for student learning, the Standards of Learning, and at the end of the educational cycle by administering the SOL tests. Schools control the middle section of this process: instruction. The state spends a significant amount of time, money, and effort ensuring that SOL tests are aligned to the Standards of Learning. Teams of teachers are brought in to Richmond every year to evaluate whether or not specific questions accurately measure the expectations found in the standards.

Unfortunately in many school divisions, little time is devoted to ensuring instruction is as aligned to the standards. With the implementation of new Standards of Learning over the last few years, more schools fail to become fully accredited due to low student performance. The Office of School Improvement at the Virginia Department of Education has identified the key element that has led to low student achievement as the misalignment of instruction (Virginia Department of Education, 2013).

The best way that administrators can monitor student learning is through assessments that are highly aligned with the Essential Knowledge and Skills found in the curriculum frameworks. Divisions will not know if they are making appropriate progress through the year if assessments are not well aligned. Teacher-made assessments tend to do a better job measuring what was taught rather than what students are expected to learn. Some teachers do a great job aligning their instruction and assessments to
the curriculum frameworks and others do not. In order for assessments to accurately track performance and progress, someone must ensure that these assessments are very carefully aligned.

**Practical Principle: Measure at Every Level**

SOL tests begin in third grade, but there are some prerequisite skills students learn in grades Kindergarten through 2nd that are critical to success in 3rd grade. A similar instance occurs in high school, in that 9th and 10th grade English skills find their way onto the SOL test in 11th grade. We believe that it is unrealistic to hold 3rd and 11th grade teachers solely responsible for content taught in earlier grades. We must assess in those lower grade levels if we expect to improve student achievement in the tested grades.

Prior to requiring assessment in those earlier grades, we had no firm idea of what our students were learning and how proficient our teachers were in those grades. In fact, some less effective teachers had been assigned to those grades in order to place the best teachers in the tested grades. Hiding ineffective teachers in non-testing grades, especially in the primary grades, had devastating results. We had some of our weakest teachers in kindergarten through 2nd grade where the bulk of reading instruction took place. Adding highly aligned assessments in these grade levels helped to ensure that accountability was shared by teachers responsible for teaching the content whether their grade had an SOL test or not.

**Practical Principle: Measure at Regular Intervals**

We found that we had to balance the need for frequent checks on student progress with the need to protect instructional time. We possess the firm belief that assessment is an integral part of the instructional process. However, we also understand that the process of administering assessments and collecting the data is time-consuming and can impact the daily routine of a school.

We decided to administer benchmarks quarterly. This interval provided three assessments per year at the elementary and middle schools and one per course at the high school. We were confident these assessments provide us with valid and reliable data points throughout the year. These data points
allow us to evaluate student progress and to intervene if necessary. It would be virtually impossible to incorporate effective intervention strategies into the instructional day if these assessments were administered on a less frequent basis.

**Summary**

It was our experience that no commercially produced assessment program was sufficiently correlated with the Virginia SOLs. We had purchased a program, and it provided the foundational base for us to begin. However, we had to heavily modify the questions to ensure it matched the actual standards and met the rigor necessary for students to be successful on the SOLs. We know that regular and valid assessments are critical to our improvement efforts. No patient would continue visiting a physician who simply prescribed medication according to the patient’s age without conducting a set of tests to determine the medical state of the patient. The only effective way to improve the health of the patient is to conduct a thorough medical exam, use the right instrument to take the right measurements, and develop a plan of action to correct what was actually wrong with the patient. School divisions should take a similar approach and should utilize assessments that are highly aligned to the curriculum frameworks and are administered quarterly to measure progress.
CHAPTER 7: EVALUATION

Hope N. Reason: How Proficient?

In November, Reason met with Crossroads County Schools’ director of personnel, Anita Doolittle to learn about the division’s evaluation system. Reason was a principal when the state changed the focus of teacher evaluations. The new system focused on measuring what students had learned instead of attempting to measure what the teacher did. The new system was primarily focused on academic results.

On the day of the meeting, Doolittle explained the process Crossroads County used to develop the new teacher evaluation system. A group of teachers was selected to serve on the evaluation committee. Committee members were given copies of the state teacher evaluation guidelines and then assembled for a meeting. At this meeting, the teachers provided suggestions and comments on how the guidelines should be developed and implemented. They were most concerned with the fact that 40% of the evaluation was to be based on student growth and achievement. By the end of the meeting, it was decided that the division evaluation process would include pre-test/post-test assessments to measure student growth. This testing was not connected to the Frameworks. Instead, each teacher was allowed to create his or her own assessments. This single measure would be used to determine the 40% of the evaluation that was based on student growth and achievement. There was no emphasis given to expectations, goal setting, academic performance, or any legitimate attempt to improve teacher performance.

Reason was shocked that Crossroads had taken such a simplistic and highly questionable approach to the evaluation system. She argued that a good evaluation system conveys expectations of performance and can help teachers understand what is required from them to help students be successful. She further argued that an effective and responsible evaluation system could have significant improvement on academic achievement.
Reason asked Doolittle how many teachers in the division were on improvement plans and what steps where involved in that process. Doolittle responded that Crossroads had exemplary teachers and none were currently on an improvement plan. Reason knew that half of the schools in the division failed to meet accreditation standards and that out of 700 teachers, it was unreasonable to believe that all teachers were performing at an acceptable level. Clearly the lack of academic progress over the years indicated there were specific deficiencies associated with the leadership and the instructional program. The situation would not improve if everyone had evaluations stating they were performing at an acceptable level.

Doolittle struggled to find an argument against this statement and began to wonder if Crossroads had missed an opportunity to improve its leadership and teaching staff by developing a better evaluation system. Doolittle knew that Reason was probably right but she maintained that a strong and legitimate evaluation system would never work in Crossroads due to political concerns surrounding the immense power that the teachers’ association possessed. She was also concerned that the school board would never support the superintendent’s recommendation to dismiss a teacher. This had never happened in Crossroads, and Doolittle was concerned they would never have the power to dismiss incompetent teachers due to the power teachers wielded.

Reason listened and was sympathetic to Doolittle’s position. She knew it could be extremely difficult and politically dangerous to recommend the dismissal of tenured teachers. However, she also knew that incompetent teachers normally were given the most at-risk students because those parents wouldn’t complain about bad teaching. She explained to Doolittle that it was our responsibility as leaders to ensure that each child had a quality and competent teacher and principal. None of us would want our children or grand-children to be under the charge of an incompetent teacher, and we should not allow any child to be subjected to poor instruction. We owed students more than that. Poor leadership on our part would have a devastating impact on students, and often, educators were the only difference between success and failure. Doolittle responded with silence because she knew Reason was right. Reason had to move on to the next appointment and told Doolittle that she thanked her for the time. The words of
Reason drove hard into Doolittle’s conscious, and she began to realize how much she had failed the school division and its children. Even though she was not really sure what she would do, the voice of Reason had convinced her that significant changes must occur, and she couldn’t wait for others to lead.

**The Wise County Experience**

Wise County’s evaluation system has always been consistent with state requirements but had not been effective. Prior to 2012, the division’s teacher evaluation system only measured teacher actions and normally only those behaviors exhibited during the formal observation. The only data utilized in this process was collected solely through classroom observations. The actual evaluation form was a simple checklist which mirrored exactly the state requirements at the time.

In 2010, we began to focus on evaluation as a means to increase student achievement. The central office reviewed the evaluations of teachers who were responsible for the lowest test scores in the division. These teachers, along with everyone else, consistently earned positive evaluations. The same was true of principal evaluations. Principals of schools that did not meet federal accountability measures earned acceptable evaluation ratings. It was clear that an incompetent teacher could have the same evaluation as one of our most effective educators. This finding was not at all unexpected since there had not been any specific expectations conveyed about evaluations. After some discussion and deliberation, we decided to communicate some very specific expectations to our administrators. It was made clear they should not provide acceptable ratings on anyone’s evaluation whose performance was inadequate.

Virginia adopted new teacher evaluation guidelines in 2011, which required 40% of a teacher’s evaluation to be based on student achievement (Virginia Department of Education, 2011). The central office and building level administrators understood this change could have an extremely beneficial impact on our schools if developed and implemented properly. Work began immediately with groups of teachers and principals to fashion the guidelines for our new evaluation system. A few changes were made to the state’s templates, and we quickly developed an evaluation system which focused on student achievement rather than observation of specific teacher behaviors. We trained principals and assistant principals
extensively and purchased an online evaluation tool to house our new evaluation process. We implemented the new evaluation system during the 2012-2013 school year. We believe this was one of the most important measures that helped us to improve student achievement.

**Practical Principle: Focus on Student Achievement**

Paradigms have shifted. It is vastly more important to measure what the student does as opposed to what the teacher does. We wanted an evaluation system that measured our ability to effectively teach students. Virtually all of the elements we identified such as written lesson plans, alignment with SOL objectives, anticipatory set, guided practice, questioning skills, etc., were all important, but they were meaningless if the process didn’t translate into student learning. We wanted a system that measured student learning. We discussed this issue for an extended period of time and eventually adopted the following tenets.

1. Teachers are responsible for student achievement.
2. Principals are responsible for school performance and ensuring teachers have a positive impact on student achievement.
3. Individuals at the central office are responsible for school division performance and ensuring principals effectively evaluate teachers.
4. The superintendent is responsible for central office performance and ensuring the directors and assistant superintendents effectively evaluate principals.

In order for student achievement to improve, individuals must be responsible for outcomes. It is not important that a teacher utilizes technology or cutting edge instructional techniques. It is more important that the students in the teacher’s classroom learn the skills and knowledge necessary for them to move on to the next level. It is not important that a principal or central office director implements an innovative
instructional program in his or her school or division every month. It is more important that the school and school division develop a strong instructional program and align its curriculum to ensure students learn.

The final evaluations of all teachers and administrators in Wise County are based primarily on student achievement. Each individual is responsible for ensuring his or her students, school, or the division meets the specified growth targets and that students are learning. If the growth targets are met in a legal, ethical, and moral manner, the staff member receives a positive evaluation rating. If the growth targets are not met and students fail to learn, the staff member receives either a “needs improvement” or “unacceptable” rating.

There are many detractors of standardized testing, and their arguments certainly have some merit. However, the Virginia Department of Education has done a reasonably good job of creating standards for student performance that help to produce an educated populace. Again, there is always room for improvement but they also produce legitimate assessments to measure student performance. Standardized expectations for performance can be very positive as they can help to level the playing field for students regardless of race, disability, or economic status.

Economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and minorities were not targeted for improvement in a majority of schools divisions before the advent of accountability. Often, these students were seen as very difficult to educate and it was a better use of resources to focus on students who could be successful. This easily translated into a mentality that these subgroups could be considered expendable. School divisions have been forced to accept the fact that every child counts with this new system of accountability and testing. Although there are a number of demons associated with the accountability system, it has vastly elevated the importance of each child.

We fully understand some teachers have students with more educational needs and that classes can be significantly different. We consider these differences between class demographics in determining reasonable expectations for student achievement. Wise County is small enough that we know each teacher and the makeup of his or her classes. We have experienced significant student achievement and
growth in traditionally low performing subgroups which provides these students with greater opportunities for success beyond their school careers. We believe it is our job to make sure we have high expectations for all children and we allow them to achieve his or her highest potential.

**Practical Principle: Train Your Principals**

We invested a considerable amount of time training our principals and assistant principals to use evaluations to improve student achievement. Part of the training focused on helping these individuals to navigate the new online evaluation tool. We also focused on inter-rater reliability. Principals and assistant principals were given scenarios of different fictitious teachers and were asked to complete summative evaluation forms. The scenarios included completed classroom observations, student achievement data, teacher goals, and anecdotal records of parent and student input. We knew our training sessions were successful when our principals were able to independently and consistently come to a similar overall evaluation rating for individual scenarios.

The most important aspect of the evaluation training was the conveyance of division expectations for individual performance. The various scenarios presented to the principals and assistant principals were designed to represent good teachers, mediocre teachers, and ineffective teachers. We wanted to have a consistency across the division when administrators evaluated teachers. These scenarios helped to create the consistency necessary for us to improve instruction through evaluation. We also used these sessions to make sure that administrators would conduct evaluations in a manner that we could easily support. They understood our expectations were consistent across the division and that they would have the full support of the central office in implementation.

We also trained principals to look for specific actions that would increase student achievement. We discovered that many of our principals didn’t mark teachers as not meeting expectations because they didn’t know how to articulate those concerns in written form. We requested our most effective administrators share some of the phrases, comments, and suggestions they had used in their evaluations. We distributed this list to all administrators to provide them with examples of what to record on the
summative evaluation. This entire process helped to increase their confidence, stressed the importance of conducting legitimate evaluations, and improved consistency throughout the division.

**Practical Principle: Align Your Goals**

There are several beliefs relative to evaluation that are shared by the leadership team in Wise County. First, we firmly believe in the old adage that states “that which gets measured - gets done”. All educators have heard students ask, “Will this be on the test?” The students will take notes and pay more attention if they believe it will be on an upcoming test. All of us possess a similar attitude about evaluations. We will devote more time, energy, and effort to those behaviors which we know will be measured. It is important that teachers know we will be looking for specific behaviors and more importantly, specific outcomes.

Second, individuals enter into education because they want to make a difference in the life of children. However, we understand this commitment may mean different things to different people. It is essential that we clearly articulate our expectations of what we want teachers to produce. Third, most educators value positive feedback from their supervisor and will work hard to ensure their performance meets the expectations. We decided to capitalize on this and took deliberate steps to ensure that school and divisional goals were coordinated and focused on meeting specific targets. We wanted all directors, principals, teachers, and staff working toward similar evaluation goals to ensure we were successful. Everyone had goals which were specific to them but aligned to divisional goals that had to be met.

In order to align improvement goals and evaluation goals, a thorough understanding of data is essential. Specifically, there needs to be a clear understanding of what actions, strategies, procedures, and initiatives must occur to allow the division or school growth targets to be met. It is critical that you move beyond simply identifying growth percentages because often this is an ineffective way to ensure academic growth. It is often much more effective to actually identify the names of students that will need to pass to
meet state and federal accountability standards instead of stating the broad goal of a 10% increase in scores among special education students. The entire focus and energy of any teaching staff will change when the 12 special education children who failed last year are highlighted as those who need to pass this year to meet accountability measures. It is also important to move beyond identification and have an action plan on how these students will be taught differently this year to allow them to experience success.

With the implementation of the new division evaluation process in 2012, we provided principals with sample teacher evaluation goals. These goals were tied to SOL and benchmark assessment results and were designed so that if all the teachers met their goals, the school and division would meet improvement targets. Principal goals were developed by central office directors in a similar manner and became the school improvement goals as well.

This process was designed to specifically communicate to each individual ownership in the process of moving the school and the division forward. We knew from past experience that simply directing teachers to utilize the curriculum frameworks did not cause them to change their practice. However, if one of their evaluation goals is to increase student achievement on benchmarks throughout the year, and they understand the benchmark is derived directly from the curriculum frameworks, a different course of action would ensue. Teachers by nature tend to work very hard. Assigning goals in this manner tends to ensure that teachers are working hard on the right things. If everyone works together and pulls in the same direction, we shall get much further.

**Practical Principle: You Can’t Hide Anyone**

Prior to the latest economic downturn, funding was not an issue in Wise County. Therefore, if a school had a problem with a teacher who couldn’t effectively teach students as evidenced by SOL scores, the teacher was simply moved into a non-critical area and another teacher hired. In reviewing this underperforming teacher’s personnel folder from that time period, it would likely contain positive evaluations. All of this changed with the recession.
Over a period of just a few years, Wise County Schools lost about one-fourth of its entire budget due to state, federal, and local cutbacks. Since staffing is the majority of any school division budget, many positions were lost over that time period. Six small high schools were consolidated into three high schools to more efficiently utilize staff. Staffing cuts were accomplished by attrition. When a teacher retired or was non-renewed, he or she was simply not replaced. Teachers were shifted from other grade levels/disciplines or other schools with surpluses to fill vacant positions.

The process of shrinking the staff through attrition caused us to pay for the sins of our past. Positions had to be filled, and we had to fill them with teachers already employed rather than hiring new ones. The teachers who were moved into non-testing areas were suddenly teaching SOL classes. This caused tremendous drops in SOL test scores in some areas. We also discovered that even teachers in non-testing grades still had a detrimental impact on our results because they were simply not educating children at an acceptable level.

A superintendent could walk into a principals’ meeting in virtually any school division and ask the administrators to write down the names of their five worst teachers who consistently failed to produce results. The superintendent could compile that list and pull those teachers’ evaluations. A significant portion of these most ineffective teachers would have proficient if not exemplary evaluations. We must begin to deal with ineffective teachers through the evaluation process. We must keep in mind that our primary responsibility is providing a quality education to students. One of the greatest injustices we commit as leaders is allowing incompetent teachers to work with children. This is not fair to the students, it is not fair to the next teacher, and it is not fair to the school and the division. The success of all schools depends on effective evaluations which reward teacher competency and possesses a series of consequences (including dismissal if necessary) for those teachers who fail to perform.
Practical Principle: Provide Oversight

We fully understood that we were asking our building level administrators to assume responsibility for an extremely time-consuming and difficult task. It is very difficult for most to hold a wonderful person (who happens to be a horrible teacher) accountable for their poor performance. Nobody wants to be the bad guy who looks that very nice person in the eyes and tells him or her that his or her performance is unacceptable. However, for student achievement to improve, this had to be done.

We also understood that many of our teachers were anxious about the new evaluation system. The idea of the majority of the evaluation rating derived from student achievement was a big shift from where we were before. Teachers worried about the uncertainty of something new and posed many questions regarding the process. Some were as follows: Would this be done fairly? Are they doing this to get rid of me? What if the principal simply doesn’t like me or my teaching style doesn’t match their leadership style?

In order to address these issues, we decided to put our evaluation system online to help ensure we could more effectively ensure consistency, honesty, and fairness. This made the process much more transparent between the teacher, the principal, and the central office. Principals knew we were monitoring this process on a daily basis. This encouraged them to spend time in the classrooms and to create meaningful summative evaluations. We also knew which teachers had been performing poorly and we expected administrators to respond appropriately to this lack of performance. Teachers knew there was more oversight from the central office, which provided some protections for arbitrary and capricious evaluations.

Central office directors monitored this process closely, especially regarding teachers with consistently low student performance. Principals were expected to address these individuals through evaluation. Goals were developed to help these low performing teachers meet expectations. If principals
did not address these teachers effectively, central office directors intervened with that principal in real time.

**Practical Principle: Provide Support**

Principals felt like they would put themselves out on a limb if they put a teacher on an improvement plan, and someone would likely saw off that limb behind them. They needed the reassurance that they would be supported throughout the process. We decided to provide that support by walking with them through the improvement plan process every step of the way. Central office directors participated in the meetings with the principal and the teacher. The directors also directly observed the teacher if there was a possibility an improvement plan was necessary. The principal and the director collaborated on the appropriate documentation throughout the entire process. While this process is not easy, principals understand that they are not in it alone.

**Summary**

Even prior to the state mandate, we wanted our evaluations to be focused on student achievement. Very intensive training was provided to principals and assistant principals to make sure they could evaluate teachers per division expectations and that the entire process would have a positive impact on student achievement. We made sure all evaluation goals were aligned to division and school improvement goals. Ineffective staff members were addressed through the evaluation process, and incompetent teachers began to receive poor evaluations. The central office provided a significant amount of oversight in the overall evaluation process so that division expectations were met. Central office staff also supported principals to the greatest degree in the evaluation process, especially with regards to improvement plans.

At one point, our evaluations were simply a formal process that had to be completed. Our human resources director had a list and we checked off the names when their evaluations came into the central office. Little attention was given to the quality of those evaluations or if they actually positively impacted
the instructional program. We had low expectations, and most of our principals were not interested in going beyond the basic minimum. However, we developed an evaluation system that is comprehensive in nature and coordinated it to the school/division’s academic priorities. It is now an essential tool by which we can improve academic achievement.
CHAPTER 8: DISCIPLINE

Hope N. Reason: Keep the “Main Thing” the Main Thing

In December, Reason met with the Crossroads County Schools’ assistant superintendent, Constance Kaios. The purpose for this segment of the internship was to study how a school division maintained focus on its primary mission. Dr. Kaios was extremely passionate, caring, dedicated, and a relentless worker. She cared deeply about students and her staff. Since she possessed a firm belief that everyone should be a life-long learner, she attended several professional development opportunities to further her education each year. Dr. Kaios read a number of books, attended state/national conferences, and participated in every webinar that she could find.

At their meeting, Dr. Kaios explained that one of the greatest responsibilities was to keep the division on the cutting edge. She made sure that Crossroads was involved in every pilot program the state implemented. Any new instructional strategies that gained national attention were fully implemented and a significant amount of money was spent on innovative programs.

Dr. Kaios also explained that to the greatest extent possible, she worked to create a process to accomplish division goals. When the director of instruction ran into resistance in the implementation of a new strategy, Dr. Kaios recommended that all teachers be required to submit lesson plans demonstrating implementation of that strategy. Also, Dr. Kaios created the position of assessment coordinator to develop and implement division benchmarks.

Reason was concerned with what she had just heard, but she was not surprised. She had been living with this constant state of change as a principal in the division for a semester by this point. She voiced her concerns to Dr. Kaios and stated that sometimes an organization must stop implementing new things and get down to the work at hand. Reason also mentioned that her teachers had faithfully turned in
the lesson plans which demonstrated 100% implementation of the new strategy. However, on many occasions Reason secretly observed formerly successful teachers ditching this in favor of what made them successful when they thought no one was looking. Reason explained that she was a firm believer in assessment, but the division benchmarks were not aligned to the state standards. In addition to this fact, nothing was done with the benchmark results afterwards. Dr. Kaios was visibly shaken by Reason’s honest remarks.

After the meeting, Dr. Kaios reflected on the conversation. Could Reason be right? Could she (Dr. Kaios) be leading Crossroads County Schools down a road to nowhere? For the next few days, Dr. Kaios could not get the words of Reason out of her head. She determined that things needed to change.

**The Wise County Experience**

When working on our story, we debated using the term “discipline” to title this chapter. This term has many different meanings and not all are positive when used in a context such as ours. We certainly did not employ any punitive tactics or require mindless obedience of anyone. To give the reader a better insight into our semantics, consider the following synonyms: self-control, orderliness, and regulation. Also, consider the following antonyms: chaos, disorder, and confusion. Our definition of discipline is more about discipline of thought and actions.

Human organizations are not very adept at successfully addressing many complex problems at the same time. Wise County Schools is certainly one of these imperfect organizations. Oftentimes, schools have too many priorities, and most go unaccomplished. We realized that in order to move forward, we had to select a very limited number of priorities and abandon the others. We made a deliberate decision to reduce the number of initiatives and programs to ensure we were highly successful with the important initiatives we retained.

Our disciplined approach made us look at how we conducted business. We knew our vision was to increase student achievement, but the degree of improvement we wanted had eluded us in previous
years. We began to look at all aspects of the division to ensure everything was geared toward improving student achievement.

As we analyzed our operations, we quickly understood that many positive things were happening, but little was coordinated to provide us with maximum impact. As we became better organized and focused, the vast majority of the school division’s programs and initiatives began to flow in the same unified direction. Funding, instruction, assessment, and evaluation all came together for the first time to support a common goal. This alignment of effort and resources was specifically designed to alter outcomes in a positive manner.

We analyzed every function of the school division and evaluated its usefulness toward our improvement goals. Some programs were not required by state or federal mandates, nor did they help to meet our goals; they didn’t seem to have any significant value to the entire instructional program. These soon ceased to be. Other areas were identified as marginally useful in improving goals, and these were improved to help the division to achieve the desired end results.

It is important to note that we didn’t ignore the non-tested disciplines such as fine arts or physical education. We understand the importance of a well-rounded education, and we made a commitment that we would maintain a balance throughout this process. Funding was not cut toward these programs, and we have excellent fine arts, band, choral, art, and physical education opportunities for our students.

**Practical Principle: Deliberately Act to Yield Desired Results**

We took very deliberate actions on our march to improve student achievement. We made sure what we did was very simple, so everyone would understand what was going on. The need for simplicity was not an indictment on the capabilities of our staff but was based on our belief that simple gets done and complex confuses everyone.

We very carefully considered potential unintended consequences. For example, early on in this process, we determined from an analysis of our SOL data, benchmarks, and anecdotal information that many of our teachers were not using the curriculum frameworks very much to define what students
should know, understand, and be able to do. They simply relied on their textbooks or other materials. Discussion at one point turned to requiring teachers to use specific lesson plan templates to identify the level of rigor in the curriculum frameworks and align that to their instructional activities and assessments. Later in the conversation someone asked the following question: “Is it important what the teacher writes in the lesson plan or what the students know, understand, and can do?”

This question really hit at the heart of the matter. If we really wanted to find out if the teachers were successfully implementing the curriculum frameworks, we needed to look at end results rather than the intermediate step of lesson planning. We didn’t require the staff at the school or the division level to carefully monitor lesson plans. In addition, just because something is written in a plan book there would be no guarantees of positive results on the SOL test. Monitoring lesson plans was a more complex potential solution to a simple problem. We decided to enforce the implementation of the curriculum frameworks through monitoring highly aligned quarterly benchmarks.

**Practical Principle: Relentlessly Monitor Progress**

As we touched upon in Chapter 4, we faithfully monitored student performance throughout the year. Monitoring turned into action when expectations were not met. Many heart-to-heart conversations occurred between individuals in which teachers received the message that their performance was unacceptable. We understood that if certain people don’t think someone is watching, they are less likely to be as productive. In Wise County, every employee knows there are multiple eyes looking at his or her results. Few of us would maintain the speed limit on the interstate if we knew all of the state troopers were on vacation.

Principals in our schools encounter a variety of problems every day and every hour. Besides leading the instructional program, they find themselves in the middle of all of the social issues of the communities such as feuds between families, drug problems, parental neglect, etc. While these issues are external in nature, they do impact students and must be addressed in the schools. However, our principals
understand that their primary charge is to improve the educational outcomes for our students, and they maintain the self-discipline they need to get this done.

Similarly, central office employees face many distractions such as state, local, and federal political issues, funding shortfalls, and community relation issues just to mention a few. Many of these issues must be addressed in order to keep the division afloat, but dealing with these does not ensure positive educational outcomes for our students. We must maintain the discipline to “keep the main thing the main thing” and effectively and continually monitor student achievement.

**Practical Principle: Make Tough Decisions**

The staff of Wise County Public Schools has been faced with many tough decisions during the last few years. Through it all, we were able to make decisions based on furthering our goal of improving student achievement. At times, these decisions were certainly not popular with some of our constituents, including some school board members, some principals, and some teachers.

Some of the toughest decisions have centered on personnel. We understood that in order to improve student achievement, we have to employ highly effective staff members at all levels. The greatest influence on student achievement in a given classroom is the quality of the teacher. The greatest influence on student achievement in a given school is the educational leadership abilities of the principal. We knew that allowing individuals to occupy a position in which they were ineffective would not further our goal to improve student achievement.

It is very difficult to sit down with a person who is likable, is a pillar of the community, and a loyal supporter of the division and tell him or her that his or her performance is unacceptable. It is even less palatable to tell this same person that if his or her performance does not improve that he or she will not be allowed to hold that position next year. However, it is critical to honestly evaluate all staff members. It is equally as important to dismiss employees who cannot competently execute his or her duties.
Not everyone is designed to be an effective teacher, an effective assistant principal, an effective principal, or an effective central office administrator. People can find themselves in a position for which they are not particularly suited, especially when paradigms shift and expectations change. School divisions cannot expect to move forward unless every employee can successfully execute the tasks assigned. When an individual cannot do this, it is imperative to find someone who can.

Summary

All educational leaders need to find that balance between what is truly effective and what is simply a fad. They also need to understand that most building level administrators have full plates, and they will need to reduce some other responsibility if they hope to add another task to the job. We need to constantly look for ways to “unpack the sack” and eliminate trivial and unnecessary practices. Keep in mind that the power of the laser beam has always been with us. It was only when that light was concentrated and focused that it became an effective tool to be utilized. Unfocused light can still provide some direction, but it can’t be used to its fullest extent.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Each school division’s journey toward academic excellence must be an individual process, and it must be tailored to the unique needs of that school division. There are no “silver bullets”, no right way, no one-way approach, and no easy paths. As we have stated in the preceding chapters, this document was not written as a manifesto of how to improve other school divisions. Instead, it is an analysis of what Wise County Public Schools did to achieve extraordinary academic results. It is our hope that these strategies, practices, concepts, and initiatives will help to stimulate ideas and help to structure the school improvement process for others.

From our experiences, including both our failures and our successes, we have developed the firm belief that improving student achievement is not about money, programs, or some innovative instructional practice. Academic excellence will not be gained from finding that one perfect curriculum model or that one exceptional instructional delivery idea. Instructional leaders must abandon the idea that they can purchase or implement a specific program to transform their schools or divisions.

Part of the good news we have gleaned from our experiences in Wise County is that the transformation process is not directly connected to revenue. The vast majority of initiatives, programs, and ideas we implemented didn’t cost a significant amount of money. However, the things that transformed our division did consume a great deal of time and required considerable personal investment. Leaders must fully understand the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of his or her division/school.

Superintendents and principals must not waste time dealing with the various symptoms associated with poor academic health, but instead, must develop a cure for the disease itself. We must confront this issue on a holistic level and change the basic way of how we do business. Increasing student achievement required a laser-focused approach to what and how we addressed each challenge that was between us and our academic goals. We have to know where we are, where we want to be, and how we are going to get there. It also required that we make a number of difficult personnel decisions. School
leaders who fail to honestly and effectively address the issue of incompetency, poor teaching, and inadequate instructional leadership are doomed to fail.

Too many school divisions are wandering aimlessly through the dark and bleak school improvement forest looking for salvation and leadership. They focus on blaming others for their failures, shifting responsibility to others, and making excuses for why their students are not being successful instead of charting a course that will lift them from the dark and into the light. They continue to expend energy, time, and resources on this meaningless journey through school reform, and they eventually wear down even the most strong and dedicated educators. School reform has, and will always be, about leadership. We must avoid the traps, diminish the noise and rhetoric, and focus on our people.

Although it can become much more complicated, much of what we have experienced in Wise County can be summarized in five simple principles or statements. Firstly, we must develop expectations and standards for academic excellence. We must be committed to these expectations, and we have to be willing to suffer to improve student achievement because it will not materialize without personal commitment. Secondly, we must communicate these expectations and standards to all stakeholders, and we must ensure the vast majority of these stakeholders buy in to a commonly held vision that involves curriculum alignment, pacing guides, and instructional practices. Thirdly, we must chart a practical course of action that will move us from where we are to where we want to be. Again, this will take a great deal of investment from everyone, and this must be a collaborative process. Fourthly, we must constantly review the data, make adjustments when necessary, and learn to distinguish between what matters and what is simply “fluff”. Finally, school improvement is not about improving schools. It is about improving people, and we must remain focused on the most important asset we have in our educational system. We must ensure our efforts help to improve our classroom teachers and our principals, so they will have the necessary resources, vision, and energy to help all students reach their potential.

In beginning this journey, realize that no plan, no curriculum, and no instructional practice have ever transformed a school. These items are merely tools, and while they are vastly important, we must
have highly skilled and dedicated staff to use these tools to make works of art. This revelation appeared many years ago during an end-of-the-year faculty meeting. The school had experienced a great deal of academic success that year, and the staff were attempting to identify what had made the difference. One of the teachers stated the school was successful because of a great curriculum and another argued that the instructional approach had made the difference. A third teacher argued that remediation and enrichment programs had the most impact.

The discussion continued until one of the strongest teachers said they were all wrong. The library fell silent and all attention turned to her. In a confident voice, she stated the school was successful because the staff cared about each other, the staff cared about students, and the staff believed in each other. She didn’t work hard because she wanted to improve the school, to help out the school division, or to be the best school in the Commonwealth. She gave everything she had because she believed in her heart that we were child-centered, we were making a difference in the lives of students, and it was the right thing to do. She was relentless in her efforts to help students because she would not disappoint her fellow colleagues. She didn’t make the personal sacrifices to be a Blue-Ribbon School or to be ranked number one, but she gave everything because she believed in the cause. There is a great deal of truth in her statements, and it would serve us well to remember the power of individuals when they are fighting for a cause in which they believe. These are only the type of people who have, and who will continue, to change the world.
At the end of Reason’s first year in Crossroads, Constance Kaios retired. She had faithfully served as the assistant superintendent for many years. When it came time to name Kaios’ replacement, Dr. Time, the division superintendent, felt that Reason would be the right person for the job. Reason had influenced many individuals throughout the year as she worked with central office personnel during her internship. The ideas she brought forth led people to an understanding that Crossroads County Schools needed to change the way business was conducted. Of course, Reason accepted the job when she received the offer.

Reason set to work immediately on the plan to improve student achievement. She knew that she had to have support from the top to proceed. Reason worked with Dr. Time to set up a retreat for the school board to discuss the improvement process. During this meeting, Reason explained to the board members that there would likely be complaints from teachers and principals about some of the necessary initiatives. Some of the components of the plan, such as increased rigor on assessments, data reporting, and increased focus on evaluations would likely move some out of their comfort area. After Reason explained all of this, she asked the board and the superintendent if they would support this process. She stated that friends or relatives of board members may be some of the individuals who could be negatively impacted. She also told them that if they were not comfortable moving ahead to let her know right then. There would be no use in attempting implementation without board support. While a few board members reluctantly agreed, the majority wholeheartedly supported the plan of Reason.

The next phase of Reason’s attack was to work with the principals. She understood that virtually all of the research demonstrated that principals were one of the most critical variables in the success of a school. The principal established the vision for the school, determined the focus and direction,
established priorities, evaluated the teachers, and held the most influence in each building. Throughout the summer, Reason and her central office team worked with principals to get them ready for real gains in student achievement. They spent a great deal of time making sure principals understood what were the most important elements that would positively impact student achievement. She also made sure principals understood they would be supported throughout the process. They collaboratively eliminated many unnecessary programs, requirements, and reports which had no impact on academic achievement.

The last phase of Reason’s plan to effect positive change was to work with the key instructional leaders from around the district. These individuals are the most influential teachers in each building, who other teachers look to for professional guidance. Reason and her central office team gathered the key instructional leaders to explain the plan and get their input. She told this group that they were key players in this process, and she needed their help to make it happen. They discussed the plan, solicited input, made the necessary modifications, and eventually produced a plan that had a great deal of common investment.

When the new school year began, the plan was implemented. There were some challenges along the way, but Reason worked hard to make sure issues were resolved in a fair and equitable manner while maintaining focus on the path forward. She supported principals by maintaining constant communication and protecting them from the queries of some less than enthusiastic school board members. Luckily, the majority of the school board fully supported the improvement efforts. At the end of the year, Crossroads County Public Schools posted some significant student achievement gains relative to the rest of the state. For years to come, the staff of the division was very thankful that Reason had finally come to Crossroads.

The Wise County Experience

The conclusion to the Hope N. Reason story does not follow the general organization of this work. We did not develop our plan to increase student achievement as did Reason. We had a general idea of what needed to happen, but there was no comprehensive and deliberate plan at first. We saw success in some areas and continued working toward the improvement goals. However, after much
reflection, we have determined that Reason’s plan would have been much better. The order in which she approached the different groups was very important. Had we done it her way, we could have realized improvement in a much timelier manner. We would utilize a three-pong attack if we re-started this process. The following is a brief description of that process. It is also important to note that this process is sequential in nature. For example, no school division will ever realize success if it can’t get a commitment from the school board and superintendent to establish priorities and to support the tough decisions.

**Practical Principle: Gain Consensus Among Superintendent and School Board Members**

School board members are political creatures who are by nature very sensitive to the concerns of their constituents. In many divisions, school board members are directly elected by their constituents. School board members come to the table with a wide variety of ideals about education. Some individuals are former school employees such as principals or teachers. Others have no educational experience at all.

However, it is very difficult for a school board member to look into the eyes of a constituent, friend or relative who has received a negative evaluation and not be sympathetic to some degree. School board members must be made explicitly aware of the implications of implementing an effective improvement plan. They must then decide whether or not they can support the plan, regardless of the personal or political costs associated with the plan. If the majority of the board cannot do so, the process stops there.

**Practical Principle: Get Your Principals on Board**

Many studies have shown that principals have a great deal of impact on the performance of a school. Principals must play a key role in any improvement process. Central office personnel must make sure that principals have a voice in the process and are very well informed throughout. If a principal doesn’t support the process, it won’t happen in that school. Highly effective principals are one of the most important variables in this entire process, and quality people must staff these positions.
Practical Principle: Get Your Key Instructional Leaders On Board

Teachers are the individuals who actually earn the scores that are reported at the school and division level. Each school has at least one very influential teacher who all of the others look to for guidance. This leadership structure may be very informal, but it exists. These key instructional leaders must also be given opportunities to provide feedback and be part of the decision making process. Often times, such teachers can be an invaluable source of valid and practical ideas. Also, they can make or break the process by what they communicate to other teachers. Wise leaders will certainly earn the support of key instructional leaders.

Summary

While we did not implement our improvement efforts exactly in the order we described above, we did all these things along our journey. If we could do it all over again, we would have approached our improvement plan in a much more orchestrated manner by obtaining the support of the school board, then the principals, and then the key instructional leaders in each building. If we could not earn the support of any of those groups, the process would come to a screeching halt. If the school board didn’t support the process, they could simply undo what was done, or find a new superintendent who would not follow that same path. If the principals didn’t support the process, they would not ensure it was done in their schools. If the key instructional leaders didn’t support the process, they could sabotage implementation at the classroom level by making negative comments to other teachers.

We fully understand this entire process is extremely complicated, and there is nothing easy that is associated with comprehensive school improvement. Many have failed to realize improvement, regardless of great intentions and extraordinary effort. However, all of us entered into education to make a difference. In the end, let us make sure we have been committed to improving the lives of the students under our charge. In this way, we can ensure the next generation of teachers and administrators are being
prepared to take our place and continue the legacy. If we do the right things and we have the necessary resolve, character, commitment, and dedication, then our students will learn, grow, and flourish in what they do long after we have retired from the field.
REFERENCES


