

## Hope Is Not A Strategy

Jan. 28, 2019

In my previous Monday message, I shared information about the reality of our school and district performance that sparked several conversations and exposed the fact that our past performances do not have to predict our future reality.

In order to change reality, we must be courageous enough to accept responsibility for where we are, own the results and collectively commit to taking action to make things better. I am convinced that we each have within us the power to act, make things better and meet any challenge that is before us if we commit to doing what is required and remain consistent in our efforts. Where we are in the present is an indication of decisions, actions and efforts of the past, but our future will be based on the actions and effort we engage in today. Specifically, we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we must take deliberate actions to improve our school and district performance.

Our guiding intent is to accelerate student learning and close the achievement gaps during the next three years, but **hope is not a strategy and luck will not be a factor**. In order to achieve our goal of being the Top in Tarrant County, we must do more than talk or hope for it, we must take action. The strategic actions we will take will fall directly or indirectly in the following categories.



### 1. Increase instructional time on task

We know that, in some cases, a student will need more time to learn a concept than what is provided. However, it is imperative to protect the time set aside for instruction and use the entire allotted time as it is designed. It is virtually impossible for a student, who is already behind, to be expected to miraculously improve without the proper use of instructional time already allotted. In addition to this allotted time, students who are struggling need even more time than what is arranged. This is when tutorials, pullouts, interventions, before school, after school, summer academies, spring break academies and other strategies come into place. **We have to think about time differently and view it as a commodity that we must use to our advantage.** We must be deliberate and intentional about who needs what, and that the efforts are targeted on specific students and specific needs. Anything other than this level of specificity would be the same as a doctor who prescribes the same medicine for everyone. This is the “why” behind the data wall and assessment system we have put into place. The system is designed to produce results that we can then respond to by increasing instructional time, modifying instructional approach and/or engaging in some other type of modification to our practice.

### 2. Improve the alignment of resources, systems, structures and supports

Research is clear that teaching a guaranteed and viable curriculum that is available to all is a key achievement gap closing strategy. We have been creating and aligning our curriculum resources and structures to create the best conditions for success. There are current structures that need continued refining, and we are engaged in that work in preparation for the future. A structure that is critical to the improvement of our district is collaborative planning in the form of professional learning communities. I am convinced that for us to ensure the best for our students, participation in collaborative planning is essential and can no longer be optional. Through this teamwork, we will uncover best practices from within and have the opportunity to scale what works and identify positive deviants. I believe in the philosophy that iron sharpens iron, and I am convinced that we grow better and faster when we collaborate with each other. **Attendance and participation in collaborative planning with colleagues on campus is a non-negotiable expectation.** This is not required in every district, nor in every school, but for us to get from where we are to where we want to be, this will be required for our team moving forward.

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### 3. Improve classroom instructional capacity and instructional leadership capacity

Study after study continues to confirm that the most important variable in whether students learn, grow and accelerate is the instructional ability of the classroom teacher. Research is conclusive that the classroom teacher's capacity has the most direct impact on the level of learning that individual students experience. In addition, when looking at overall school performance, it is the instructional leadership capacity of the campus administrator that has the greatest impact on overall school performance. It is because of this that we have developed and continue to refine our professional learning opportunities. As adults, it is imperative that we adopt and exhibit growth mindsets and commit to continued learning. We all must recognize that the knowledge we gained in the past is not sufficient, and we must be continuously learning as we prepare students for their futures. Continued attendance and embracing of professional learning is a must for where we are attempting to move our district.

### 4. Improve engagement and connections

Students are more likely to have positive experiences if they are connected to social groups, clubs or other activities. In addition, the more students are engaged with relevant material, the more likely they are to engage in learning. For the students we serve, social connections are critical and relationships mean the most. As we move forward, it is important that we are intentional about connecting with all students, but especially those students who appear to be disconnecting or underperforming. For many students, all they need is a caring adult who sees something in them that they may not have noticed. Others just need a reason to perform or a relationship with a person or group that recognizes and encourages high performance. Positive peer pressure is one of the most powerful tools we have, and it is our responsibility to create vehicles that we can leverage to manufacture what is needed for success.

### 5. Improve relationships

We all recognize that relationships are critical, and caring relationships are difference makers with the potential to be game changers. No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship. The right kind of relationship will cause students to excel at levels unimaginable.

At a high level, all actions we take will connect to these areas. This is not an all-inclusive list, but it does represent a comprehensive grouping of our current and future efforts. As we get closer to the state assessment, it is imperative that our focus becomes sharper. Time is critical, and we must use the time in the most productive way possible to produce the results we desire. Tier 1 instruction remains necessary and student interventions are even more critical. We will be working with campus administrators on short-term action plans as we enter into testing season. We are sharpening our focus to change the performance trajectory of our schools and district.

We create the future with our daily actions. We must act with intention, be deliberate in our efforts, commit to the plan and be consistent in the implementation of the plan. The challenge before us is not an easy one, but it is one that is possible. Tomorrow will be different, not because we hoped it so, but because we made it so today.

With gratitude,



Mike McFarland