

Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Raising the Bar: Teacher Expectations and Student Performance

In a Nutshell

Teacher expectations play a very significant role in students' aspirations for college attendance and their motivation to do what's necessary for admission and ultimate success. Teachers are especially influential when the student is the first in the family to attend college. Fortunately, there are numerous strategies that principals can use to encourage teachers to support student aspirations and help to prepare them for college programs.

Virtually every study of schools that encourage students to attend and succeed in college concludes that a key element is high expectations for all students and a belief that all students can do well in high school and prepare for post-secondary education. An earlier [Research into Practice Brief](#) summarized the characteristics of this belief that is embedded in the school's culture.

COLLEGE GOING CULTURES

College going cultures are likely to exist in schools where:

- Students are expected to achieve high academic standards in a college preparatory curriculum
- The school staff is collectively committed to students' college goals
- College is a visual reality (There are symbols of colleges and successful students on display.)
- Informal and formal communication networks promote and support college expectations

Fundamental precursors to creating a college going culture include:

- A commitment from the school leadership team and staff
- An understanding that all teachers and counselors are college counselors
- A dedication to a partnership model of college preparation that includes active involvement from teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents

But what happens when school faculty, leadership or staff don't really believe that their students are capable of success in post-secondary education? Or that "college isn't for kids like ours." What messages do students get if the adults in their school are not fully committed to the idea that they can prepare for and succeed in college? The answer is not encouraging. According to a large-scale study by the Center for American Progress (CAP) (Boser, 2014), teacher expectations are very powerful in affecting student outcomes. Their study found:

✦ **High school students whose teachers have higher expectations about their future success are far more likely to graduate from college.** All else equal, 10th grade students who had teachers with higher expectations were more than three times more likely to graduate from college than students who had teachers with lower expectations. In other words, the expectations of teachers showed a very strong predictive relationship with college graduation rates. It cannot be said for sure that teacher expectations boosted college graduation rates. It is also possible that teachers with lower expectations were more likely to teach traditionally disadvantaged students who are less likely to succeed in colleges. It is also possible

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that teachers might simply be very good at figuring out who will graduate from college, regardless of the students they teach.

✦ **Secondary teachers have lower expectations for students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.** Secondary teachers predicted that high-poverty students were 53 percent less likely to earn a college diploma than their more affluent peers. They also believed that African American students were 47 percent less likely to graduate from college than their white peers. Finally, they believed that Hispanic students were 42 percent less likely to earn a college diploma than their white peers.

✦ **College-preparation programs and other factors that support higher expectations are significant predictors of college graduation rates.** High school students who enroll in college-preparation programs are more likely to graduate from college—all else equal—as are students who indicate that they work hard in high school. In short, students who have more rigorous academic opportunities and experiences—including opportunities to practice and gain knowledge—are more likely to succeed academically.

Just as important, CAP reports, “Expectations also often have long-term effects. For example, education researchers in the Netherlands found that biased teacher expectations at the end of primary school predicted secondary school outcomes. Psychologists from the University of Michigan and Rutgers University concluded that teacher expectations can predict student achievement for years. Specifically, they found that teacher expectations in sixth and seventh grade predicted student achievement six years later.”

Raising Expectations

Clearly, it is worth the school leader’s time and energy to promote positive attitudes and high expectations among his or her faculty in support of their students’ college aspirations. Equally, clear, though, is that simply admonishing teachers to have higher expectations or to avoid low expectations will not accomplish much. But some strategies have been shown to be pretty effective in promoting high expectations and the kind of support that is necessary to help students achieve their college goals.

Creating A Vision

Dewey Hensley was named principal of one of the lowest performing schools in Louisville, KY. Under his leadership, the school doubled its proficiency rates in math and reading and became one of only 17% in the district to meet “annual yearly progress.” His first week on the job, Hensley drew a picture of a school on poster board and asked the faculty to annotate it. “Let’s create a vision of a school that’s perfect,” he recalls telling them, adding: “When we get there, then we’ll rest.” Hensley, the first person in his extended family to graduate from high school and then college, sought to instill in his staff the idea that all children could learn, with appropriate support. “I understand the power of a school to make a difference in a child’s life,” he says. “They [all] have to have someone who will give them dreams they may not have” (Knapp, 2010).

Creating a Climate

A “healthy school environment,” as Vanderbilt researchers call it (Goldring, et. al., 2007), is characterized by basics like safety and orderliness, as well as less tangible qualities such as a “supportive, responsive” attitude toward the children and a sense by teachers that they are part of a community of professionals focused on good instruction.

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One former principal, in reflecting on his experiences, recalled a typical staff meeting years ago at a school where "morale never seemed to get out of the basement." Discussion centered on "field trips, war stories about troubled students, and other management issues" rather than matters like "using student work and data to fine-tune teaching." Almost inevitably, teacher pessimism was a significant barrier, with teachers regarding themselves as "hardworking martyrs in a hopeless cause." (Knapp, 2010).

To change this kind of climate - and begin to combat teacher isolation, closed doors, negativism, defeatism and teacher resistance - the most effective principals focus on building a sense of school community, with the attendant characteristics. These include respect for every member of the school community; "an upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment;" and efforts to involve staff and students in a variety of activities, many of them schoolwide (Portin, et. al., 2009).

Another critical feature of this college-going climate is the nature of the relationship between students and their teachers. Teachers – all of whom are college-educated and, in the eyes of their students and non-college educated parents – “know the ropes,” have a huge effect on students’ college aspirations and motivations. If teachers convey the message that “you can do this...and I know because I’ve been there,” students are more likely to aspire to college and take the necessary steps in their high school programs to assure college admission and ultimate success. This is especially true if the teacher comes from a background similar to that of the students they teach. The power of a message that says, “I came from where you are, and I made it...and so can you” is almost immeasurable. Although teachers often feel that what they say isn’t heard by their students, when it comes to academic matters and assessments of their intellectual performance, high school kids tend to believe their teachers more than anyone else. It’s an awesome responsibility (ASCD, 2016).

Principals’ Practices in Turn Around Schools

Schools that are successful in boosting teacher expectations and student success share several key practices.

Changing the Narrative. Principals in higher performing schools structure meetings and conversations in such a way to focus on students’ abilities and aspirations rather than their shortcomings. Although they are empathic and supportive of teachers who may be struggling with challenging students, they don’t engage in conversations that disparage student abilities; instead, they focus the conversation on improving instruction or proven management strategies. In staff meetings, instead of inviting griping, they asked teachers to tell stories of success and achievement and offer their colleagues tips and suggestions for raising student performance.

Classroom Observation and Coaching. Whether they call it formal evaluation, classroom visits or learning walks, principals intent on promoting growth in both students and adults spend time in classrooms (or ensure that someone who's qualified does), observing and commenting on what's working well and what is not. Moreover, they shift the pattern of the annual evaluation cycle to one of ongoing and informal interactions with teachers. These principals frequently observed classroom instruction for short periods of time, making 20 to 60 observations a week, and most of the observations were spontaneous (Louis, et. al., 2010).

Accept the Power of Teachers and the School. Most teachers, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds themselves, can point to a teacher or two who helped them raise their aspirations and attain their college goals. The evidence on parent support for student achievement is actually mixed for children whose parents lack education themselves

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and, therefore, are unable to provide guidance about school success or college preparation. In these cases, it comes down to the most educated people in the community – usually teachers – to provide help and support.

Digging Into Data. According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), ‘When it comes to data, effective principals try to draw the most from statistics and evidence, having “learned to ask useful questions” of the information, to display it in ways that tell “compelling stories” and to use it to promote “collaborative inquiry among teachers” (Portin, et. al., 2009). They view data as a means not only to pinpoint problems but to understand their nature and causes’ (Seashore Louis, 2010).

Using Data to Raise Expectations

Schools are buried in data -- so much that it’s easy for principals and teachers to throw up their hands in frustration and give up trying to understand it all. However, it’s not necessary that everyone in the school be a statistician or data wonk. The key is to turn data into information that is useful in making instructional decisions and boosting student achievement. Effective principals help their teachers understand critical data and lead them in a process to turn it into useful information that informs their teaching. Helpful practices include the following.

Calibrate Expectations. Tonya Singer suggests that teachers start with student work and “collaborate to calibrate expectations. Use exemplars of student work to define together what success looks like for each grade level and content area. Use shared rubrics to get specific about the criteria of success, and collaborate to compare how you score the same work sample using the same rubric. As you discuss different approaches to scoring, justify your thinking with evidence from the rubric and the students’ work. (This is also an excellent collaborative activity to do with students to make learning criteria visible, build evaluation and justification skills, and support self-reflection and revision)” (Singer, 2015).

Put Faces on the Data. To focus on improvement, “teachers need to combine *technical expertise* with a strong *emotional connection* to what they are looking at. The key is how to make important things personally important to the individual on both cognitive and affective grounds” (Sharratt and Fullan, 2012, p. 1). Effective principals encourage teachers not just to look at data, but to imagine the students that the data represents – the kids who are actually in their classes and depending on them for helping to achieve their aspirations.

Notice and Wonder. When teachers are given mountains of data, sometimes important things escape their notice. Principals who are successful in raising teacher expectations and student performance encourage them to *notice* facts and features of the data and *wonder* about why things are the way they are. Principals present a data set to teachers who are first asked to notice something that is contained in the data – a trend, an outlier, an inconsistency – and then offer possible explanations for the observations or pose suggestions for gathering additional data. The intent is to gain insight into what the data suggest, how the data may be connected and what the data imply (Venables, 2014).

Question the Data. This doesn’t mean to challenge its veracity (although sometimes that might be the case), but to ask questions the data might answer. The purpose is to get the data to yield information that is useful for planning instruction, solving a problem, or making a needed change (Venables, 2014; Williamson and Blackburn, 2016).

Here are some question prompts that can be used to look more deeply at the data.

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Suggested General Question Stems

- Why do you think this is the case?
- As you look ahead, what might you do with this . . . ?
- When you say . . . , what do you mean? What might be an example?
- What would you have to change in order for . . . ?
- What do you think would happen if . . . ?
- What criteria did you use to . . . ?
- What sort of impact do you think . . . would have on . . . ?
- What was your intention when . . . ?
- What's another way you might . . . ?

Question Stems for Deeper Conversation About Data

- What do you think this implies?
- What evidence do we have to support . . . ?
- What specific evidence do we have that . . . ?
- Why? How do you know?
- From . . .'s perspective, what might they find important?
- What are the big issues here rather than the secondary issues?
- What are the root causes of the issue?

The Bottom Line

One of the most powerful ways to change attitudes is to change how people *think* about a person or idea, and one of the most useful tools for principals is data and information. If data are presented in a clear, precise, and engaging fashion, and if people are asked to think about it in structured ways, the results are usually reasonable, informed, and positive. "Changing minds" about student abilities and aspirations can be difficult, but once they are changed, they can never return to old ways of thinking.

Professional Development in Your Own School

Oregon GEAR UP has developed a set of professional development discussions leaders can use with teachers and other educators at their school on the importance of high expectations. Those PD modules can be found at <http://oregongearup.org/resources/pd>.

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