Building Engaged Schools

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction — Global Competition

Combine the implications of the "flat world," as described by Thomas Friedman, and the new challenges your school district faces today that didn't exist 15 years ago. What can you say about the demands faced by America's schools? You may want to list the statements as you brainstorm the new demands of schools.

What is your reaction to the "message" of the book? (See p. 9.)

The Assumptions

Think about and react to the Peter Drucker quote introducing Chapter 1. (See p. 13.)

What are the lessons of the railroads and IBM PC for you? In what ways are these illustrations applicable or not applicable to America's schools today?

Partners may want to choose one of the assumptions and react to the assumption and the accompanying description. Do the assumptions seem fair or not? Do they describe what is happening in America's schools? Explain.

Do you agree or disagree with the statement that the assumptions "… reinforce the status quo in America's schools — and those who make policy for them — even as the world changes dramatically around them"? Why? (See p. 21.)

Standards and Accountability Testing

What is the evolution of No Child Left Behind according to the author? Do you agree with this assessment?

In your opinion, what ways are standards and accountability testing desirable? In what ways are they not desirable?

If you were seeking to improve America's schools and student learning, would you start nationally or locally, with outcomes or processes, with proficiency levels or value added?

In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the current testing requirements? How would you improve them?

In summary, what is your position on assumption 1: Higher expectations and accountability testing are the keys to ensuring that students are learning what they need to be successful in life?

Weakness Trap

What is your reaction to the Animal School parable?

Why is focusing on and improving weaknesses so powerful in our society?

The typical line is, "Anyone can do anything they want to, if ...." What are some of the "ifs" you have heard? Do you agree with the adage above? In what circumstances might you agree or disagree?

Is the description of teacher evaluation similar to the methodology in your district? Is it a weakness trap? How would you improve the process?

Engagement in the Classroom

Review the chart on p. 66 of the 2004 Gallup Poll characteristics of a "very successful school." In your opinion, what are the important points from the graph?

What, to you, is the meaning of "students challenged to develop their full potential"?

What is your explanation for the disengagement of many students from school?

If the Youth Poll comments from students are correct, what will it take to engage students in learning?

Pursuit of Strengths

What are Gallup's definitions for talents and strengths?

What is your reaction to the research on brain development cited and the source of our talents?

What are your thoughts after reading the research on strengths in the private sector and in education?

What is your reaction to Jim Hawkins' story? (See pp. 104-105.)

Engaged Teachers

Compare and contrast the constructs of knowledge, skills, and talents.

The fourth assumption asserts: There exists a perfect curriculum that can help solve student achievement problems in a way that works for all students and teachers. Do you agree that the assumption exists? What are the implications of the assumption for you?

Think about the examples from Gallup focus groups and other polls about quality teaching. What does quality teaching mean to you?

What Do They Do Differently?

Write the description of "Your Best Teacher." (See p. 142.) What are your descriptors like? Categorize the qualities as knowledge, skills, and talents. Where do the majority fall?

What is the core of Rogers' theory of constructive personality change? In your view, how does it apply or not apply to education and teachers?

Why did you choose to teach? What was your motivation?

How did your best teacher build relationships with students?

How do teachers activate learning? Share some of your observations of outstanding teachers.

Engaged Principals

What are your thoughts about "principal as manager and leader"? Where do principals spend most of their time? Where should principals spend their time? How does the district help or hinder principals from focusing on the important aspects of their role?

What is your reaction to the research that finds little direct effect of "instructional leadership" activities? Does the Bossert model make sense to you? What "instructional leadership" activities would have an effect on learning in Bossert's model? Which activities would likely have less of an affect?

Does the quote from *First, Break All the Rules* about managing by "remote control" resonate with you? (See p. 188.)

Think about and discuss the mission, vision, goals, expectation chain. (See pp. 195-198.)

What is your reaction to the three broad categories of motivation, relating, and empowering the staff Gallup found in its research of outstanding principals?

Does your district have succession programs in place to develop the next generation of school leaders? If not, why? Where would you start with such a plan?

Employee Engagement

Let's look at your school district. What is the annual turnover rate for teachers? What are the dollar costs of turnover for your district? (See pp. 216-217 and fill in your costs.)

What are your thoughts after reading the quote from John Goodlad about sick schools? (See p. 220.) Is it reasonable that teachers' working conditions can have as much to do with retention and productivity as salary?

Take some time to discuss the Q^{12} items and the engagement hierarchy generally. What do the questions suggest about productive workplaces? Do the questions seem too simple? Are there questions about which you are dubious?

Some detail is provided for each Q^{12} item that principals and school leaders should consider for their work groups. (See p. 230.) Taking each item, how can I use it to think about influencing the engagement of associates in my work group? What am I doing now, what should I keep doing? What am I not doing now that I should be doing?

Is it an oversimplification to say, "If we can't have great places for teachers to work, we won't have great places for students to learn"? (See p. 222.)

Engaged Communities

What efforts should we make to more actively involve the community inside the school so that they become advocates for what we are doing? Are we making the teacher/parent juncture a positive partnership? Is the parent/teacher relationship one-sided, with us telling parents about their son or daughter's weaknesses with little suggestion of what to do to help? Where does your school need to build on and improve?

What are the keys to the successful program examples for preschool/kindergarten and the elementary/middle school groups?

Evaluate the communications in your school and the school district. Are they one-way events with principals and district leaders telling the community information and PR efforts? Or, are there efforts to gather information and ideas from the community to form decisions?

In what ways do you have components of community schools in place? After-school child care would be an example. How can you incorporate more community programs so that the school is a hub for the community?

Conclusion

What is the lesson to be learned from the Best Buy example? (See pp. 273-275.) How does it apply to schools and the survival of public education?

How can principals and school district leaders begin to challenge the final assumption, help parents and community members break with the comfortable past, and constructively mobilize them for positive change? If you don't challenge the assumption, who will?

Is the prospect in David Matthews' quote real? (See p. 277.)

Review "Challenging the Assumptions." (See p. 278.) What steps can you take to implement new directions in these areas?

What are you taking away from *Building Engaged Schools*?