

Courage and Leadership

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Former AASA National Superintendent of the Year**



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Introduction

Courage comes in many forms. In the field of education, courage and true leadership that makes a positive difference involves a number of philosophies and action plans, including: : being accountable and establishing measurable results; setting high goals and not making excuses; standing up to detractors; never being satisfied with the status quo; communicating openly and honestly even when it is painful. Leaders who exhibit courage find that it can be a lonely position and may make them unpopular.

The serious business of schooling requires model leaders who know right from wrong and choose to do right. The leader who brings stakeholders to the table, including detractors, to seek their opinions on key decisions demonstrates the highest form of leadership, because it guarantees that information will be shared, while also building bridges that form the basis of personal relationships and respect. Ultimately, it is respect that will pay huge dividends for the leader and the organization.

The number one reason for leading courageously is the message it sends to the young people that courageous decisions are worth the sacrifice because they form the basis of our integrity and respect. The courage to merge a school district or to determine that no school will be disproportionate with its number of poor children reflects leadership. That kind of courage builds a place where students can excel.

Accountability

Traditionally, educators have been uncomfortable with the word “accountability.” Businesspeople, on the other hand, know that accountability causes employees, from the CEO down, to focus their energy on what is important. The emphasis on accountability produces results. Public school educators, however, are so used to taking abuse from the public that they typically are unwilling to engage in internal criticism.

Other factors in education have steered administrators and teachers away from accountability. For one, few people are rewarded for doing a great job, except for the pride an individual could take in knowing that they made a difference in a child’s life. For another, most teachers have tenure or union contracts that provide protection no matter how well or how poorly they perform. With job security, who wants to be bothered with accountability? And, with guaranteed annual salary increases (either by contract or legislation) that are the same for everyone, there have been few incentives to excel, to take a risk, to stand out from the crowd. In situations like these, accountability could serve no purpose but finger-pointing.

Prior to my position as superintendent in Wake County Public School System, in Raleigh, North Carolina, superintendents rarely received comprehensive written evaluations, and there were few prior agreed-upon performance criteria to measure results stemming from the superintendent’s leadership. Board of Education members did not want something in writing that could not be defended if some disagreement with the superintendent arose, and some superintendents were similarly comfortable with the absence of written performance measures. Consequently, few comprehensive evaluations were done on the superintendent’s job performance.

So what can be done to boost accountability levels? Answers must be sought at the state, district, and school building levels. In North Carolina, the ABCs (Accountability, Basics, Control) of Public Education program was developed by the state Board of Education in response to the 1995 General Assembly. This

plan established guidelines and target goals for annual progress for each school relative to the test results of the year before. Teachers could earn bonuses if the students at the school achieved those goals. The ABCs program has created an incentive that has worked well on a school-by-school basis in a state where teachers have traditionally been underpaid. Subsequently, the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) took this emphasis on accountability to a higher level in a movement that required considerable courage on the part of board members and administrators.

Like most school districts, WCPSS has a mission statement. Unlike many districts, however, WCPSS holds itself accountable to measure up to its mission. The mission of WCPSS reads as follows:

The Wake County Public School System will educate each student to be a responsible and productive citizen who can effectively manage future challenges.

To be held accountable for achieving this mission, WCPSS wanted to provide some level of assurance to the community that it was willing to take this mission seriously and achieve higher academic standards for its students. WCPSS recognized that it needed to establish a metric by which the community could tell what progress the school district was making toward fulfilling its mission.

Setting Goal 2003

Developing the lofty mission of the school system in turn led to a process that involved the community in formulating a “stretch goal,” an ambitious plan that forced the educators and the community at large to think beyond what was achievable with already-available resources. The school district collected input to create this stretch goal from the business sector, parent groups, teacher organizations, and the division of principals and assistant principals, among numerous other groups.

Could we identify a goal that would satisfy all of these interest groups? What single, overarching goal would these diverse groups all recognize as one which would reflect our purpose in public education, be meaningful to all citizens, and set a lofty standard for achievement? The process of collecting this input inspired the community to support the school system.

In the summer of 1998, following a community education summit, the Wake County Board of Education held two retreats to tackle this issue. It was then that the Board of Education established Goal 2003, which stated:

By 2003, 95% of students tested in grades 3 and 8 will be at or above grade level as measured by the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests.

This goal didn't say the district wanted 95% of just white students or black students at or above grade level; it stated 95% of ALL students (white, Asian, Latino/Hispanic, black, Native American, free-and-reduced lunch students, academically gifted, etc.). Although the goal was written for 3rd and 8th grade students, we knew that all grade levels would be impacted over the course of the five years set for achieving the goal. Third grade teachers would want the K-2 teachers to prepare their students for the third grade, and the 8th grade teachers would want the same of the earlier grade level teachers. High school teachers might feel as if the goal did not apply to them, but they surely would want the district to achieve success, better preparing students for high school.

It is important to note that we had settled on a single goal. Whereas many school districts will create a lengthy collection of goals, trying to address a great variety of desired outcomes, we had identified one easy-to-remember goal that represented the sum of everything we hoped to accomplish with students. It also is important to note that no additional funding was associated with this goal. We were idealistic and optimistic; we intended to achieve the goal with available resources.

To many people in our community, the goal seemed absurd. For some population groups and regions of the county, with percentages in the 60s and 70s, this goal might be quite unrealistic. Such a goal was surely unachievable and, if it was unachievable, why set the district up for failure and community ridicule?

This was 1998; how could such progress be made by 2003, in only five years? Why not set a more realistic goal? How about 85% or 90%? We also heard from many individuals who found the goal to be exciting. The notion that we would raise achievement for all students in the entire district was the kind of challenge that many in our county enthusiastically endorsed.

To reach Goal 2003, we knew we needed a strategic plan unlike any we had designed and implemented in the school system before. We were entering uncharted waters. Yet, we planned to hold ourselves accountable for achieving results. We knew that some dramatic work needed to be done if all students were to make this mark. Our majority students — Caucasian — were performing about 10 percentage points below the 95% level, and our minority students — in particular, African-American and Latino/Hispanic — were performing well below that. Factor in other population groups such as students with disabilities, free-and-reduced lunch students, and students whose first language is not English, and one easily can see that this was a daunting task. Was this new goal foolish or was it a courageous undertaking? We didn't know the answer, but school leaders committed to this standard of accountability and did so publicly in the belief that it should be done.

For us, the right decision was made. The simplicity of this one goal was that it didn't single out a particular group, but required that 95% be the goal for all.

The goal energized all facets of our community with its single focus. Each group could see its worth and the impact it would have on their children. African-American and Latino/Hispanic families could see a commitment to improve the academic standing of their children and at the same time, white and Asian families could be sure their children's needs would be addressed as well. The tightrope we walked was trying to close the achievement gap, while ensuring that advanced students also grew academically. Resources could not be taken from the best performing students to help the lower performing students. Any perception that we weren't serving our best and brightest students was aggressively countered, knowing that such a perception could result in the defection of these students to private, parochial, charter, or home schools. In adopting the goal, the district could end up damaging itself if it led to parents withdrawing their students from the public school district.

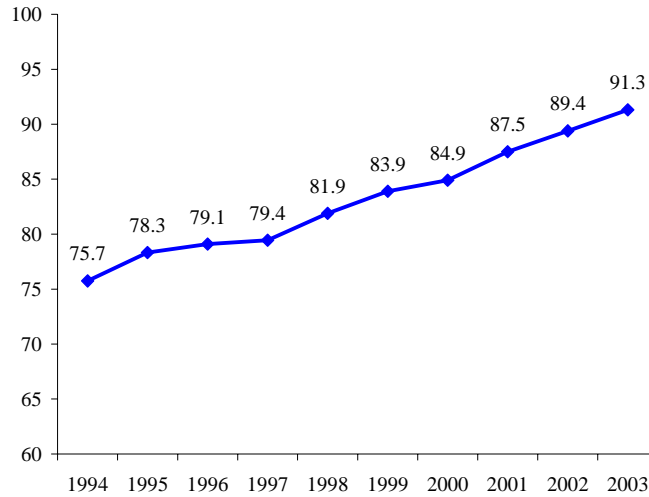
We knew we had gone out on a limb. Would a business ever announce a new product, new service, or higher level of product or service without having spent huge amounts of resources to be sure it was achievable? Probably not, but nor had we. We knew our students were capable. We knew we were striving for excellence and were confident we had the courage, heart, and brains necessary to be successful. And what has been our success?

One measure of the success we achieved in pursuit of Goal 2003 was in securing new resources and making better use of existing ones. Surely, this is a measure of success that any business would admire. While Goal 2003 was set with the knowledge that additional resources were not guaranteed, over time the goal became a mantra for organizing the resources needed to meet its mission. Subsequently, the Wake County Board of County Commissioners appropriated additional funds and school administrators reviewed all budget items to identify funds to support the goal. Through the effort of the commissioners and realignment of existing school district resources, we were able to cover a portion of the new and expanded strategies that we began rolling out in pursuit of the goal without major tax increases.

Academic Achievement Gains

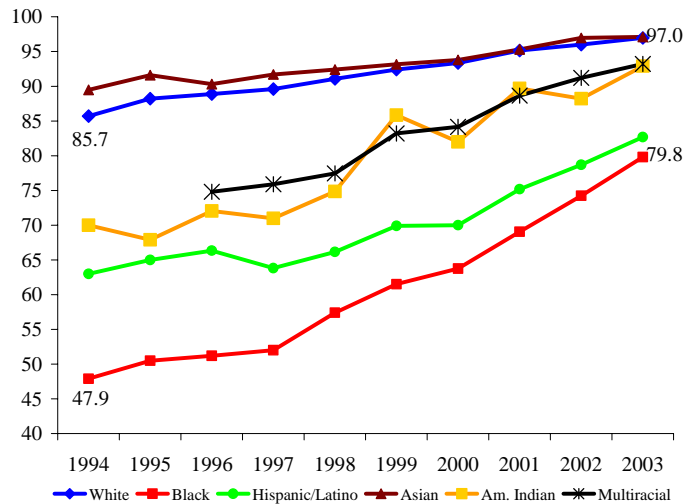
Most significantly, our success is evident in the achievement gains our students made. Figure 1 depicts the composite percentage of our 3rd and 8th grade students who passed both of North Carolina's reading and mathematics end-of-grade exams for the years 1994 to 2003, the latter year being the point in time when we planned to have achieved the 95% goal. We didn't completely achieve our goal, but our progress still was remarkable. While it is not possible to attribute a statistical cause-and-effect relationship between establishing the goal in 1998 and the rising achievement gains in subsequent years, still, it is interesting to note how Figure 1 shows that the year 1998 is when achievement gains began to show a marked and steady increase each subsequent year.

Figure 1. Percentage of 3rd and 8th Grades Students Passing Both Reading and Math State Exams



In Figure 2, we provide another look at the achievement gains students made in the years between 1994 and 2003, showing that each of our major racial population groups made steady gains over the years. The achievement gap that existed in 1994 between the highest and lowest performing groups, approximately 40 percentage points, had narrowed to less than 20 percentage points by 2003. It is especially impressive that all population groups made steady gains — the highest performing population groups as well as the lowest performing population groups.

Figure 2. Closing the Achievement Gap



All students made gains and the persistent and debilitating achievement gap (impacting students and staff alike) had been significantly narrowed. The school district had shown what can happen when men and women of courage choose to put themselves to the test and elevate expectations for all students. This was not easy for teachers, administrators, students, or parents. We are talking about hard work, dedication, and being constantly on guard for the negativism that so often pervades the school culture. However, we would not be deterred; we knew we were on the right path. Setting Goal 2003 was courageous. It was a goal that drew everyone's attention and superseded all the other goals administrators had established in previous years.

Responding to Detractors

It is safe to say that public schools have become so used to criticism that the path often chosen for dealing with critics is by slamming the information door in their faces. All too frequently, critics are ignored. This behavior may come from a mistaken belief that even if detractors had all the facts, they would not deal with them forthrightly, but skew the information to meet their own preconceptions.

We believed, and still do, that many of the outspoken critics of public education often have limited information and the best way to respond to them is to open the doors and educate them. After all, we're in the "business" of education. We maintain that all information not of a proprietary or confidential nature needs to be available to the public for scrutiny and readily accessible on the school district's Web site. Moreover, when more information is required, we gladly supply it.

This approach requires courage, and if handled improperly, can be costly to a school district. We appreciate that some of this information could in turn be used by our critics to add fuel to their fire, but it has been our general experience that our critics instead become more enlightened. We can see this enlightenment develop as the tenor of their argument with us begins to change. Additionally, the debate helps to inform those who are sitting on the sidelines. These individuals — the silent majority — become more educated because of the increased flow of information to the public via the media.

We decided that an open-book approach was the right thing to do, even though this would mean more work for our staff. We felt strongly that what the school district was doing was right, proper, defensible and, with making even more information available to the public, that citizens with an interest in public education might well come up with ideas to improve what the district was doing. If so, the district would move to implement these ideas. Businesses do this all the time with focus groups. However, the school district did not have the financial wherewithal to conduct varied focus groups. Rather, we made members of the whole community a focus group. Instead of slamming the door in their faces, we were inviting them to come in, take a seat at the table, and share their ideas, which we took seriously. From the standpoint of credibility, this stance is critical.

We have seen school districts give voice to this approach, but only on paper. Many school boards have appointed task forces and oversight committees. But, the school boards controlled who served and controlled the results. Furthermore, members of these task forces and committees often colluded in this process. By virtue of being friends of or advocates for the school district, there were no fears of what recommendations would be forthcoming. It was a tightly controlled environment among friends. Unfortunately, this approach is all too transparent to the serious critics of the school district, and the committees become another target of these critics. Additionally, the media will note who the committee members are and question the credibility of the process. No credibility equals no accountability. These committees may be comfortable for educators, but they do little to silence our critics. Instead, they add to further criticism.

Opening our books was the approach school district administrators took with the County Commissioner's Task Force on Public Spending, including task force members who we knew were determined critics of our public schools. Subsequently, having had this opportunity to freely inspect all the available information, the task force recommended no cuts in public school spending. Since that time, two citizen advisory committees were formed in the county and they, too, conducted in-depth reviews of school district spending (1999-2000 on capital spending and 2001-2003 on operational spending). The approach taken by WCPSS was the same: give them what they ask for and do so promptly.

The 1999 Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) came about as a result of the school district's first and only failed bond issue. Since 1980, Wake County had been going to its taxpayers for hundreds of millions of dollars to construct new schools and renovate old ones, just to keep up with tremendous growth in student population. For a number of reasons, the bond issue was defeated in June 1999 by a 2 to 1

margin. Our critics came out in force and won the day, or so they thought. Without the bond, we would struggle in the years to come to build the needed new schools and maintain the existing ones.

Rallying Support from the Critics

With boards of education in North Carolina unable to levy taxes, the responsibility for providing school buildings and seats for students rests largely with the county commissioners. In the summer of 1999, the commissioners wisely commissioned a CAC task force to analyze what went wrong with the bond issue. The task force agreed on a chairman, a recently retired CPA from a large national firm, and both boards (school and county) jointly appointed a 40-person committee of school supporters and critics. As reported by the news media, this task force had credibility. One year later, that committee submitted its list of 29 recommendations for changes in the way the school system and county provided for and cared for school buildings. All but two of the recommendations were implemented immediately. The other two were studied but could not be accomplished without further research and legislative action.

Our community was satisfied that the task force had performed its job well, and the following year it approved the largest bond issue to that point in time. The school district's willingness to include detractors of the school system in the CAC process, an open-book approach, and commitment to live with the recommendations of the CAC were relatively novel ideas at the time and led the school district to better ways of doing business, as well as increased public confidence in the school system.

The second CAC was organized upon the request of the county commissioners to decide whether school district administrative funds were being spent wisely and whether the district needed more or less money from the county to be successful. This time, a smaller committee, jointly appointed by the commissioners and school district and with resources for consultants, took two years to reach its conclusions. The open-book approach was used again and the conclusions were overwhelmingly in favor of increased funding for schools.

To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi's response to being attacked: "First [your detractors] ignore you; then they laugh at you; then they attack you; then you win." For us, being attacked by our detractors only provides more opportunities to inform and educate them, to gain even greater public support in the process, and to possibly identify new and better solutions.

Measuring Success

ABC Testing

As the state developed its accountability program, called the ABCs of Public Education that was fully implemented in 1998, our school district was out front looking at its test data, disaggregating the data, looking at subgroups, and figuring out what schools needed additional support. Shortly, the invaluable work of the WCPSS's Evaluation and Research (E&R) Department was in demand by the staff, administrators and teachers. Our administrators wanted to be instructional leaders who could help their teachers understand why 3rd grade scores were not as strong as 4th or 5th grade scores and what needs to happen in 3rd grade to change this dynamic. Our principals became so good at communicating what needed to be done to improve academics that their schools started to blossom. They could pinpoint a group of students not doing well by grade level, by classroom, and sometimes by other demographic factors.

Data became a wonderful thing, but only if looked at in the correct context. For example, if schools are being ranked exclusively by percentage of students who are proficient at grade level, two schools with 90% proficiency rates may look identical on a data sheet. But we should ask how proficient the students were when they came to that school. Were they at 95% when they started the year? For a school at 75% at the start of the year and 90% at the end of the year, is this school doing a better job than one that started at 95%?

Test data that change from one year to the next should be examined closely to ensure proper interpretation. For example, test scores may plummet in a district from one year to the next. The first assumption may be that teachers aren't teaching as well. However, any number of factors also may have caused a drop in scores. An influx of non-English-speaking students into the district (from 1990 to 2000, North Carolina's Hispanic population grew 394%, the largest growth of all 50 states) could have caused the scores to drop. Or, as it happened in the 2005-06 school year, the state may have renormed the test, essentially raising the bar for student performance in that subject area.

An adequately staffed E&R Department can offer much to a school district. In one audit of the school district by an external group, it was noted that the WCPSS E&R Department was larger than comparably sized school districts, but it also was noted that WCPSS appeared to be making good use of the department in ways that justified its size. School leaders and boards of education would be making a mistake to undervalue the importance of E&R functions, regardless of the size of the school district.

SAT Scores

A smart E&R Department helps the community understand the purpose and limitations of tests like the SAT or ACT, along with what needs to happen in the classroom to positively impact a student's score on such tests (e.g., vocabulary lessons, advanced courses, reading the right materials, taking the pre-SAT, SAT study courses, and SAT preparatory software). Most WCPSS seniors take the SAT.

SAT scores used to be hit-or-miss in our district. One year, they dropped considerably. Through the E&R Department, we brought in representatives from ETS (Educational Testing Services) and had them look at our testing process and offer recommendations to help us improve student SAT scores. Since we trained our teachers and principals, our SAT scores have risen strikingly. In 1990, Wake County students' average SAT score was two points below the national average. By 2006, our students' scores exceeded the national average by 45 points and the state average by 51 points, with approximately 78% participation. WCPSS was the only large urban district that consistently ranked in the top five in the state and top quartile in the nation. This has been no accident.

Benchmarking Versus Other Districts

One central question that grew out of the work of the E&R Department was: How good are we? We knew what we were doing and had some idea how we were doing compared to the rest of the state, but we couldn't answer this question nationally. We had indices, such as the SAT, but this is not an adequate measure to compare school districts. The E&R Department suggested that we identify a network to benchmark with demographically comparable urban districts. We invited these districts to meet with us to compare data and other information. The win-win for all parties was new ideas and new research that resulted in the formation of the Educational Benchmarking Network, which encompassed school districts across the nation with similar characteristics.

Originally, there were 17 benchmark districts. We would ask each other questions about suspension rates, personnel hiring practices, instructional programs, budgets, etc. People in similar positions among these districts began to share information. Through this benchmarking, we became better and started to believe that we could compete with the best in the nation. This may have been the beginning of WCPSS national stage debut. Other districts started trying to learn what was going on in Wake County. Unlike many businesses that keep the formulas of their products locked in a vault, we shared our formula for success with everyone. Although we have touted throughout this paper how school systems should be run like good businesses, the one exception is competition.

While it's nice to have bragging rights to high SAT scores or other competency indicators, we have no widgets to offer as products that we don't want the competition to duplicate. Our "products" are competent students who can read, write, and factor polynomials. They are ready for higher education, vocations, and, most importantly, to become good citizens in their communities. Some competition among schools

and districts is healthy, but when you have something that works and could help other students, you have a responsibility to pass it on. And, the responsibility should not feel like a burden. Do it cheerfully. We would not lament if the rest of the nation raised its SAT scores by 45 points, although we would lose our spotlight. This would further inspire us to move the bar up another notch.

Healthy School Indicators

WCPSS has a history of trying to maintain diversity in all of its schools, whether this be diversity in academic achievement, family income levels, student race, or other factors. We believe that a healthy school district will maintain this balance among all of its schools, whether urban or suburban, newly built or many years old. All schools should be equally attractive for students, parents, teachers, and administrators and be a source of pride in the neighborhood. And, all schools should be properly resourced. Obviously, maintaining the perfect balance at all times among all variables for all schools is not possible, but we try, and the assignment of students to schools is one of the tools used by the district.

In the past, the race of a student was one of the variables used in student assignment decisions, but race no longer is a factor. Rather, nodes in the county (akin to ZIP code regions, but much smaller) will be assigned to schools based on such factors as proximity to the school, the percentage of low-income families living in the node, and the percentage of students in a node performing below grade level. Compounding these factors, because of the ceaseless growth in enrollment that the district experiences every year, there is a need to assign students to new schools as they are built and opened. The assignment or reassignment of students to schools to maintain the overall health of the district is an annual challenge for both the school and community.

When students were reassigned to another school, a written notice was sent to parents. Naturally, most had concerns about leaving their present school where they had become comfortable. We already had trained parents to be data-savvy and, as a result, many started doing their homework. They compared their children's new school with the former one. They wanted to know which school had better academic data. They used our maps to determine what percentage of students was at or above grade level. As parents asked questions, and in their appeals highlighted the negative issues of a school (lower test scores, unsafe, older facility, fewer certified teachers), this led our board to look at the health of each school.

Through the E&R Department, we established indicators of a healthy school: test scores, facility, parental involvement, quality of teachers and staff, and a diverse student body, to name a few of the indicators. If a school was deemed unhealthy, we looked for the remedy to make it healthy. We formed a Healthy Schools Review Team, led by the E&R Department to annually review the healthy schools indicators. When schools were found to be low on a number of healthy school indicators, then resources were adjusted, personnel scrutinized, and programs changed — all in the effort to provide every student in every school with the optimal education.

NCLB Testing

It's easy to take potshots at the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. It's a big target and there is a lot that is wrong with it. Take aim and you're bound to hit something. However, who will argue with the premise that we should educate all of our students to meet minimum standards of competency? Sure, you can quibble with 100%. Every business will accept a certain amount of failure, as none could stay in business if it tried to meet 100% success. The price of ensuring 100% success is exorbitant, and will prove to be so in education as well if the NCLB standard is remains as it is. Left unchanged, the current NCLB standard will lead to the day when every school and school district in the nation will be subject to takeover by the state. What would be next take — over by the federal government?

When NCLB wanted to know how subgroups were doing in Wake County, we already knew the answer. We had been disaggregating data and publishing this information for a number of years. When the 2003 goal was developed in 1998, pre-NCLB, this was developed to get all students to grade level.

We have always supported the premise of No Child Left Behind. However, what are the chances of reaching the NCLB standard of 100%? There is a concern that this all-or-nothing approach — a rather harsh “stick” approach — puts tremendous stress on a school. We could have 27 of 29 groups achieving standards and still be designated as a school “in need of improvement” and the NCLB sanctions are applied. We know enough about human nature to know that there is greater success with the carrot *and* stick than with the stick alone, especially if the latter is used indiscriminately.

The NCLB stick approach includes sanctions, from being embarrassed in the newspaper, students being able to transfer from the school campus, bringing in supplemental services, and having outsiders ultimately taking over the school. Most departments of public instruction do not have the resources or trained personnel who can come in and effectively change that school overnight. Moreover, it is possible that the school may be doing quite well by many other measures.

We must be careful to not demoralize students, staff, and parents. We do not want a negative self-fulfilling prophecy, one in which we surrender and cause an exodus of quality staff and parents. Without a robust public education system, how will our nation fare? The federal government can't educate the millions of students, and there will never be enough private schools, charter schools, or home schools to do the job. Imagine if public education disappeared, and students are distributed in all these different ways, with many not going to any school. What would happen to standards-based education then? What would happen to accountability? What would happen to 100% proficiency? Without a robust public education system, there will be chaos.

No one has come up with the magic formula because it doesn't exist. We know school reform requires the proper personnel, with the autonomy and proper resources. It takes about five years to turn a school around. It's quite possible the school will hit bottom before it begins to improve dramatically. NCLB, although it contains many commendatory attributes, wants turnaround to occur in a year or two, and that's not realistic. Additionally, NCLB is geared for 100% failure eventually. All schools will be low-performing when 100% of students are unable to meet all criteria of success. We think 95% is idealistic, but something worth striving for. And, most important, let's find the carrot that we can use in concert with the stick to motivate staff and student performance.

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