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Collaboration key to fixing broken schools

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A hundred Michigan schools will head back to class with an additional challenge this year -- how to transform themselves to succeed.

It's a mandate they're under after appearing on one of two state-generated lists of low-performing schools.

But how these schools deal with the challenges before them will mean the difference between a smooth course toward improvement and chaos for years to come. Because with this struggle comes opportunity.

Low-performing schools have the chance to do more than change the curriculum or methodology -- they can create an environment that transforms students themselves. And federal grant money means that schools have the resources to put behind solid ideas.

But more than that, schools facing the task of transformation will also have a clear example of one way it can be done successfully -- Adrian High School in Lenawee County.

When AHS first appeared on a school improvement list, the district and staff began looking for solutions -- not only from the outside, but from the inside as well. Adrian administrators recognized the expertise of the high school staff and decided that those who knew students best should be called upon to help drive the transformation. They decided that collaboration would serve students far better than conflict.

And they're right.

Every transformation is unique to the individual school, but choosing to draw upon the strengths of teachers and staff is critical if districts are serious about turning schools around.

In Adrian, instead of relying on contractors for curriculum, the district will train members of its own staff to develop coursework. Instead of hiring consultants as teacher coaches, AHS will call on its best to mentor others. And perhaps most importantly, instead of spending precious resources to change the culture from the outside, Adrian staff will instigate that change themselves, as they help decide how to implement the goals everyone shares.

What does this mean?

It means each student will be paired with an individual teacher who will serve as an adviser and academic coach -- and the two will have the chance to meet at least twice a week to check progress. It means that more students, and more staff, will participate in summer school. It means that at-risk students will get help before they falter. And it means that the traditional boundaries between classrooms and departments will come down. If a student is struggling, the entire staff will work together to do what needs to be done.

Could any of these things be achieved without the collaboration? Perhaps.

But to truly change the mindset from a struggling school to a culture of success, you must empower the people in the trenches. You need to cultivate support from parents and the community at large.

It's essential to build the capacity of the passionate teachers in the classroom and the dedicated staff in the school. These professionals chose their careers because of their desire to see students succeed -- why wouldn't you follow Adrian's lead and harness that energy and expertise?

It's a question every parent with a child in a struggling school should be asking.

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Additional Facts

Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Bob King, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters.