

Finding Common Ground

4 Things to Do Before Setting Priorities

Stay focused on the most pressing concerns

By Peter DeWitt & Michael Nelson — June 13, 2024.



We have all heard of the elevator conversation. It's the moment you get on an elevator on the first floor and you select Floor 10. As the door closes, the person next to you asks a question of you. You have approximately 10-15 seconds to succinctly answer the question. In this scenario, the question would be, "What are the priorities for your school?"

Are you able to easily share priorities for your building when asked this question? We have found that focused clarity around school priorities is essential in building a culture of improved instructional practices and student learning, yet the ability to articulate these priorities is often difficult for school leaders. Below are some reflective questions to guide your thinking as you explore possibilities in the development of your priorities.

How do you determine your school priorities?

In our work with building leaders across the globe, we have found many leaders immediately focus on broad sweeping language like "improve test scores" or "strong social-emotional health

and well-being for students.” We do not disagree with the intent of these statements, but because of their broad scope, it is difficult for staff, parents, and your community to be clear on how they can directly support the language. When writing priorities, be specific and clear so that there can be a united understanding of the priority as well as of the roles of various constituents in supporting its intent.

What are the data telling you?

Before establishing priorities, what is your formative and standardized data telling you about the needs of your students? Have you looked at multiple pieces of data to know established trends by grade level as well as by cohort? Within the data trends, are there clusters of discoverable standards that might emerge as a tangible priority?

What is being talked about?

We have been in many schools and have had conversations and/or conducted interviews with staff, parents, and community members. After spending a day doing this, we quickly discover themes of what the needs of the school are. We have found that individuals in a school community (staff, parents, and community members) often know critical areas in which improvement needs to occur often without doing a deep dive into the data. Knowing what is being talked about regarding ways to support continuous improvement in your school is a good step in establishing priorities that will be embraced by all constituents.

What is the system doing?

As a building leader, you are often one of multiple schools within your system. What are the priorities of your system? How do the priorities of the system match or not match the needs of your building? As a leader, are you able to articulate why or why not a system priority should or should not be linked to one of your building priorities? We believe having a strong coherence of priorities from the board/superintendent to school buildings and classrooms is a key to building a focused culture of learning.

Creating Your Priorities

Once you have reflected on the common themes based on evidence, areas of need under discussion, and alignment to system priorities, it’s time to create your building priorities. We recommend having no more than three focused priorities that are specific enough to create clarity, yet allow for innovation in how they are operationalized.

An effective priority statement avoids broad language and instead pinpoints key instructional areas for improvement. For example, rather than “improve reading scores,” an effective priority could be “All students will demonstrate proficiency in identifying main ideas and supporting details in literary and informational texts.”

This sample priority is:

- Specific to the skills of main idea and supporting details
- Crosses content areas of literary and informational texts
- Measurable through existing reading assessments
- Targeted priorities like this allow for consistent focus, measurement of progress, and innovative approaches to instruction and interventions.

Additionally, effective priorities should be bite-sized and achievable within the designated timeline, typically a 1–2-year scope. Unrealistic priorities that require multiyear transformations are at risk of failure due to lack of motivation and perceived impossibility. Bite-sized wins build momentum and desire to take on bigger challenges. What we know about self-efficacy is that small successes contribute to the energy to keep going in the learning process.

Rollout and Embedding the Priorities

After settling on no more than three focused priorities, it's essential to effectively roll them out and embed them into the culture of your school. Some ways to do this are:

- Devote professional development time to unpack the “whys” and specifics of each priority so all staff own them.
- Prioritize the priorities. Rework school processes like instructional coaching, PLC work, assessment cycles to laser in on the articulated priorities.
- Communicate clearly to families and the community, linking priorities to initiatives, improvements, data talks, etc.
- Build a “priorities” corner or wall in the school to visually showcase the priorities and celebrate work happening around them.
- Highlight student work connected to the priorities through showcases, videos, displays.
- Link priorities to hiring practices, asking candidates how they can contribute.
- Make priorities the lens for reviewing practices, resource allocations, budgets.

The more your three focused, bite-sized priorities become embedded into all aspects of your school, the greater the collective commitment and likelihood they will be manifested through impactful changes in pedagogy and student learning.