The singular power of one goal: Interview with Emily Calhoun

Action researcher narrows focus to broaden effectiveness

By Dennis Sparks
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(Editor's Note: Emily Calhoun is director of Phoenix Alliance, which provides long-term support to school districts and state/regional agencies that are committed to improving student achievement through investing in staff learning at the school level. A more complete bio follows the interview.)

JSD: Over the years, you've helped many schools conduct action research. You've also reflected on that work in articles and books. Based on my experience, it seems that one of the most critical and challenging steps in the school improvement process is establishing clear, specific goals for the high achievement for all students.

Calhoun: Selecting schoolwide goals focused sharply on student learning is difficult. Staff members often say, "Student learning is what we are all about," but coming together to select a student learning goal in an academic area is often very hard work. There are a number of reasons something that sounds so easy is so complex. Part of the problem is that a faculty wants everyone to be satisfied, so the school ends up with five or six goals. I've seen as many as 11 goals in a school improvement plan. As a result, it's impossible for the school to achieve any of them. One powerful student learning goal is sufficient if the staff is working diligently on it and looking carefully at student performance.

Another problem is that the goals are often too broad. The goal will say something general about improving student achievement in math, science, or reading. Instead, the school has to focus on specific areas in the discipline. For example, the goal of improving literacy is just too broad for a faculty to engage in serious, in-depth study. The school needs to get more specific by focusing on goals like improving student writing of informative prose or improving reading comprehension.

Still another aspect of the problem is the need for a staff to learn to work together. Few faculties are used to the collective weekly study of teaching and its results. Some of us feel threatened about the public planning of lessons and sharing of their results, regardless of how successful or unsuccessful our students are. The action research structure helps a faculty learn how to work together in teaching and learning, although most schools are not set up to support that kind of work.

After goal setting

JSD: What should happen once the goal is selected?

Calhoun: Getting the goal is just the beginning. But it's a powerful beginning because it screens out some of the competing demands for time and attention and affects how resources will be invested. The primary goal the staff selects for collective pursuit affects how resources will be invested.

When a faculty selects a goal it believes will make the most difference in the education of students, it is setting the parameters for collective study and action. This focus on one powerful goal limits the amount of student learning data to collect, the amount of data to collect about what is currently happening in curriculum and instruction throughout the school, and the extensiveness of the study of the external knowledge base. It also makes possible the high quality staff development needed to support changes in instruction and the careful study of the implementation of strategies selected by the faculty. Even with one, it's a big task.

There's a concept I call "seeing through and beyond," which means looking at all the changes that will be required. The faculty needs to look through the learning goal to the student performances the teachers want to see; teachers need to consider what successful goal attainment would look like for students. Then they need to determine what teacher behaviors in curriculum, instruction, and assessment are necessary to promote those student behaviors. Next, they must see right through the teacher behaviors to what the principal is doing and what the district office is doing. Having the goal helps us focus; then we push through it to the things that everyone must be doing to bring it into reality.

Teachers must look beyond the data that's readily available, such as standardized test scores and grades, into the specific student performances they're trying to develop. Say it's reading comprehension. The faculty will have to decide what information to collect about student performance related to comprehension. For example, can students identify the main idea of a passage? Can they explain how they determined the main idea? Can students use multiple sources of information in forming major ideas about a topic? Can students identify the author's purpose?

Teachers also must reach out to the knowledge base to interact with the ideas of others. A lot of time must be spent in study so faculty will select classroom strategies that are likely to yield increases in student achievement and to learn how to use them to a

high level of skill. Unfortunately, we don't often fully support this implementation process. It's like a curriculum that we simply cover for kids – we have too many goals, too many things we're running at, and so we end up not supporting the staff development that's required to achieve the student learning goal. Consequently, we don't get what we hope for because we're not using what we know about supporting people who are making complex changes in cognition and performance.

We do it like we've done with curriculum documents, we just throw it out there and hope something happens. We would not do this to our students: just give them the book, the idea, and overview, and expect them to learn and change. But frequently we do this to ourselves. We are learners, too, and we are not learning unless we are moving our cognitions and performance beyond their current state.

Workplace barriers

JSD: From your experience, what prevents schools from focusing on a single goal and working diligently to achieve it in the way you've described?

Calhoun: The structure of the workplace is a barrier. If we were to redesign schools for students and teachers, we simply wouldn't design them the way they are now. Most schools and districts are not designed to support the kind of work we're talking about. For one thing, time is not provided for staff members to look at student data, to study the knowledge base, to engage in long-term substantive staff development, and to look at the effects of the staff development on students. So we ask people to take it out of their hides.

The kind of thing I've been talking about won't happen unless the principal and a core group of leaders are fully engaged and willing to use all they know and are to help everyone move forward. Policy makers, state departments of education, and district offices must make this type of work possible. It shouldn't be so hard for people to work together, study student learning, and to apply good learning theory to themselves. It's almost impossible to be a learning community if you don't have time to work together regularly.

It's difficult for schools to use the full action research structure without the support of the school district. The whole district needs to support this kind of work in schools if it's going to be successful. Districts that want to support student and staff learning tackle the time problem by providing or helping schools secure competent and caring technical assistance, by helping school teams design staff development that applies good learning theory, by helping with access to the knowledge base, and by modeling action research or similar inquiry-oriented improvement processes at the district level.

Develop high expectations

JSD: A common barrier that you didn't mention is modest expectations for student learning. How do you help a faculty develop high academic expectations for all its students, which in turn will have a large influence on the professional learning in which teachers engage?

Calhoun: One thing that can help with expectations is to get teachers to reach out to the knowledge base so they can see what is possible. Another approach is to get the staff to select one or two strategies in which they will become highly skilled and to watch carefully what happens with their students. This takes us back to Miles and Huberman's idea that commitment follows competence. If teachers can suspend disbelief long enough to become highly skilled in something that has a strong research base, then they prove to themselves what can happen for their students. It's critical, though, that the school select something substantive, study it with depth, use the best of what we know at this point, and watch what happens with students. That's the best way to prove to teachers what students are really capable of learning.

Sometimes I'll see a school improvement goal that says something like 'students between the 30th and 50th percentiles will increase on the standardized test by five percentile points.' Sometimes the anticipated increases are just two percentile points. This says a lot about what the school expects.

Using research

JSD: As you know, there's a lot of cynicism about the knowledge base. Educators sometimes say research can be used to prove anything.

Calhoun: I worry about the cynicism. I think maybe it's just part of the culture of our times. A part of the problem, though, is that we haven't taught educators how to mine the knowledge base, to really get into it. We have to teach those screening skills because not all information is equally well grounded.

JSD: How do you teach people how to access and screen the knowledge base?

Calhoun: Once the school has selected its focus area, I ask them to identify three people for whom they have a great respect in

that subject area, someone from a university, the district office, the state department of education, or a regional service agency. Leagues or other consortia of schools also may be sources of information. I suggest they contact these people, tell them what they're working on, and ask for three to five research studies and one or two conceptual pieces that they should read. Studying these documents provides a starting place for the group. I then recommend that teachers look for common agreements among these experts. There are some nice pieces available now that show the overlap among researchers who approach a subject from different perspectives. These areas of agreement can provide a starting point for the school's work.

Structured response sheets are another way I help schools screen the knowledge base. (See page 57.) Teachers use the sheets to juxtapose what different authors say about teaching, curriculum, and assessment. Teachers complete these forms individually and then discuss their responses in their peer coaching work groups. This discussion leads to a common response sheet from the group; the process is then repeated with the whole faculty. The reflection and dialogue at all these levels usually reveal the actions that should be tested as hypotheses in the school improvement plan.

Going beyond test scores

JSD: Some schools reach a block at this point because they think they must wait for next year's test results before they can know if their efforts are paying off. How can schools get more immediate information about how they're doing?

Calhoun: Of course, schools need to look at general information such as grade promotion and retention rates, attendance, standardized test scores, and so on. In their focus area though – which could be writing informative prose, reading comprehension, non-routine problem solving, or whatever – they need to regularly collect what I call up-close data, data as close to the student performance as possible. That data may be collected weekly on some goals, or gathered monthly or every six weeks. For example, if the school were seeking to improve informative writing, teachers would bring samples of student writing to their work groups at least once a month. To facilitate this work, teachers might study very closely and share with their peer coaching group just three students: a student with low fluency in writing, one with moderate ability, and a third who seems very skilled.

As part of their staff development, teachers would then implement throughout the year new strategies to advance student performance related to the school's goal. Schools that are serious about all this should expect to see almost immediate changes in student performance, and then they should see those changes continue from month to month throughout the year.

Role of school leaders

JSD: School leaders often seriously underestimate the investment of time and resources required to change classroom practice. How do you help them understand all that's required?

Calhoun: Many school leaders are familiar with the Joyce and Showers training design model and can be quite articulate about it. But when I look at the staff development provided by the school or district, that's not what I see happening. When I look at school and district improvement plans, provisions have not been made to support staff in expanding their curriculum and instructional repertoire. So, through dialogue, I try to activate their knowledge about learning theory. We discuss what we know about changing cognition and behavior. We talk about the need for information, multiple demonstrations, and regular practice with the skills. I try to help them tap into what they know about good learning theory, and then to get them to use it on themselves.

It's also important that principals and teacher facilitators, school district staff, intermediate service agency staff, and state department of education staff – all of us who have accepted the responsibility of leading other adults – must model whatever we are supporting or promoting.

In my 28 years of experience, there is nothing as critical to school implementation of new teaching strategies as the principal's full participation in learning the strategy, practicing in the classroom, sharing with his or her peer coaching group how students responded, and building the next lessons together. I can almost map a school's level of implementation by how engaged the principal is in modeling what is happening. While not quite as powerful in affecting what happens in an individual school, the full engagement and modeling by central office staff can affect larger numbers of people in the district.

JSD: Are you an optimist about schools' capacities to meet the challenges they're now facing?

Calhoun: I am. A lot of it has to do with leadership and willpower. We can do it if we inquire together and use what we know: Believe in people – most of us are doing the best we can. Provide support for people – no pressure without support. Model what we ask of others. And use what we know at this point in time, while continuously adding to this knowledge.

A biography of Emily Calhoun

Job: Director of Phoenix Alliance, which provides long-term support to school districts and state/regional agencies that are committed to improving student achievement through investing in staff learning at the school level. Her major work is helping school, district, and state staffs to study the effects of curriculum and instruction on student learning and to strengthen the learning environment for all students.

Education: B.A. in English from Georgia College; M.Ed in early childhood education and reading, Georgia Southwestern College; and Ed.D in supervision, Univ. of Georgia.

Professional history: Calhoun has been an elementary and high school teacher, an intermediate service agency consultant, a district language arts coordinator, and coordinator of the Georgia League of Professional Schools. A longtime advocate of action research, her current work focuses on helping schools use action research to focus on student learning, especially in literacy.

Books: Calhoun has written numerous books and articles, including:

- How to use action research in the self-renewing school (ASCD, 1994).
- Learning to teach inductively, co-authored with Bruce Joyce (Allyn & Bacon, 1998).
- The picture world inductive model: Teaching beginning readers of all ages (ASCD, in press.)
- The new structure of school improvement: Inquiring schools, achieving students, co-authored with Bruce Joyce and David Hopkins. (Open University Press, in press.)

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About the Author

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The Power of The Goal. A business book disguised as a novel, a love story about the manufacturing process, and an exhilarating adventure in human potential. Alex Rogo is the manager of a failing manufacturing plant who receives an ultimatum from corporate headquarters: turn the situation around in three months or the plant will be scrapped. One of the main obstacles standing in the way of implementing a major change is reaching a wall-to-wall agreement on the direction of change. A powerful tool to create such agreement is The Goal Movie: The How-To Version. The use of this video is not limited just to the beginning of the implementation process. Reaching agreement on the change in direction is not a one-time effort. By Emily Esfahani Smith. Ms. Esfahani Smith is the author of "The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed With Happiness." April 7, 2020. How people respond to adversity is a topic I've investigated for years as a journalist. Over the past decade, I've interviewed dozens of people about their experiences of extreme stress and have scoured the academic research in psychology on resilience to understand why some people are broken by crises while others emerge from stressful experiences even stronger than before. What I've learned sheds light on how people can protect their mental health during the pandemic — and it upends some common ideas our culture carries about trauma and well-being. The singular power of one goal: Interview with Emily Calhoun. Journal of Staff Development, 20. 33-42). Poster templates by: www.POSTERPRESENTATIONS.com.