The Fast Track to Sustainable Turnaround
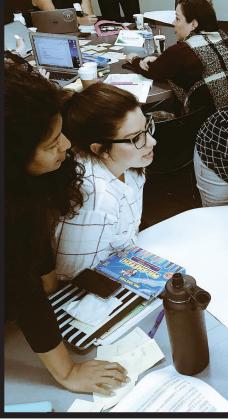
How one principal re-energized a struggling elementary school by focusing on coherence and distributed leadership.

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Heritage Elementary's PBIS teacher team brainstorms schoolwide expectations.

What actions can school leaders take to turn around low-performing schools relatively quickly? We considered this question through our work with Heritage Elementary School in California's Garden Grove Unified School District—one of us (Michelle) as principal, the other (Michael) as a consultant. This is a story of re-energizing educators by giving them new leadership experiences that yield new learning for both teachers and students.

Heritage Elementary is a diverse, high-poverty school (86 percent of its 625 students receive free or reduced-price lunch). In summer 2016, Michelle was transferred to Heritage from another district school with a mandate to improve its culture and performance. At that time, both of us set out to investigate this question: Could good leadership transform a low-performing, high-poverty school within about two years—using specific change strategies? The answer, as we shall show, turned out to be a resounding *yes*.

Within two years, Heritage's culture changed dramatically to one focused on staff and student learning. Student achievement increased. Yet all 32 staff members who were at Heritage when Michelle arrived are still there two years later. The only personnel change is that an assistant principal position was added because of the school's size and challenges. So what actions did Michelle and her colleagues undertake to energize staff and obtain sustainable progress?

Tracking School Change

The two of us tracked Heritage's progress through an experiment. Every six months or thereabouts, Michael emailed Michelle asking a specific question about how the work was unfolding; she answered soon after with details about the school's latest work.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHELLE PINCHOT

Could good leadership transform a low-performing, high-poverty school in a short period of time—using specific strategies? Yes.

It was appropriate for her to reflect with Michael because he was a consultant to Garden Grove Unified School District. In 2012, superintendent Laura Schwalm had invited Michael and his team to engage in capacity-building activities in Garden Grove, which at the time was already using many of Michael's ideas on school reform.

The district places a strong emphasis on the quality of its educators. The superintendent asked Michael's team to help their schools "go deeper" in establishing a culture of continuous improvement by working with senior staff and school teams. Michael and his fellow consultants regularly conducted capacity-building sessions with groups of school staff, focusing on the professional capital of teachers and elements of "coherence making": clarifying direction, creating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability.[1]

Four years after Michael's group began consulting with Garden Grove, we began our "natural experiment" to track the first three years of Heritage's turnaround work. Here are some of the questions Michael emailed Michelle during the first year of their exchange:

- What was Heritage Elementary like when you arrived?
- What was your plan for improvement in the first year?
- How is that plan going several months in?
- How are things going after six months of implementing change?
- What are your reflections at the end of year one?
- What progress is being made in year two?

Going Slow to Go Fast

We attempt here to capture the first year of re-energizing Heritage. At the beginning of this work, Garden Grove district leaders[2] had charged Michelle with building staff morale; setting up necessary procedures; coaching teachers; building relationships, trust, and a positive climate; and "go[ing] slow to go fast," a Fullan team slogan.

Going slow to go fast means that new leaders strike the right balance at the beginning between communicating a sense of urgency and building trust. Michelle spent her first few months taking stock with Heritage's staff through purposeful interactions that included the following: holding meetings of all the school's grade-

level chairs and the instructional leadership team; doing multiyear data analysis; holding sessions with key staff, parent groups, and district office superintendents; and planning strategically with the assistant principal. Two initiatives put into action were PBIS (Positive Behavior Inte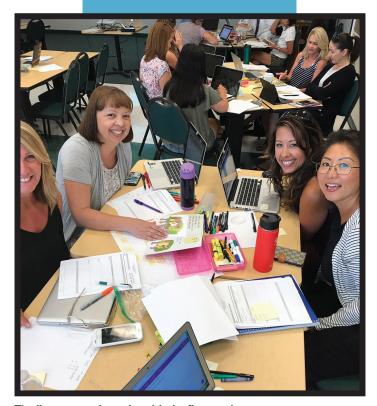rvention Supports) and a schoolwide Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) plan. After careful analysis of academics and schoolwide behavior, leadership teams had determined that behavior and academics had to be addressed in tandem.

The goal at this beginning stage is to do a lot of listening, test initial impressions, and convey that action for change needs to happen—but that leaders are open to the form change will take, and that any actions will be jointly determined, with the principal viewed as lead learner.

Through such steps, a principal can gradually identify challenges that require action. Those of us working in school and district improvement have seen that the biggest obstacle to change is often *how to get started*. Effective leaders help staff get to promising actions sooner rather than later by enabling people to experience early success.

At Heritage, key staff members and the principal listed concerns that needed to be addressed. They prioritized essential items that needed to be in place to support implementing

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The literacy coach works with the first grade team.

PBIS and MTSS; for instance, students now have a more structured day that includes block scheduling and allows for interventions and enrichment during the school day. This ensures that all students will receive additional services at their instructional level. As a result of these interventions, student referrals for poor behavior declined by 80 percent in one year.

Cultivating a vibrant school atmosphere also depends on building relationships. Michelle knew she would need to interact with each teacher and staff member. She needed to collect data—verbal, written, or observatory—to determine the baseline of the current culture and what barriers to change existed.

Michelle began talking to staff about the challenges she perceived at Heritage: low academic expectations (she often heard "our students aren't ready" or "parents don't support them"); low morale; lack of development of teachers' skills; and a scattered will to improve. She also noted a lack of everyday procedures. For instance, there were no Student Study Team procedures in place that included data analysis, progress monitoring, and student assessments. Overall, there was limited parent involvement; little technology use; and a dearth of teacher leadership.

On the positive side, Heritage was a neighborhood school closely connected to its community. Teachers wanted to move forward and were open to setting schoolwide goals. Overall, this school was stuck—but had stakeholders who were open to doing something about it.

Six Strategies

From her turnaround work with another Garden Grove school, and from her familiarity with the

FIGURE 1. Heritage Staff Responses on School Culture Survey, 2016 vs. 2017		
Item	**2016**	**2017**
	A/SA	**A/SA**
1. Students have at least one adult at the school who really cares about them.	84%	94%
2. Students feel safe at school.	71%	94%
3. Students are proud to attend this school.	65%	75%
4. Students ask questions when they don't understand.	33%	71%
5. This school is an inviting place for students to learn.	71%	81%
6. This school promotes trust and collegiality among staff.	68%	88%
7. This school has a safe environment for giving peer-to-peer feedback.	44%	93%
8. Site leadership fosters professional growth though constructive feedback, training and support.	30%	86%
9. Site leadership asks for and listens to staff suggestions prior to major decisions.	47%	75%
10. District leadership provides an opportunity for two-way communication.	50%	65%

Note: A = agree SA = strongly agree

approach recommended by Michael's writing and his consultant team, Michelle knew what worked to motivate teachers. As Michelle told Michael when he asked about her plan and first steps for improvement, she started by implementing six strategies.

1. Establishing multiple permanent teams led by teachers that had clearly defined responsibilities and were committed to long-term school goals, such as an instructional leadership team, grade-chair team, special education team, and teams for PBIS, computer science, and academic pentathlon, among others. These groups met monthly using teacher-generated agendas. They reported out on their work, collected feedback, and moved forward on common goals.

2. Providing a variety of specific teacher professional development and following up with clear expectations and support.

3. Developing the schoolwide behavioral plan (PBIS), with strong involvement by student, teacher, and parent groups.

4. Using instructional rounds to collect data on instructional practice and celebrate implementation of teacher learning.

5. Purchasing digital devices and establishing a new media center.

6. Being highly visible in teacher-led teams and in classrooms through weekly visits. Michelle tried to be present, helpful, and nonjudgmental—and to encourage her staff to diagnose problems through evidence and to craft solutions. She partici-

pated as a learner in helping to move the school forward.

In November 2016, Michelle reported to Michael on specific actions she and staff were taking related to these strategies, such as:

■ Visiting all collaborative teams to observe, collect information, and help solve problems for small wins.

■ Working with custodial staff and office staff to develop effective operational procedures.

■ Meeting with a teacher on special assignment to develop a year-long PD plan.

■ Working on building buy-in for leadership teams.

"Wow!"
In January 2017, Michael asked for a mid-year update on how the plan

was unfolding. Michelle's response started with "Wow!" She noted that all teachers were onboard with the plan and described elements of her plan that were moving faster than anticipated. For one, interest in teacher leadership opportunities was exploding. Michelle said teachers were "practically begging to be part of PLCs." The staff was working on a multiyear plan for student achievement, noting progress that was already being achieved. Grade chairs and instructional leadership teams were facilitating collaboration centered around student achievement by focusing on instructional practices. For the first time, data was being used to drive instructional decisions.

On the Move

Let's look at some of the changes that were evident at Heritage after about a year of this turnaround work.

School Culture

Garden Grove surveys all school staff in the district on many items covering school and district climate, scholarly habits, student climate, motivation, and social well-being. Figure 1 displays Heritage's results on 10 of these dimensions, comparing responses from summer 2016 to those from summer 2017.

What stands out to us are the items that bear most directly on teaching and learning: 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. When working for school change, affecting the pedagogical core is the most difficult—and most important—factor

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FIGURE 2. Eight Factors that Help Leaders Make Deep Transformation in Schools

1. Consider the principal as lead learner.

2. Have a sense of focused urgency about reducing inequity.

3. Use the group to change the group.

4. Spread and deepen teacher leadership.

5. Establish procedures and communication during implementation involving all staff.

6. Focus on pedagogy and student progress.

7. Use evidence.

8. Go outside to get better inside.

Note: These factors don't represent an ordered sequence, but a constellation of factors that must be addressed in concert.

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relative to raising student learning. The year-to-year differences in these results are so great that one can only infer a massive, recognizable shift in the culture of learning and support in the school. For example, the item *students ask questions when they don't understand* reflects a dramatic change in the climate of student-teacher relationships related to the learning agenda—from 33 percent of staff to more than 70 percent agreeing.

The remaining items demonstrate a spillover effect in creating a positive school climate for students and productive school relationships. Responses moved from middling to very high agreement, especially on items involving feedback for continuous improvement.

Achievement

Tracking learning in California is difficult; the state is in the midst of a major transformation in assessment

procedures. California's new assessment system, Dashboard, is based on indicators of growth. It includes the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) system, which focuses on English language arts (ELA) and math, pays special attention to the performance of subgroups and their year-to-year gains, and contains several other indicators, like attendance and high-school graduation rates.

Heritage was a low performing school when Michelle arrived: For instance, the screening tool used to monitor students' literacy rate (DIBELS) showed that during the years 2013–2016, between 46 and 51 percent of students in grades K–3 were below grade level in reading fluency and comprehension. But by the end of the 2017 school year, only 30 percent of students in grades K–3 were below grade level in these skills, representing a significant improvement.

Although it's hard to master the intricacies of measurement with the Dashboard system, there is evidence of rising achievement. For example, in 2017, 81 percent of Heritage 4th graders were at or above the projected level in ELA. For 5th graders, the percentage at or above this level was 79, and for 6th grade, it was 84. Similar high percentages of students reached proficiency in math.

We asked an expert on SBAC on our team (Carlye Marousek, head of accountability and assessment at Whittier Unified School District) for her assessment on these results. Her response was:

For 2017, they [Heritage] have an index level of 8 out of 10 for ELA (Growth 75) and 6 out of 10 for Math (Growth 55). In 2016, Heritage had a 3 in ELA (Growth 23) and a 5 in Math (Growth 43). . . . There is growth improvement of the school overall, and from subgroups that are doing better than predicted (such as 5th grade Math and ELA, or ELA for English Learners or Economic Disadvantaged students).

Heritage's year-by-year SBAC comparisons also reveal substantial gains. In 2015, 15 percent of students met or exceeded expectations in ELA, and 14 percent did so in math. In 2016, 24 percent of students met or exceeded expectations in ELA, and 25 percent did so in math. The percentages for 2017 were 31 percent in ELA and 29 in math.

In short, if we take the positive, obvious developments in the culture of the school reported above (concerning factors known to relate to student success) and the SBAC indicators, there's every reason to believe that Heritage is a school strongly on the move.

Seeding Leadership

The fact that all teachers at Heritage took on specific roles to improve some aspect of the school contributed to these gains. Promoting teacher leadership was a key strategy for Michelle. In summer 2017, she reflected on why Heritage teachers had been remarkably eager to adopt ideas for change:

Once a leader understands the status of the culture, he or she may systematically plan and execute necessary change—but this must be done with the leaders at the site. At the start, leadership was lacking at Heritage. Not that teachers didn't want to be in leadership positions, but there wasn't a clear definition of what the groups

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should be accountable for. There were grade chairs and an instructional leadership team; however, they weren't used in a way to make school change. It was more of a formality. We knew teachers needed to feel valued and part of long-term planning and decision making . . . . Little by little, teachers started to show enthusiasm; then it rapidly accelerated as teachers began to ask for additional opportunities.

Michelle described one teacher in her 13th year of teaching who was "re-ignited" by expansion of her role. This teacher told Michelle that she had considered leaving Heritage to pursue another opportunity, but had been motivated to not only stay, but also to take on additional leadership roles to move the school forward. She now has three major leadership roles: She is the coach for the PBIS initiative, a grade chair (meaning she attends district meetings and brings back ideas to her team), and one of

four teachers leading the way in integrating technology into instruction.

One principle from Michael's school change work that Michelle adopted is, "Use the group to change the group." An administrator is a proactive enabler of people with a common goal. The common goal for teachers at Heritage was for highly engaged students to perform at high levels of achievement. Heritage found success because each teacher assumed responsibilities that led to that final goal.

Leadership Implications

Turning around high-poverty, low-performing schools is daunting. Given the tendency to want quick fixes, there's often a sense that immediate action must be taken. Solutions do have to be fast tracked, but they also have to establish conditions for lasting depth. We estimate that, with good leadership, most schools can get initial buy-in that can be leveraged into in-depth change within two years.

An organization's *culture* is a crucial foundation for energizing people. One key question is how to change a culture from low-energy to high-energy. Michelle did so through focused development of teacher leaders that encompassed all staff. Fullan and Quinn (2016) define a "coherent" culture as one that reflects a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work,[3] but shared depth can't be accomplished by a few people, a strategic plan, or "alignment" of core elements. The only way to develop it is through specific, purposeful interaction day after day by all members of the school. In short, coherence and culture are intimately related.

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The eight factors for leading school transformation listed in Figure 2 together result in what we call "rapid, high-energizing capacity" that leads to sustainable improvement. These factors come from Michael Fullan's group's applied work in scores of schools and systems. The work in Heritage both confirms and adds to our knowledge of what it takes to transform schools. Let's consider how these factors worked together at Heritage.

Michelle demonstrated the lead learner concept. She was ubiquitous in setting up groups at Heritage and checking in with everyone, expecting and enabling things to happen without dominating. At Heritage, the eight factors as a set represent a focused force for "winning" without delay. From a change leadership perspective, the most interesting question is whether Michelle used the eight factors consciously as an explicit set of strategies. The answer is yes and no. She was aware of most of them (such as "a sense of urgency" and the need to "spread and deepen leadership") but didn't use them as a formal set of steps. The implication is that leaders must be consciously aware of the key factors associated with motivating teachers for success, possibly using them as a checklist to make sure the factors are addressed. Leaders must see themselves as

deliberately changing the culture of the organization.

With respect to being aware of the factors, Michelle told Michael she "lives by" the third factor. Strong leaders influence the quality of the culture indirectly but nonetheless explicitly so teacher groups can move the school forward. Michelle also brought in leaders from other parts of the school, including the head secretary and custodian, empowering them to make change.

The fourth factor is one of the most powerful. There's been much emphasis on the crucial role of the principal over the past decade, but the most successful schools and districts build the presence of *all teachers* in leadership, perhaps getting to 100 percent of regular teachers in leadership roles, as Heritage did. This shift means that administrators rarely chair meetings—teachers do. Day-to-day work is carried out by teachers, individually and in groups, often with administrator participation as lead learner.

Factors 5 and 6 are at the heart of improving learning. Practicing good pedagogy, diagnosing learning, and providing teachers with regular feedback about teaching is where learning stands—or falls. Improving pedagogy was one of Heritage's strong suits. In the staff survey, it was teachers' views of these pedagogical

aspects that grew the most.

Using evidence of learning was strong at Heritage, but this practice more broadly includes the habit of considering evidence, from both inside the school and out, about whatever changes a leader is working to implement. We believe 80 percent of one's best ideas come from leading practitioners—in your school or elsewhere. In Garden Grove, for example, the district fosters a culture where schools learn from each other. There is a close two-way relationship between district and school leaders.

An Encouraging Example

We have provided only an early slice of a complex school on the move, and all our conclusions are interim. Clearly, Heritage has much more to do. At this point, however, Heritage provides an encouraging example of how to accelerate the timeline to energize dormant schools. Urgency and energy must go hand in hand. EL

[1] This work became the basis of Michael Fullan's book, *Coherence: Putting the right drivers in action for schools, districts and systems* (Corwin, 2015).

[2] Gabrielle Mafi, an internal leader, succeeded Laura Schwalm as superintendent.

[3] Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: Putting the right drivers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press.

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