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THE HANDS-ON GUIDE TO **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

Transform Culture,
Empower Teachers, and
Raise Student Achievement

Evelyn M. Randle-Robbins, M.A.

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Edited by Al Desetta

free spirit

PUBLISHING®



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I dedicate this book to Chris and Kennedi for sharing
me and my time with students, teachers, and families;
and to my mother for teaching me Proverbs 3:5–6.

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See page 201 for information about how to access the PDFs.*

Introduction

The Hands-On Guide to School Improvement is a practical, no-nonsense book that will help principals and administrators bring transformational change to their schools—whatever their needs, strengths, goals, or starting points are. The hard-earned advice in this book is based on my more than twenty years of experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal in Chicago Public Schools. In these pages you will find insights, recommendations, and practical applications that will dramatically improve school culture, transform teaching, and boost student achievement.

Many books have been written about school improvement and leadership. However, few are written by active school principals. This book is not based on research I've conducted about schools or on interviews with educators. Instead, it offers something more concrete and direct—a first-person account of my ongoing work as an instructional leader. I have been responsible for every detail of school leadership: from greeting students when they arrive in the morning, to creating a culture of respect and harmony, to monitoring teachers in the classroom, to improving schoolwide academic achievement. Everything I recommend in this book has been tried and tested in the day-to-day realities of challenging school environments. And while my experience comes from schools that were once struggling, the lessons in this book apply to any school, in any community.

Consider the following statistics: In 2013, only 41 percent of U.S. public school students in fourth grade and only 34 percent in eighth grade performed at or above proficiency in mathematics. In the same year, only 34 percent of U.S. public school students performed at or above proficiency in reading in both fourth and eighth grades, with the percentages in the states ranging from 17 percent to 48 percent. For twelfth graders, the news was even worse: only 26 percent of high school seniors in 2013 were at or above proficiency in math, and 38 percent were at or above proficiency in reading.¹

¹ National Assessment of Educational Progress, “2013 Mathematics and Reading,” *The Nation’s Report Card*, 2013 (nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013).

All schools will eventually encounter challenges or roadblocks in at least one crucial area. A school with high academic achievement may have a demoralized and non-collaborative teaching staff. A school with a respectful and orderly culture may be underperforming in academics or have strained relations with parents and the community. Few schools perform equally well in every regard, and all schools run up against similar problems from time to time.

For example, a majority of U.S. public school students come from low-income families, according to a new analysis of 2013 federal data, a statistic that has profound implications for the nation. The Southern Education Foundation reports that 51 percent of students in prekindergarten through twelfth grade in the 2012–2013 school year were eligible for the federal program that provides free and reduced-price lunches.² This troubling situation affects nearly every school district in the country and is an issue that won't be going away anytime soon.

I believe in an approach that I call “visionary school leadership.” By that I mean intentional leadership: Everything you do as a school leader must have a clear goal and must be carried out through a systematic, consistent process. Laying out the core principles of visionary leadership, this book will give you specific ways to meet challenges by implementing proven, tested methods that I have successfully used as an administrator in three difficult school environments.

While this book *will* look at theory and data to support school improvement, it is more than a theoretical or data-driven book. It is always practical and concrete. It is designed to help school leaders implement the day-to-day and week-by-week changes that are crucial to improving school performance. Learning can only take place when a school has a culture of respect and harmony. And that kind of culture is not built just on theory or data, but on paying attention to small, tangible details—rules for bathroom use, how trays are emptied in the cafeteria, how students are taught to walk in the hallways, and many other situations. The same detailed, hands-on approach is needed in coaching and developing your professional staff. The ability to initiate difficult conversations with underperforming teachers, to closely observe and monitor their classroom teaching, and to take steps

² Suits, Steve. “A Majority Research Bulletin: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation’s Public Schools.” Southern Education Foundation, 2015 (www.southerneducation.org).

to improve their performance is crucial in improving your school. Theory and data are important, but the key to unlocking their power lies with your ability to effectively implement changes according to what the numbers are telling you.

The lessons and advice I offer were not taught to me in college or graduate school. I learned them on the job. When I first came to a K–8 school as an assistant principal, we didn't have anyone guiding us in how to improve a severely underperforming school. I had taught in the Chicago Public Schools for many years, but Howe School of Excellence was my first experience in a high-stakes, high-pressure administrative setting. Despite my extensive classroom experience, there were many things I didn't know about being an administrator in a struggling school. So the principal and I experimented and tweaked things as we went along. If a strategy worked, we kept it. If not, we went back to the drawing board and tried something new. There was no book or manual to show us the way.

The Hands-On Guide to School Improvement, based on this process of trial and error, seeks to fill that gap. You'll be able to use this book to address your most pressing challenges, from creating a culture of harmony and respect to making instructional leadership the focal point of your daily routine. Whether it's the “small stuff” that matters greatly, or the “big picture” of student achievement, *The Hands-On Guide to School Improvement* provides practical guidance that has been successful in the “real world” of three public schools. It shows you:

- how to create rules and procedures that lead to respect and harmony in classrooms, bathrooms, hallways, and cafeterias.
- how to create and implement consistent and effective disciplinary measures.
- how to spend 70 percent of your time out of the office, monitoring teachers and focusing on instructional leadership.
- how to make ongoing professional development the centerpiece of your work with teachers.
- how to empower teachers to manage their classrooms effectively and deal with difficult issues.
- how to initiate difficult conversations with underperforming or unprofessional teachers, and how to recruit effective teachers.

The book is organized into nine chapters, addressing key challenges you will face as an administrator:

- Twelve Core Principles and Practices of Visionary Leadership
- Developing a Strategic Plan for All Stakeholders
- Evaluating Your School and Staff
- Culture and Climate—Establishing a Positive, Safe, and Nurturing Environment
- Professional Development—Creating and Sustaining a Proficient Learning Community
- The Specifics of Instructional Leadership
- Using Academic Interventions Effectively
- Working with Common Core State Standards
- Building Quality Parent Partnerships

Throughout the book, I rely on real-life examples from my work as an administrator to illustrate key points and practices. You'll find some of these examples in sidebars under the heading "From the Principal's Desk." Sometimes I use the name Great School Academy in place of the real names of schools where I've worked. Similarly, while the stories I tell are true, all teachers' names have been changed. I've also included forms and documents I have used as a hands-on instructional leader, some of which are provided as reproducibles that you can adapt to your own situation and needs. See page vii for instructions for downloading these forms, which you can customize and print out. In addition, a short list of questions follows each chapter, encouraging you to reflect on the material you've read and on your goals as an administrator.

I also regularly refer to Charlotte Danielson's *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, which I have found to be an invaluable guide in my work as an administrator. Danielson's four domains—Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities—help frame my standards for teacher excellence.

In the end, no one book can show you the path to successful school reform. I'm not suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach in this book. The schools where I served as an administrator required particular approaches to deal with discipline and academic achievement. Not every school requires exactly the tactics I suggest. Instead, you must test, adapt, and apply your own practices, based on your particular school, teaching

staff, and circumstances. *The Hands-On Guide to School Improvement* is designed to help you do that, supplementing and informing your efforts as an administrator.

I invite you to contact me and share your stories or to tell me how the book was useful to you. I applaud your work and wish you success and satisfaction in your endeavors.

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*Everything I recommend
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CHAPTER ONE

Twelve Core Principles and Practices of Visionary Leadership

On that March day in 2008, it would be an understatement to say that I was extremely nervous.

Ms. Smith and I were making our first visit to a struggling K-8 school located on Chicago's west side. In September, the two of us—Ms. Smith as the principal and myself as the assistant principal—would be taking over at the school. We were visiting the outgoing principal (whom we would be replacing, along with her entire staff) to get a sense of what we would be facing in the fall.

I had been a classroom teacher since 1992 and was no newcomer to the challenges of underperforming schools. But this was my first assignment as an administrator. Ms. Smith had never been a principal before and I had never been an assistant principal. I had no clue about what it took to transform a school. All I could think about were the previous administrators I had worked for, and how harried and distant they often seemed.

The enormity of the challenge hit me the moment we walked through the school's front doors. The school was in chaos and the noise level was sky-high. Kids who should have been in class were scampering through the halls. Instead of checking us in or welcoming us, the security guard slumped in his chair, as if seeking refuge from the bedlam.

"What's all the noise?" I asked him.

"Oh, that's just lunch," he replied.

As we explored further, we saw that the building was dilapidated. I was struck by the peeling paint, dirty floors, and broken water fountains. I thought to myself: *Is this what we think of our children? Is this how much we value them?*

As Ms. Smith and I peeked into classrooms, we saw no sign of structure or discipline. Teachers and students yelled at each other. Kids sat atop

their desks, sometimes pounding on them. In one classroom, a substitute teacher read the newspaper while the entire class was in an uproar. There was no lunchroom. Instead, lunch was being served in shifts in two crowded classrooms.

Had I seen glimpses of schools like this in my career? Yes, I had. But during the previous four years I had been at a much more successful school with a modern interior, up-to-date technology, and a lot of parent participation. When Ms. Smith first contacted me, she asked if I could handle coming to the west side of Chicago, because she knew it would be difficult territory.

When Ms. Smith and I met with the departing principal, she wasn't angry. In fact, she welcomed the coming changes. "This should have been done years ago," she told us. She added, "Don't keep anyone from this staff. They're just not good for students." They had been around for years, she said, and had become complacent.

The principal told us story after story about incompetent teachers—how she had unsuccessfully tried to remove them or take some kind of corrective action. Many were angry and bitter, because now they had to find new jobs by the end of the summer. The principal also showed us knives and other weapons that had been confiscated from students. Many of the school's discipline referrals were for the most aggressive student misconduct.

That day in the school, we could feel the tension around us. Many teachers had mentally checked out already and were just going through the motions, while the students were left to do what they wanted. As we were leaving, we knew we had a huge challenge in front of us. But I didn't feel intimidated by it. Rather, I felt charged. We had a job to do, and I was passionate about getting it done and about fundamentally changing the way those students experienced school. Later that month, Ms. Smith and I began picking a new staff for September.

If you walk into that school today, more than seven years later, you'll see a totally transformed environment. You'll be greeted by a warm staff. You'll see a clean school with creative bulletin boards displaying lots of student work. Students walk the halls quietly, in orderly lines. You'll glance into inviting classrooms and see teachers engaged with their students. Test scores and attendance have risen dramatically, while disciplinary infractions have decreased significantly. And the school now has a real lunchroom.

The difference is between night and day. This book explains how we got there. The core principles I describe will help you:

- create a culture of high-quality learning for students and staff
- develop students who learn more and who can compete academically on standardized assessments
- transform your school into a place where learning is contagious, where kids are eager to come to class and participate, where high achievement is the norm, and where parents and community members become working partners in your success story.

The first core principle in creating and sustaining an effective school is inspiring, supportive, and visionary leadership. Leadership starts from the top; the principal or academic director sets the tone for an entire school. That tone can be negative or it can be positive. I've seen both in my career. In improving school performance, it's absolutely imperative that you provide clear, focused, and intentional leadership. Without such positive leadership, it will be very difficult for you to create transformation.

In the rest of this chapter, I'll explore twelve essential components of effective, visionary leadership. Throughout the book, I'll continually refer back to them and elaborate upon these components.

#1: Speak to Inspire

Inspiring your staff means letting them know that they're the people you want on your team, and that you know they'll help your school overcome whatever obstacles it may face. It means recognizing and empowering that very personal part of them that first drew them to become teachers. They chose the profession for reasons beyond just liking children. They wanted to do something to change society for the better, and they knew that working with students would be the best way to effect that change. Inspiring your staff means speaking to their purpose in life, and acknowledging the reasons why they do what they do. To inspire your staff, work to connect with them and let them know that you realize not everyone can do this work, that they're the right people for the job, and that you're glad to have them on board. A good leader makes teachers feel appreciated.

Start off the year with an inspirational talk with your teachers. Then, throughout the year have one-on-one conversations with them, especially

at crucial times. Around testing time, for example, teachers can get frustrated and tired. That's a good time to let your staff know their work isn't in vain and say: "I see everything you're doing, I know you're putting in more than 100 percent, and I appreciate it." Just like anyone else, teachers gain strength and energy from recognition and acknowledgment.

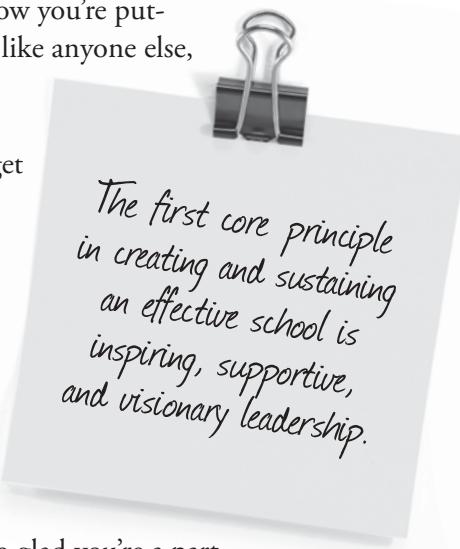
Yes, there are going to be hard days, and things may get more difficult before they get a whole lot better. That's all the more reason to let your staff know that you're on their side and eager to work together. Inspire your staff through little gestures. Cater breakfasts and lunches for them. Give them appreciative cards, plaques, and "hallway high fives." The little things can go a long way toward inspiring your staff.

Too many administrators talk to teachers about what they're doing wrong, but not about what they're doing well. When you begin a conversation with, "I'm so glad you're a part of my staff," you're helping that teacher feel good about being part of your vision. You're empowering that teacher. Sincere praise goes a long way. And when you can walk into classrooms and ask teachers about their weekends or how their parents are doing, it shows that you care about your staff as individuals, not just as employees.

What you do as an administrator affects everyone. Teachers take your positive energy back to their classrooms and transfer it to their students. In turn, students start treating each other better. Inspiration starts at the top and filters all the way down. Tangible progress will result throughout the school year.

#2: Connect Staff with a Vision

To be effective in improving school performance, you need a detailed plan for how you're going to make that happen. In fact, you need multiple plans. There has to be a plan for transforming culture and climate. There has to be a plan for transforming instruction. And there has to be a plan for transforming teaching, or professional development. Change can't be dictated from the top: "I'm the new principal, so everyone follow me." Your staff has



The first core principle in creating and sustaining an effective school is inspiring, supportive, and visionary leadership.

to clearly perceive the short-term and long-term goals and benefits of the changes you're working to make.

When you hire and train teachers and staff to begin the process of transforming your school, you need those people to connect with your vision for the school. You have to clearly and passionately articulate that vision so they will say, "Hey, I want to be a part of this thing. It's going to be transformative work and it's going to change—or even save—the lives of students." And you have to not only articulate the vision, but find a way to make it tangible and doable. These steps—which will be described in greater detail later in the book—will help you do this:

- Lead your staff in a creative workshop to develop the mission and vision.
- Create teambuilding activities to strengthen staff cohesion.
- Discuss goal setting with all staff members during one-on-one meetings. Ask: How will their actions contribute to the vision?

A central part of any transformative vision is conveying high expectations. So talk about high expectations at professional development meetings. Devote student assemblies to the subject, especially at the start of the year. Tell students your expectations for them are 200 percent, and make it clear that they must work to meet these expectations. Emphasize these points continually throughout the school year.

Constantly keep your vision front and center in everything you do. Describe it in the simplest possible terms, so people remember it and can carry it forward. At every professional development meeting, reiterate that vision. For example:

- To provide high-quality, standards-based instruction for all students
- To promote the value of learning, emphasizing creativity, character, and social-emotional development
- To nurture quality performance among students and staff, so that everyone is able to reach their highest potential through a differentiated, effective, and rigorous curriculum within a caring, safe, and orderly environment
- To prepare and equip all students to be contributors to a global society

Talk regularly and passionately about how you're going to make these goals become reality. It's okay for a teacher to email you and say, "I have

some thoughts about my role as it relates to the vision. Can I bounce some things off you, while you give me more clarity?” In a positive school culture, that kind of collaboration happens all the time. It gives teachers confidence that they can make the vision happen.

#3: Support Your Staff Around the Little Things

Seemingly little things can often disgruntle teachers, especially when they already feel stressed or overwhelmed. Schools located in high-poverty areas, in particular, often don’t have the supplies and luxuries that other schools have, and the disbursement of materials and funds may be limited. If teachers can’t get a pack of pencils, make copies, or receive supplies from the main office, they may feel angry because of it. In turn, they may struggle to teach effectively. If these things are taking place, supportive leadership is faltering.

To prevent this scenario, you can work on anticipating these “little things” and preventing them to the best of your ability. Buy supplies at the start of the year and provide teachers with pencils, pens, paper, staplers, pencil sharpeners, folders, and crayons—all those things that can make such a huge difference. If your school has uniforms, you can purchase these well before the start of the school year so no one is scrambling at the last minute. You can ensure that necessities such as heating and cooling systems are working in all classrooms. You can also work to be sure that every classroom is set up with minimal technology needs and all teachers have been trained on any new technology before the year begins.

This sends an important message: we’re not going to bicker and argue over this stuff. In transforming a school, you’ve got bigger fish to fry. When children sit down in their seats, their teacher must be ready and able to teach effectively.

#4: Know How to Delegate

In my early days as an administrator, I’d come home overloaded with work. My husband observed, “If you have that much to do, then you haven’t delegated.” That was a powerful moment of realization. I had hired a highly capable and experienced staff, yet I wasn’t empowering them to use their skills to the maximum.

An effective leader has to empower her entire staff and others in the school family—not just teachers, but also parents and caregivers, community members, and partnering organizations. This is a key aspect of improving school performance. At the end of the day, a leader can't do it all herself. You have to communicate the vision and present a coherent plan to achieve that vision. And then you have to send forth your staff to carry it out. That requires delegation.

Be confident in your team members and let them do their jobs. Trust that you've made the right decisions in hiring them or keeping them on your staff. If you're not delegating, you're not using your staff's talents to the fullest.

#5: Create “Buy-In”

Working with adults can sometimes be more difficult than working with students. For the most part, students are going to comply because you have authority over them. You can generally win them over by providing structure, positive support, and social services.



A central part of
any transformative
vision is conveying
high expectations.

You can't always win over adults this way, however. If you don't connect well with your staff and build a trusting relationship with them, problems will develop, often over the smallest things. That's why many administrators are short, easily frustrated, and not as accessible as you'd like them to be. A huge issue in improving performance is assembling the right people and communicating with them in the right way.

That means creating buy-in—the motivation and desire among teachers and other partners to work with you to fulfill the vision. Buy-in means people agree to support your goals, often by becoming involved in creating those goals. My experiences with administrators over the years—both positive and negative—affect how I run my school today. By doing positive things for staff, you can create buy-in and strengthen their willingness to work hard with you to fulfill your vision. Without that cooperation, no vision can reach fruition. Positive things may include a staff attendance incentive in the form of chocolate bars or other treats, which you can pass out with a note reading, “You’re worth a lot to our school. Thank you for

being here every day!” Additionally, you could feature a Teacher of the Week in each newsletter, highlighting special events, valuable skills, or notable accomplishments.

At one school where I taught, the principal was very “old school.” She would walk into our classrooms in an intimidating manner, sit at our desks while we were teaching, and go through our desks and file drawers (she considered this part of our observation). She also gave us each a piece of hot pink paper with these rules listed on it:

Don’t come late.

Don’t talk in the halls.

Don’t leave the restroom unlocked.

Don’t submit your lesson plans late.

She seemed to blame teachers for everything, and everything she said had a negative tone, even her “good morning.” Getting a compliment from her was like pulling teeth. She didn’t listen to her staff, scheduling morning meetings at 7:45, although none of us wanted to meet that early. Even when she offered to pay us to attend, no one did. She was also completely controlling. Once she walked into a teacher’s room and saw something about handwriting instruction she didn’t like. She bought every teacher a student-level cursive handwriting book and gave us a due date for completing the assignments. I was stunned and angry. I looked around at the other teachers in the meeting and wanted to say, “Is she serious?”

Not surprisingly, this principal didn’t create buy-in. No one would stay after work or take on special projects. As a result, she struggled to increase academic performance. A lot of the staff gave up and just collected their checks.

At another school where I taught, I had the opposite experience: I saw how a truly effective leader creates buy-in. This principal came into my classroom and gave me the constructive feedback I needed. She was warm and supportive. At our Tuesday meetings she complimented the staff, pleasantly and directly. She held teacher appreciation breakfasts and lunches, and gave us small gifts. At the end of the school year she held an ice cream party for the staff, gave a nice going-away talk, and chatted with us about our plans for the summer. At other schools I had worked hard, but at that school I worked *smarter*.

I told myself, “If I become a school principal, I’m going to do that.”

When teachers trust you and know that you care about them, you'll get so much more from them. They'll stay longer to make sure projects are taken care of. They'll come in early, because they have a sense of camaraderie. They'll work more collaboratively with you and their teammates. But, for this to happen, they have to feel that you respect them and care about them.

#6: Be Proactive and Take Chances

When transforming a school, you can't wait until every detail is perfectly planned to take action. As an administrator, work to start new programs and to try new ideas proactively, even if you don't know exactly what's going to happen or what the results will be. You'll only see change by making changes, not by waiting until you can be 100 percent sure about every new idea.

If you don't encourage teachers to try new things quickly, they may grow hesitant to do so. This issue arose at one school when we were trying a major change in how teachers worked with students. We wanted to cluster kids in fifth through eighth grades in small groups according to their ability levels, not their grade levels. We discussed this "shift," as we called it, during the fall term, but some staff wanted to postpone trying it until after the winter break. Other staff wanted to start right away and work out the kinks as we went along, so we would know what worked (and didn't work) by the spring term. That's the approach I favored: Let's go ahead and get this done now! Soon everyone was on board, we made the shift, and it was a great success.

I absolutely love that thinking. Try to make it your motto as an administrator: Don't wait to make changes. And when changes don't fit your vision, then you'll know, sooner rather than later, where and how you need to make further changes and adjustments.

#7: Initiate Crucial and Difficult Conversations

An effective leader is able to initiate important conversations with staff—especially when those conversations are difficult. This is essential, especially when you can't replace an entire staff and must bring existing staff up to speed. Being honest with staff about improving their performance is critical to your success. When you're working with employees who are not meeting expectations, you have to be able to say, "What I saw in your classroom

wasn't effective. I have a suggestion for trying it a different way." You have to be able to deal with staff directly and say, "I'd like to share something that I believe will enhance your instruction."

When I was a classroom teacher, one of my principals struggled to have critical conversations with her staff around instruction and discipline. The school was surrounded by housing projects, served low-income students, and had its challenging days. Even with these challenges, the school's culture and performance would have improved greatly if the principal had gone into classrooms and initiated difficult conversations with teachers who weren't doing their jobs. Instead, she stayed in her office and staff never saw her.

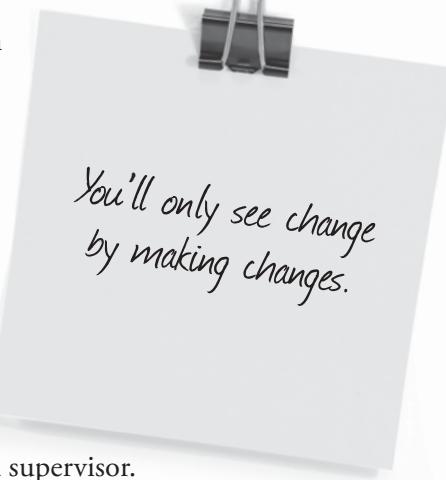
One reason she had difficulty making her expectations known was that she had gotten too close to her staff and had lost her professional distance. Naturally, it's important to be cordial and friendly with your colleagues. But it's just as important to remember that, first and foremost, you are their administrator and supervisor. Hold your staff accountable, just as you, in turn, will be held accountable by your superiors.

When a staff member is not meeting your expectations, don't postpone starting the tough conversation you need to have. Pull the teacher aside—in private, if possible—and say, "According to what we discussed in our staff handbook about lesson plans, your lesson plans are late," or, "Your lesson plans are not as detailed as I would like them to be. How can I support you around this?"

The teacher may say she had a busy weekend, or may mention another extenuating circumstance, and that's okay. You can allow an occasional excuse, but the teacher has to know by the end of the conversation that you expect detailed lesson plans on your desk before six a.m. on Monday or there will be consequences.

If you don't initiate difficult conversations in a prompt manner, you risk losing control of your staff and perpetuating or exacerbating whatever challenges your school is facing, rather than confronting and overcoming them.

Also remember that *how* you have the conversation is just as important as having it at all. The old saying really does apply: "It's not what you say, but



You'll only see change
by making changes.