

Journal 19

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Every Child, Every Classroom, Every School

Hello, I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

Last week I described the four strategic directives which anchor what we do as a school system. Today I want to talk about our first strategic directive, our highest priority: focusing on learning and teaching.

This is obviously the reason why we are here. However, the reality and potential trap for any school system is that it is very easy to lose focus on your top priority while dealing with the day to day tasks of keeping the organization running smoothly.

That is why I made focusing on learning and teaching our first strategic directive. We needed to remind ourselves that EVERYTHING we do in the Wake County Public School System must support learning and teaching. I remember some very interesting conversations with some central services departments whose job responsibilities are, on the surface, far removed from the classroom -- and listening to them connect the dots from what they do every day to supporting learning and teaching in the classroom.

Whatever our job, it is important for every employee to understand that what we do isn't done in a vacuum, but for the ultimate benefit of our students. Focusing on our core business in that way helps eliminate the impact of distractions.

As part of our annual budget planning process, any change in a line item must be supported by a written business case that is aligned with one of the four strategic directives. We must demonstrate to the Board of Education, as well as our community, the clear recognition that learning and teaching comes first.

As a result, we've been able to better align our resources and goals around our core business. That way, when difficult financial decisions need to be made about where our resources need to be spent, everyone understands our priorities.

That's only one of the benefits of having our first core strategic directive support learning and teaching. Another is that our highest strategic directive has raised all of our employees' awareness of, and helped them take greater responsibility for, student learning. Everyone has a role to play in your child becoming more successful in the classroom.

I'll give you just two examples. This past spring, our grounds maintenance staff purposefully scheduled outdoor lawn mowing and facilities work around when our students were taking their EOG and EOC tests. Now this might seem like a small thing, but after being a classroom teacher trying to administer a test while they were cutting the grass right outside my window, I can appreciate the impact on my students' ability to concentrate.

A second example was the pledge by our transportation staff, our bus drivers and those who keep the buses moving, to ensure that our students would be delivered on time to school, because if they didn't do their jobs and get our children to school, our classroom teachers wouldn't be able to give their full attention and talents to their students.

Two simple things, but when we compound them with dozens, or even hundreds more across the system, we begin to have a significant impact on what is happening in our classrooms.

Our renewed focus has also reduced temptations regarding rolling out "new programs" and "new initiatives" as quick fixes for accelerating our students' academic progress. It's not a new initiative's job to improve student performance. It's a shared responsibility between our students, our staff, our parents and our community for each child's learning.

It's about working together better, rather than relying on a product -- because, after all, there are no silver bullet solutions in education. Instead, learning and teaching improves by establishing a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. Next week, we'll look at some of the concrete steps we have taken to lay that foundation in the Wake County Public School System.

Thanks, and I look forward to talking to you again soon.