

Six Steps to Boost Student Learning

A Leader's Guide

Karen A. Goeller

An **Eye On Education** Book



Six Steps to Boost Student Learning

This inspirational and reader-friendly guide offers school leaders six quick and achievable steps for transforming teaching and learning into a high-impact action plan. Author Karen A. Goeller shows how effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment work can help students overcome college, career, and life challenges. With its clear steps and concrete advice, this text will help school leaders in any district ignite passion for continuous school improvement and sustain a culture of ongoing and collaborative learning.

Topics include:

- crafting a purpose statement that will rally students, teachers, and families around an essential focus;
- using data to boost school improvement and student performance;
- streamlining curriculum and instruction;
- building meaningful relationships among students, teachers, and families;
- leveraging instructional strategies to improve student engagement; and
- energizing staff and students with networking strategies and transition activities.

Each chapter offers research tips, guides to action, numerous examples, reflection questions, immediate take-aways, and downloadable tools.

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About the Author

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Preface

Why I Wrote This Book

Stakes are extremely high as students move through K-12 classrooms and schools along the complex and ever-evolving pathway toward success. How can we best prepare students for the critical thinking, creative problem solving, and twenty-first-century communication skills needed for higher education demands, rapidly expanding technology, and a globally competitive workforce? How can we best guide students to emerge from K-12, ready to persist as learners and to act as responsible and caring citizens?

School leaders are working feverishly in school improvement efforts to ensure that all students are moving toward higher goals. Most certainly, good teaching and learning matters in ensuring each student's future success. School leaders must be deeply intentional about aligning college, career, and life expectations with the good teaching and learning work that needs to take place in classrooms and schools.

Teaching and learning is the toughest and most visible part of the school leader's job. Like the definition of student success, the meaning of school success is also multi-faceted. The good news is that we DO have access to valid and reliable educational research. We DO know from researchers and practitioners about those teaching and learning practices that have proven effects and widespread applications. And, we DO know from school leaders about what works in various settings for certain students. School leaders are desperately seeking that "aha moment" when ease meets high-impact, and the right teaching and learning components come together in an all-in-one plan.

What You Will Find

This book offers school leaders six quick and achievable steps to transform teaching and learning into a lean plan, driving greater student outcomes and resulting in a better school culture. The book has four primary objectives:

- to empower principals and teachers to lead the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] (2015) flexibly with useful, confidence-boosting steps;
- to provide evidence-based strategies that enable students to reach higher college, career, and life goals;
- to solve the very real needs of crazy-busy practitioners by streamlining teaching and learning big components into a high quality plan; and
- to ignite passion for continuous school improvement and sustain a culture of ongoing and collaborative learning.

Purpose and intentional design are essential to exceptional performance. Good teaching and learning involves prioritizing and streamlining the essential components. Innovation does not have to be bigger and more complex. Too many scattered and disjointed teaching and learning parts are more problematic for school leaders than not enough. Six field-proven and hyper-practical steps will translate purpose into action and yield big results.

Practitioner voices and professional connections are needed for school leaders to bring about a culture of sustained, continuous improvement. Growing student learning requires growing teacher learning. School leaders will take on new roles and build more robust relationships with others to bring about real change. Great leadership is shared leadership as educators learn and grow together.

What Is the Organization of This Book?

School leaders are always learners first. After a brief introduction, principals and teachers will find six high-impact components that will allow them to reimagine teaching and learning and accelerate student growth in classrooms and schools.

Step One: Focus on What Matters Most for Students

School leaders will begin with the basics of good teaching and learning. Crafting and communicating a teaching and learning purpose statement will rally students, teachers, and families around an essential focus. School leaders will then be armed with research and legislative guidance to set an aggressive equity agenda and ensure that all students have rich opportunities to learn. School leaders will assist students in developing growth mindsets and foster the grit and agency necessary to move them to deeper learning. School leaders will interact with clear descriptions of college and career targets and learn easy ways to communicate the critical information to families. When it comes to the big lesson of teaching and learning, principals and teachers must be visionary leaders, well versed and equipped to prepare students for what is headed their way.

Step Two: Lead Learning with Easy Data Use

A conceptualization model will assist school leaders in organizing the data work while moving students closer to college, career, and life goals. Data work will energize school improvement, professional development, classroom instruction, and student performance and growth. Principals and teachers will use their own collaborative data protocol to embed meaningful practices into the culture of the school. Teachers will become instructional leaders who drive student learning with real-time data use. Focusing on the process of growth will help students better understand their learning and make real gains. Interactive data activities will draw families into the school as active partners in their children's learning.

Step Three: Prioritize and Simplify Curriculum and Instruction

Step three brings the thunder in streamlining curriculum and instruction. School leaders will optimize the use of local curriculum, including standards, textbooks and supplementary materials, pacing guides, and unit and lesson plans. Quality classroom instruction includes simple instructional routines and evidence-based, engaging strategies. The higher college and career targets will become reachable for students as school leaders better align the needed reading and writing skills and abilities. School leaders

will engage with effective and implementation-ready reading and writing practices to prepare students for higher education and the workplace. Downloadable tools will help school leaders immediately impact students' quality and quantity of reading and writing opportunities.

Step Four: Strengthen Learning with Relationship Building

Step four features school leaders who have the know-how and the passion to build intentional relationships among students, teachers, and families that bring about greater student outcomes. Building student capacity begins in quality classrooms as teachers strategically differentiate learning to meet the needs of all students. Principals and teachers also accelerate student capacity through design of classroom teams. Capacity building for principals and teachers involves embedded professional development using modeling and coaching and school improvement rounds. Engaging families in meaningful partnerships builds trusting relationships and more learning.

Step Five: Leverage Powerful Pieces to Accelerate Growth

Strategically adding BIG pieces to good teaching and learning will boost and energize the work of students, teachers, families, and school leaders themselves. Principals and teachers will give students rigorous speaking and learning opportunities and power up learning. Vocabulary achievement will increase through direct instruction, wide reading, and schoolwide vocabulary applications. School leaders will enhance achievement with active social studies instruction, using biographies and autobiographies, community learning, historical storytelling, service learning, and citizenship learning. Schoolwide literacy strategies will continue to stretch student learning. The grant writing process will spur on school leaders and grant writing teams to find creative solutions that support all students.

Step Six: Energize Staff and Students for the Next School Year

Principals and teachers must invest in their own leadership and learning, modeling a passion for continual inquiry about the latest teaching and

learning research and emerging trends. Fresh, implementation-ready networking strategies will engage leaders at the school, university, and state levels. Ideas are illustrated for supporting new teachers through mentoring, shadowing, staff development, and a teacher think tank. School leaders will inspire the best teachers by showcasing their skills, empowering them in new roles, and enabling them to lead professional conversations. Jump-starting the school year for students with proven transition activities will promote optimism and hope about college, career, and life success right from the start.

What Special Features Enhance This Book?

A beginning-of-chapter learning vignette invites readers into the real world of practicing school leaders, captured from my own teaching and administrative experiences in schools and districts in multiple states. An Essential Question sharpens the focus, stimulates thinking, and aids readers in making important connections among the upcoming strategies. Research Tips give school leaders the right information in bite-size chunks that are easy to communicate and share with others. Evidence-based strategies are presented that can be quickly and easily implemented in classrooms and schools. Stories from *Educators Making a Difference Each Day* give readers access points into the “hard work and heart” of principals and teachers in other school settings whose seemingly small actions bring consequential results. Guide to Action boxes weave practical applications strategically into each step. Numerous examples provide fresh ideas for easy replication. Reflection Questions provide more opportunities for readers to address what perplexes us. Leadership Take-Aways offer inspirational ways to apply the research and mobilize others to act. Downloadable Tools provide school leaders with ready resources for classroom and school use.

What Are Potential Uses of the Book?

Practicing and aspiring school leaders are always looking for ways to build teaching and learning cultures that boost student learning. This text takes a broader view of student and school success (beyond testing and

accountability grades) yet also recognizes and relays the urgency in preparing students for the very real college and career challenges ahead.

This text challenges principals and teachers to grow new leadership and learning opportunities for students, teachers, and families. Building relationships and teams between and among adults and students enhances the school's capacity for powerful learning. Making fresh connections and forging innovative leadership roles in classrooms and schools create forward movement and more learning.

Principals and teachers are seeking the most useful school improvement resources. Each of the six steps can be used as a springboard for more comprehensive study and discussion. Reflection questions and leadership take-aways continue the dialogue for inquiry groups, team meetings, faculty retreats, and networking meetings. Even better, perhaps the questions and take-aways stimulate conversation and more creative ideas well into the evening at the local coffee shop.

School leaders deserve an easy read in their precious downtime. With its clear steps and concrete strategies, this text offers hyper-practical ideas to consider for implementation in a variety of settings. The stories may resonate with other school leaders and add a joyful moment in bringing back their own memories. Likewise, this text will serve as a guide to university leadership instructors about what is real in our honored profession.



Acknowledgments

My education colleagues, who are too numerous to name, have impacted this text the most. The journey to improve K-12 education continues with the vision and dedicated work of those in classrooms and schools every day who need to be acknowledged as the real heroes. I am the fortunate one who can tell their stories and mine, and hopefully make a contribution of lasting value to our profession.

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I thank my husband, Michael Goeller, for his unconditional support. As I work to become a better educator, he always has the words to ground me in what is right. Finally, having two children of my own just complete college (Scott from business school and Kate from medical school) has made me acutely aware of the enormous challenges that families face and of the awesome responsibility that school leaders must acknowledge and act upon to prepare our K-12 students.



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Tools available online

- eResource A SAT and ACT Discussion Checklist
- eResource B Data Literacy Discussion Questions
- eResource C Schoolwide Reading Analysis Questions
- eResource D Schoolwide Writing Analysis Questions
- eResource E School Improvement Rounds Learning Log
- eResource F Major Speaking and Listening Opportunities Chart
- eResource G Grant Implementation Activities Chart
- eResource H Teaching and Learning Interview Questions
- eResource I Teacher Mentoring Conversation Starters
- eResource J Transition Goals and Strategies Skyrocket Student Success



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Introduction

The annual back-to-school meeting is about to begin in the auditorium. Students, teachers, and families await opening remarks. What if . . . instead of explaining school rules or this year's fundraiser, school leaders stepped up and addressed the good teaching and learning components that matter most for all students? The large screen behind them would spotlight students fully engaged in academic talk and classroom teams. What if . . . principals and teachers shared their commitment to helping all students build growth mindsets and take ownership of their learning? What if . . . school leaders then challenged students to become effective, everyday data users, working toward their own ambitious goals? What if . . . principals and teachers conveyed specific ways that students would accelerate wide reading and increase their reading stamina? What if . . . school leaders praised the modeling and coaching and school improvement rounds that were spurring collective growth in good teaching? What if . . . school leaders previewed schoolwide service learning activities that would transform students into academic leaders and responsible citizens? And then, what if . . . school leaders closed by inviting families to join in vibrant and meaningful partnerships that would enhance learning for their children?

What if . . . school leaders advocated such clear and powerful steps that would push all students closer to their postsecondary and workforce goals? With principals and teachers serving as enthusiastic champions of teaching and learning, the auditorium atmosphere quickly swells with hope and possibilities. Good teaching and learning has begun. This simple guide will help school leaders prepare and stand ready for such an annual meeting.

Preview of the Book's Essential Content

Six Steps to Boost Student Learning: A Leader's Guide arms school leaders with clear and achievable steps to bring about quality teaching and learning and prepare K-12 students for the college, career, and life challenges ahead. Readers will interact with evidence, rich experiences, and practitioner voices as they think more deeply about accelerating meaningful outcomes for students. Each step begins with an overarching question to help school leaders conceptualize what is essential for good teaching and learning.

Step One: How Do School Leaders Focus on What Matters Most for Students?

How do school leaders even begin to create an environment that will enable all students to reach college, career, and life goals? School leaders who couple passion with a teaching and learning purpose are ready to seek out the rich learning opportunities that all students deserve. Advocating and acting for school fairness and building growth-oriented thinking across the school pushes the learning forward. With the right strategies, students become gritty and agency-ready for joining the global workforce. School leaders must translate the college and career expectations ahead into understandable language and create know-how for families to help their children.

Step Two: How Do School Leaders Use Data Strategically and Easily to Enhance the Quality of Teaching and Achieve Greater Student Outcomes?

Too much data can be overwhelming, and not knowing which data to collect and why can be even more frustrating. Using a clear model, school leaders can better conceptualize their data use and prioritize areas in which to act. Principals and teachers can develop their own collaborative data protocol and seize the right ingredients to move forward aggressively in school improvement efforts. School leaders will urge teachers to accept new leadership roles in collecting and studying plentiful classroom and school data. Even families will become passionate data users when they join their children in monitoring growth.

Step Three: How Do School Leaders Ensure the Highest Quality of Curriculum and Instruction?

Curriculum and instruction can become an unwieldy arena with too many disconnected parts. School leaders are often required to develop local curriculum, but what does that look like? Directing others will become easier with simple instructional routines and evidence-based, engaging strategies. Instead of looking with skepticism at the unbelievable expectations within the college and career targets, school leaders will thoughtfully align their similar components and move forward with ease. School leaders will recognize what higher levels of reading and writing instruction should look like in classrooms and gain confidence and new ideas for change.

Step Four: How Do School Leaders Build Capacity for Teaching and Learning among Students, Teachers, and Families?

Building capacity for greater learning involves intentional relationship building among students, teachers, and families. Differentiation strategies and team-building add energy to classrooms and boost student capacity. Modeling and coaching allow teachers themselves to design the learning that best helps them determine which teaching practices work for which students. Likewise, school improvement rounds give principals and teachers other chances to participate in inquiry around individual and schoolwide goals. Confidence about meeting students' needs expands as principals and teachers develop new leadership capacities. Purposeful school and family partnerships will result in stronger relationships and better learning.

Step Five: What Additional Pieces Can School Leaders Leverage to Accelerate Student Growth?

School leaders have many innovative, yet untapped BIG pieces to bring to the teaching and learning table. How many times do teachers really leverage the value of speaking and listening in improving student achievement? Immersing the school in irresistible vocabulary words and phrases powers up learning without costing the school a dime! Social studies instruction adds vibrancy and active engagement while building better citizens and stronger minds. Implementing higher levels of literacy standards

across all content areas brings experimentation with different strategies for deeper learning. Grant writing fast-tracks growth and is an amazing lever for molding coalitions of support for students.

Step Six: How Can School Leaders Use the Summer Break to Design Powerful Activities that Jump-Start Learning for the Upcoming School Year?

Summer break is the time to invest in learning and prioritize those activities that will have the most impact for students in the upcoming year. School leaders who advance their own knowledge base can then lead important conversations about child development, direct curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and contribute to decisions about high-yield practices. Networking with colleagues brings fresh associations and creative ideas. Having a comprehensive plan in place for new teachers relieves anxiety and moves the learning forward. And, nurturing the top performers brings unlimited chances for renewal and professional satisfaction. Powerful student transition activities will ready new and incoming students for a phenomenal school year.

ESSA Offers Frameworks and Fresh Possibilities

The Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] (2015) brings legislative guidance about topics that matter most to students and schools. ESSA's elements of fairness, opportunities to learn, multiple assessment measures, monitoring of student growth, and principal and teacher development align seamlessly with good teaching and learning. School leaders must grab ESSA's critical elements to frame school improvement efforts and drive greater teaching and learning.

ESSA (2015) ushers in optimism about leadership and learning possibilities at the school and district levels. Principals, teachers, students, and families can remix roles and strengthen relationships that result in more learning. Yes, ESSA requires testing on challenging standards, demands accountability for progress, and has consequences for low-performing schools (2015). However, the federal law also specifically recognizes practitioner expertise and experience in directing evidence-based practices