

An Evaluation of the Systemic Efficacy Through the Lens of Six Principles that Advance Student
Achievement at Costello Elementary School in Troy, Michigan

Grayson W. McKinney

Oakland University

Author Note

Grayson W. McKinney, Department of Organizational Leadership, Oakland University.

Grayson McKinney is currently a graduate student, working towards an Education
Specialist degree in leadership.

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Formal Organization, taught by Dr. Karyn Wells.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Grayson McKinney, 1401
Oakstone Drive, Rochester Hills, MI 48309.

Contact: gwmckinney@oakland.edu

Abstract

This paper explores the practices of one school located in Michigan, and examines it through the lenses of six principles, as detailed by Alan M. Blankstein, that are said to advance student achievement. The six frames through which the school and its practices are examined include looking at its common mission, ensuring achievement for all, collaborative teaming, data-based decision making, engaging families, and building a leadership capacity among the staff. Conclusions are drawn about the areas in which the school excels, which include the community building piece, as well as the activity of creating sustainable leadership capacity among the staff. Areas for improvement can be found in the principles of collaborative teaming, and making decisions based on data.

Keywords: schools, students, community, learning, achievement, elementary, mission

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Introduction

Anyone who has been in a public school in the last decade or so as a student, teacher, parent, secretary, nurse, paraprofessional, custodian, or administrator has felt and witnessed the enormous amount of pressure that has been mounting on school districts and their employees. It has been felt and carried, sometimes crushing those on whose shoulders it falls, creating increased anxiety, depression, burn-out, and who knows how many other psychological disorders and physical ailments. Schools are tasked with providing for the children of our future the skills and knowledge they needed for the 21st century. Educators need resources and training in order to avoid the systemic failure of their pupils and educators. There are professionals throughout the educational system who are aware of certain concrete and comprehensive actions that can provide their schools and districts with a different approach. These elements can provide a framework to help us tackle and achieve the worthy goals that have been set before us. Using the six principles laid out in Alan M. Blankstein's book, Failure is not an Option, we are offered a whole-school transformational model that can improve the performance of educational programs.

What would be possible if your school were filled with teachers who not only knew and understood the common mission, vision, values and goals held by the institution, but lived it every day? What would it feel like to see achievement attained by all students who were responsible, showed initiative, were creative in their problem solving? What could you accomplish if teachers practiced collaborative teaming, and strove for continuous improvement by making decisions based on data collected? How much farther would a teacher's impact be

carried in a school where active engagement from families and the community was a given? A school where teachers have a built-in capacity for leadership, along with these other guiding principles, would be set up for success from the beginning. In this paper, I will analyze the achievement in this school to determine whether or not these characteristics are present, and to what degree.

I am a 4th grade teacher at Costello Elementary School in Troy, Michigan, and have been since the 2012-2013 school year. Costello is the second smallest of twelve elementary schools in the Troy School District (TSD), with an average population of 350 pre-K through 5th grade students. Troy School District is a public school district located in Troy, Michigan in Oakland County, a suburb twenty miles north of Detroit. It consists of twelve elementary buildings, four middle schools, three high schools, and an alternative education facility. Troy School District is known for its exemplary schools, as every school carries the prestigious Blue Ribbon Award, is North Central Accredited, and has student achievement levels that are among the best in the nation. Costello Elementary follows the general demographic trends of the community, and as of 2010 had a racial composition of 74% Caucasian, 19% Asian American, 4% African American, and approximately 2% of Hispanic or Latino descent. The socio-economic status of the community members, according to the 2010 census, indicated that the median income of families in Troy was \$79,000. Education is highly valued, as is apparent in the 95%+ turn-out rate for parent-teacher conferences over the last three consecutive years. Given the high level of excellence that Costello and all of the Troy schools have and continue to achieve, it should quickly become apparent which of Blankstein's principles are functioning at the highest levels, and what the biggest challenges include.

Principle 1: Common Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

The common mission, vision, values, and goals of a school are a product of the culture, or “the way things are done around here.” Whether one is consciously aware of it or not, the culture of a school represents the history of the staff. It’s a feeling you get when you walk in the door. It is heard in the greeting you receive upon arrival, it can be seen reflected in the faces of the students walking throughout the halls, and in the demeanor of the parents as they drop off their children for school.

Our mission at Costello Elementary states that we will utilize best practices to increase achievement for all. This boilerplate mission statement is straightforward and to the point, although it is not a “living document” by any means. It was pretty lifeless when I arrived in 2012, and has not been rehashed, discussed, or even referenced to my knowledge since I have been teaching there. It is the popular choice for many teachers in our building as an email signature line, but beyond that, I would be willing to bet that nobody- staff, students, or otherwise- can recite it. That isn’t to say, however, that we are not actively trying to use best practices to increase academic achievement for all. Indeed, that is what we spend almost every minute of our staff meetings, professional learning committee (PLC) meetings, and North Central Accreditation (NCA) meetings discussing best practice. The culture of our educational community naturally reflects the our commitment to this vision.

The TSD’s website has an entire section dedicated to explaining the district’s mission, vision, values (known to the district as “common beliefs”), and goals. Again, most of the literature found there are standard, admirable targets to shoot for, but they seem lifeless and without much reference. Our mission statement declares that the purpose of the Troy School

District is to ensure learning for all members of the school community. Our vision is to become an exemplary learning community that supports innovation and is committed to continuous improvement. The Troy School District, it states, will “be a place where a collaborative community develops curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment to ensure all students learn.”

This is where I feel like our district goes above and beyond the normal requirement of an education institution to explain, point by point, what our exemplary learning community will attempt to create a collaborative culture that ensures all students learn. This vision is multifaceted, and gives additional explanations for each main idea, much as we try to teach our students to do in their own writing. We are always telling students how they need to say more than one sentence about each new idea. We aim to create a climate that fosters instructional collaboration, a community of trust, mutual respect, empathy, an appreciation for diversity, and a physically safe and well-maintained learning environment. They have also given details about how they plan to implement a relevant and rigorous curriculum, with lessons aligned to the current curriculum benchmarks, grade level content expectations (GLCE) or high school content expectations (HSCE). It sounds to me like these need to be reviewed and updated to remain relevant. At any rate, we plan to use a comprehensive curriculum designed to ensure that all students have opportunities to exceed local, state, and national standards, as well as utilize innovative programs developed from current research and instructional trends.

The framers of our schools’ ideal culture also thought it necessary to continuously research, create, evaluate, and adapt best practice instructional strategies to ensure learning for all students. Along with that, it is our goal to make purposeful use of instructional time (no more

birthday parties in the classroom this year), and we strive to use instructional strategies that meet the needs of all learners. This last point sounds very familiar to Costello's own mission statement.

I feel like all of the teachers at Costello are committed to living up to the vision set before us. Teachers in Troy are very proud of their national recognition, and the progressiveness of their teaching techniques. If I had to name names, I would say that Bemis, recipient of the 2014 National Blue Ribbon standard of academic excellence award, in the category of exemplary high performing school, is kind of the flagship of our elementary flotilla. I say this because they are consistently referred to as the "what you should be doing" school. If there is ever a question about what the next step is in taking our students to the next level in terms of their thinking, we ask ourselves, what are they doing at Bemis. However, the fact that we are asking that question shows a lot about our commitment to the growth of our students. We constantly use ongoing common, standardized assessments as instruments to design and adapt instruction that ensures quality learning. We design formative and summative assessments based on current research, and monitor progress across grade levels and subjects. Also, our assessments are not all "by the book", but rather have begun to consider all learning styles, and assess students for understanding, rather than simply on the curriculum. When assessments are used, there is always the focus on asking the higher level thinking type of questions, not just the rote memorization of facts and figures. We embody the pursuit of deeper thinking in our thoughts, words, and actions as we model. Regularly scheduled meetings outside of our contractual obligations focus on helping students to make their thinking visible, based on the theories of Ron Ritchhart.

Ultimately, we at Costello are committed to excellence. We play a key role in the community and have a responsibility to be a resource for enhancing the quality of life for all citizens, parents and students alike. I myself am on a parent outreach committee, helping to assist parents with any technological issues they may have and need support in. This continual betterment of the people shows the importance we place on creating partnerships with the entire community.

Principle 2: Ensuring Achievement for all Students

Achievement is important for all students at Costello, and the commitment to this standard results in opportunities and challenges for the faculty. There is definitely pressure to look at the trends in standardized testing, and watch our percentage of partially proficient students decrease, and exceedingly proficient students increase. But there is such a caring warmth within our staff, that while we do care about ensuring academic achievement, we also know that there is another component that is just as important: the longterm happiness of our students. Positive self-concept and respect for others is fundamental to teaching and learning, and it is apparent at Costello. We are currently striving toward creating a system of Positive Behavior Supports, and Interventions (PBIS), to highlight and kindle positive behavior within our students.

As one illustrative example, I'll share what happened at a meeting I attended the other day, in which we were asked to jot down in a visible thinking routine called "chalk talk", the things we most hoped for our students to have and be able to do as future adult versions of themselves. We wrote in silence, thinking about what a successful member of society looks like and acts like, and made exclamation points and stars by the notes of our colleagues, as we found points with which we agreed. After all was said and done, we reflected on the qualities we had

written down. We included items such as responsibility, communication skills, problem solving abilities, and creativity. We thought it would be wise to wish them ability to work well in a team, to exhibit leadership qualities, and to have accountability for their actions. We want nothing but happiness for our students as they grown into adulthood, and in order to achieve that, we thought in necessary for them to have adaptability, and initiative to be self-motivated.

The one thing we noticed that was lacking from our visionary list of student attributes, was anything remotely academic. Nowhere did we say we wanted them to be good readers or able to solve word problems in math, to memorize the scientific method or know the five themes of geography. So what did we want for them? Characteristics of nice people. Skills are not sufficient; we must also have the disposition to use them. Possessing thinking skills and abilities alone is insufficient for good thinking. One must also have the disposition to use those abilities to think and awareness of occasions for thinking as well as their thinking skills and abilities. Having a disposition toward thinking enhances the likelihood that one can effectively use one's abilities new situations. This process showed that we most desperately wished to allow for the unique qualities of each individual student to shine through, and that they will grow up having general qualities, applicable to whatever field or cultural situation they find themselves in.

I think this spoke volumes to the heart of our staff, that we want our students to have principles and skills rather than knowledge that could be found on Wikipedia or merely "Googled." When Blankstein (2013) describes what it means to ensure achievement for all students, he asks the question, "What do we do when students *don't* learn?" (p.142) Our staff's vision for an ideal educational model shows our collective commitment to our school's students more than anything else. We love our students, and believe they can all succeed.

We ensure that they feel connected to multiple adults in the building, so they can have a security net of people looking out for them. We are in the process of developing “families,” small heterogenous groups of students that will meet once a month with an adult other than their classroom teacher, to teach life skills, such as cooperation and collaboration, and the four character traits that were chosen by the staff and school families through an open invitational survey. Our character traits include respect, responsibility, perseverance, and integrity. When they meet, they will make friends from different grade levels and will be involved in hands-on activities. Indeed, there are many activities that promote connection versus disconnection, competence versus incompetence, student self-control versus compliance, and contribution versus self-centeredness (Blankstein, 2013, p. 126). It is school-wide activities like this and many others that exist within our school, that show that we are committed to ensuring success for each and every student, not just most or some, by systematically assuring that every student connects positively with adults in our building.

Principle 3: Collaborative Teaming Focused on Teaching and Learning

In order for classrooms to create cultures of thinking for students, schools themselves must be cultures of thinking for teachers, who are encouraged and lead to work in teams, rather than groupings. A group is a collection of individuals who temporarily coordinate their individual efforts to solve a short term problem. On the other hand, a team is a group of people who share a common purpose and are mutually committed to the goals and to each other, which creates a strong bond and a strong motivation to perform. Without purpose and goals that come from the team themselves, you cannot build a team. The purpose must be worthwhile in order to create a

sense of doing something important together. It's in this area of internalized purpose I feel like we fall a little short.

With the development of a professional learning community in which deep and rich discussions of teaching, learning, and thinking can take place is the ultimate goal, we could become great, but our PLC meetings are run from the top down, with little to no input from the staff as to what needs to be addressed or the direction in which we want to go. Teams of motivated staff are a fundamental part of teachers' ongoing experience, and could be the cornerstone which provides the foundation for nurturing students' thinking and learning. However, I fear that we fit more snugly in the "group" category, with groups of teachers randomly assigned to work on specific building goals, and assuming the assignments to pass the time working on what feels like busy work. We definitely have some work to do here.

Let me give an example of what I mean. Over the past two years, there has been a group of teachers that have made it their mission and goal to bring a strong sense of a positive behavior culture to our school. The initiative was termed PBIS, which stands for positive behavior interventions and support. They attended workshops lead by experts from the field, they attended ongoing training through Oakland Schools, and they visited other buildings with strong PBIS programs already established. It was their pet project, to which hours had been dedicated, but this year our principal took each of those committee members off of the initiative, and supplanted them with a seemingly random and arbitrary group of staff who had no previous experience or obvious enthusiasm for the program. Instead of working on this goal for our building, teachers were assigned to other committees, such as the writing goal group, the math achievement group,

and the reading comprehension group. The decision left many teachers befuddled and bemused, unaware of why or how this decision had been made.

Principle 4: Data-Based Decision Making for Continuous Improvement

Teachers and school leaders have a very difficult task when it comes to making decisions based on student data. Lorna Earl and Steven Katz (2010) state quite appropriately that “Educational institutions are awash with data, and much of it is not well used.” (as cited in Blankstein, 2013, p. 163). Turning data into information to be used in improving educational practice is more difficult than it would seem. Undoubtedly, many educators embrace the notion of becoming more reflective practitioners, but it feels like few educators have the knowledge or time to commit to engaging in such analysis and reflection when it comes to working with large data. Despite these challenges, using student data allows teachers, principals the opportunities for reflection on practice, monitoring effectiveness, and participation in learning.

At Costello, we do collect a lot of data. We collect and store grades on common math assessments, we record quarterly the reading levels of every student in our building, we enter scores from common writing rubrics into data management programs such as Pearson’s Inform, as well as a service called Mastery Manager. It is mandated that we meet as a grade-level every two weeks for meetings to discuss the students in the bottom 30% of our classes for reading comprehension, to review if they are making gains with the strategies we are implementing. We also progress monitor for fluency using Cloze tests quarterly and give our students a barrage of other reading checkups, including reading comprehension tests from our literacy text-book publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All of that only scratches the surface as to the amount of data we annually collect and attempt to analyze on our students. We also look intensely at

students' MEAP results, which in the past three years has also lead to classroom assignments and sorting of certain students, attempting to balance the load of students who score above, at, or below levels of competency on the particular high stakes test.

Despite this apparent deluge of data, Blankstein posits that it isn't the hard numbers or technical side of things that leads to continuous improvement, but rather, it is the human side of the equation (p. 163). While collecting, sorting, and distributing data has never been a problem for our school, it is the creation of a climate and culture of trust wherein lies our greets challenge. Teachers at our school are not usually willing to hand over their data, especially when it is unflattering, unless mandated to do so. Since the implementation of performance based compensation, the advent of the SMART goal, and the security of teachers' careers being jeopardized by a principal's designation as less-than-effective, the good relationships that are needed in order to make data-analysis the social process that it should be have dried up. There is very little trust between our staff and our school leadership, from the principal upwards, and because of that, we lack the climate and culture of trust for effective data use.

Principle 5: Gaining Active Engagement from Family and Community

Schools that have become true professional learning communities have addressed the gap between parents and schools by establishing positive familial relationships. After all, the research is abundantly clear. According to Michael Fullan (1997), "Nothing motivates child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership." (as cited in Blankstein, 2013, p. 188). Blankstein (2013) advises that there exist three distinct areas in which a school can build this mutual trust. First, an understanding based on empathy and recognition of shared interests must be established. Next, he claims that it is

important to have meaningful involvement of family and community in a variety of school activities, and finally, he shares that successful schools have regular outreach and communication to family and community. Schools that are committed to student success strategically devise creative ways to respond to the difficulties that students face to create these most valuable of connections between the classroom and home.

In this area, Costello and its staff shine. It goes back to the culture of the teachers that inhabit the school; we are dedicated to and care for every child within our walls. Some areas in which we extend support include providing translators who can communicate with non-English-speaking families and produce versions of important school announcements and communications in the languages spoken by the families that are served. I, myself, speak some Spanish, and on several occasions have conferenced with Spanish-speaking families about their children or functions at school. Furthermore, we create an inviting environment with comfortable waiting areas with books for younger siblings at school for parents and other visitors so that they don't have to stand at the counter while waiting to speak to a member of the staff. We set up alternatives to telephone communication for families who lack telephones, such as emails, daily planners, newsletters, websites, bulletin boards, and a large sign outside of the school with important information about upcoming events.

We at Costello have a well-established parent-to-parent outreach program so that they can contribute to student learning. We invite parents and community members to provide guest-reader appearances in the classrooms (I even had former State Senator John Pappageorge read to my class once, and answer questions about what it was like to work in our state's government). Parents in our school take on leadership roles for extracurricular clubs based on special interests,

such as boy and girl scout troops that meet in our building after school hours. Parents lead all of our classroom holiday parties, and even take on the teaching role when it comes to running Junior Achievement classes with our students in the spring semester. Getting parents into the school like this on a more formal basis can give an opportunity to provide a positive experience to the kids, expand the relationship with the parents, and encourage meaningful and helpful interactions between adults and the children of our school. Some other teachers in our building enlist the help of parent volunteers to mentor and tutor students who need extra help in math, reading, and writing, assist with classroom centers-based projects, science experiments, and so forth.

Part of reaching out to our school community involves being visible at PTO meetings, in the district sporting events, at restaurants during fund-raising events, and skating parties. It is a constant, ongoing process that is central to the relationships we have with our families at Costello. Some of our success may not be applicable to every school, but the examples offered here should show how we go about bringing about meaningful student, family, and community engagement in Troy.

Principle 6: Building Sustainable Leadership Capacity

When one hears the words “educational leadership”, most of us think of a particular person or group of people, such as a building principal, superintendent, or the district’s school board. I think it’s normal to picture this person in a position of authority, making all the important decisions and earning the big bucks. When we do this, however, we are losing sight of the untapped potential of the entire community participating in the process of building sustainable student success. According to Blankstein (2013), school leadership needs to be

embedded in the school community as a whole, with responsibility shared among administrators, teachers, parents, and students alike:

...developing leaders capable of creating high-performing teams who in turn support effective teaching and learning. This is the route to sustainable student success and a vibrant, self-renewing school culture able to take on myriad challenges and mandates “du jour.” (p. 207)

At Costello Elementary School, we do a very good job of sharing the responsibility for our students’ success. For the most part, we have students who are confident, reflective, self-directed, caring and competent. I personally started Costello’s first ever student council, where 3rd-, 4th-, and 5th-grade children contribute to their broader community, ask questions of what can be done to improve our community, create service-based learning projects, and feel passionate about helping others around the world. Each successive year of its implementation brings a larger number of students who want to participate. They look for other opportunities to show leadership as well, in 4th grade beginning to help teachers around the school through Service Squad, and in 5th grade helping younger students through our Safeties program.

Even our parents are full partners in the work of teaching and learning the students of Costello, as outlined in the previous section. This shows leadership capacity being built into the families so that all children understand the purpose of their education at home and at school. Parents involved in our school’s PTO raise thousands of dollars each year through an adult auction night in order to fund the teachers’ classroom budgets and make sure that their children have all the tools necessary for success. Members of the Troy community pass bonds and

millages to support education, and the parents who advocate on behalf of the school lead this campaign in order to get other parents to participate in the process.

The teachers themselves show signs of leadership, as they often engage in meaningful dialogue while grappling with questions of practice and educational theory. We are skillful and knowledgeable about teaching and learning, challenging each other and the school community to grow and develop through 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teacher labs, when we open our doors to teachers from around the district to observe and learn about others' teaching methods. Our professional learning communities are lead by a core team of teachers, who guide us to use our time together as a time for inquiry and goal setting in order to retain our North Central Accreditation. Within this community, there are subsets of teachers who work together in a writing skills group, a math knowledge group, a reading comprehension group, and a PBIS group.

Separate from that is a technology committee, of which I am also a part of. Along with two other teachers, we support and organize professional learning opportunities to support integration of technology into all curriculum areas using various models to meet ISTE standards for students, teachers and school leaders, mentor and coach teachers for the purpose of building capacity to teach and improve instruction, collaborate with teachers and principals to support the development of exemplary practices, assess the needs of teachers and students for the purpose of determining the types of professional development and strategies needed to bring about student achievement gains, and seek opportunities for personal learning to support improved instruction through the use of technology and best practices. Going forward, we also have the goal of developing student technology leaders within our building. We hope to someday soon present to

District leaders and the Board of Education all that we have accomplished in our extra leadership capacity. To top it all off, we also have two co-head teachers, who can take charge when the cat's away so the mice don't play (too much). All in all, we are all about sharing the responsibility of seeing our students through to success.

Conclusions

Upon reflecting on Alan M. Blankstein's six principles that advance student achievement in highly effective schools, I would have to say that the areas in which Costello Elementary School excels include gaining active engagement from families and the community building piece, as well as the building of a sustainable leadership capacity among the staff. We do well in living by the mission, vision, values, and goals set forth by our school's founders, and we also perform adequately in the area of ensuring success for all students. Areas for improvement can be found in the principles of collaborative teaming, and making decisions based on data, which is interesting because it feels like these two are the most closely related. If I were the principal of the school, my primary and immediate focus would be on establishing a community of trust among the staff so that we could work as a "team" to share and make decisions based on data that would lead to better instructional strategies for our students.

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