

CONNECTING QUALITY ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT - THE NEA KEYS INITIATIVE

by Bill Raabe

When introducing the KEYS (Keys to Excellence for Your Schools) initiative to groups, two quotes are often used: “Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.” - Anonymous; and “To become different from what we are we must have some awareness of what we are.” - Eric Hoffer. These two quotes set the climate for a discussion of quality in schools, the assessment of the conditions of teaching and learning which lead to quality, and the actions to be decided upon to achieve quality - the basis for KEYS.

After a five-year research project on The Conditions of Teaching and Learning (CTL), the NEA initiated KEYS. The CTL study looked at school systems and involved teachers and others from the school community in a wide ranging random sample survey and site studies of 57 school sites in various regions of the country. The result of these studies was the identification of 35 organizational factors which are essential to developing and maintaining quality schooling and correlate positively with high student achievement. The KEYS initiative provides school sites and districts with a tool for assessing the level at which these factors exist in the site and support and training for ongoing efforts to improve the quality of the school's organizational characteristics through results oriented staff development and school development.

An advisory committee, (Willis Hawley, Dean, University of Maryland; Susan Moore Johnson, Dean, Harvard University; Ann Lieberman, Professor, Teachers College Columbia University; Joseph

Murphy, Professor, Peabody College Vanderbilt University; Michael Fullan, Dean, University of Toronto; and Joe Mills Braddock, Chair, Sociology, University of Miami), was retained to assist in making sure that the KEYS initiative was designed in a way to have a positive impact on school organizational characteristics and thereby, student achievement. One of their initial actions was to divide the 35 organizational factors into 5 main categories: 1) Shared Understanding and Commitment to High Goals; 2) Open Communication and Collaborative Problem Solving; 3) Continuous Assessment for Teaching and Learning; 4) Personal and Professional Learning; 5) Resources to Support Teaching and Learning. These five categories provide an opportunity for school sites to focus their energies in one of these categories based on the results from the self-assessment in which they engaged.

KEYS is not intended to be a “silver bullet.” It's not a quick fix. It's not intended to rate or grade the school site. There are plenty of those plans being marketed by politicians, interest groups and those looking to make a buck. KEYS is a tool to assist school sites in setting their own direction for improvement. It's an opportunity for the school

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community to extend its arms to the extended community and invite them to be partners in the assessment of the quality conditions of teaching and learning and the development of an even better school for the future. It fits well into, and is not intended to replace, school improvement plans that already exist. It will take time, sincere effort and the wise choice of many alternatives. It will work.

To find out more about the NEA KEYS initiative please contact Bill Raabe, MEA Field Representative at: 1-800-233-2530 or write him at Copper Corte II, 4180 Thielman Lane, Suite 114, St. Cloud, MN 56301-7304.

Shared Understanding and Commitment to High Goals

- ❖ Parents and school employees are committed to long-range, continuous improvement. Central and building administrators are committed to long-range, continuous improvement.
- ❖ Goals for achievable education outcomes are clear and explicit.
- ❖ Teachers, education support personnel, students, and parents believe all students can learn.
- ❖ School district administrators and school board members believe all students can learn.

Open communication and Collaborative Problem Solving

- ❖ Teachers, education support personnel, parents, school building administrators, students, school board members, district administrators, and civic groups are all involved in improving education.
- ❖ Everyone actively seeks to identify barriers to learning.
- ❖ There is a general willingness by everyone to remove barriers to learning.
- ❖ School staff work to remove barriers to learning.
- ❖ Students and parents work to remove barriers to learning.
- ❖ School and district administrators work to remove barriers to learning.
- ❖ A cooperative problem-solving process is used to remove barriers to learning.
- ❖ There is two-way, nonthreatening communication between school administrators and others.
- ❖ There is two-way nonthreatening communication between the school staff and district administrators.
- ❖ There is two-way, nonthreatening communication among teachers.
- ❖ All communication takes place within a climate for innovation.

Continuous Assessment for Teaching and Learning

- ❖ Teachers assess student improvement daily. Administrators assess student improvement daily.
- ❖ The school uses teacher-made tests to assess students.
- ❖ The school uses oral classroom activities to assess students.
- ❖ The school uses exhibitions to assess students.
- ❖ Assessments take into account student background.
- ❖ Academic programs are assessed.
- ❖ Teachers consistently rate program quality.
- ❖ Assessment results are actually used, and classroom decisions are based on assessments.
- ❖ Instructional materials are selected based on quality.
- ❖ Instructional materials are selected based on appropriateness to student needs.
- ❖ Instructional materials are not selected based on cost.

Personal and Professional Learning

- ❖ School is an overall learning environment for employees and students.
- ❖ There is ongoing, consistent staff development in the areas of decision making, problem solving, leadership, and communication.
- ❖ Staff development is an ongoing, high-quality, state-of-the-art, practical experience for all school employees.

Resources to Support Teaching and Learning

- ❖ Space is adequate within the school building.
- ❖ Supplies are adequate.
- ❖ Support services are adequate.
- ❖ Psychological and social work services are available.