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Closing the Achievement Gap: It's Everybody's Job

by Kathy Checkley

"Every person in my building is an instructional leader." This phrase is more than a bromidic expression for Vera Blake; it's her call to action. Blake believes that every adult—from the principal to the custodian, from the classroom teacher to the nurse—can contribute to the important job of helping all students achieve academic success.



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When Blake was principal at Falls Church High School in Virginia, she ensured that everybody in the school had opportunities to take part in teaching and learning. The custodian, for example, asked to participate in the school's mentoring program.

The man, Blake recalled, was brilliant: he spoke five languages, had graduated from college in his own country, and was taking classes at night to earn a degree from a U.S. institution. He proved to be a strong leader and positive role model for kids, Blake said. "He understood that his role as a mentor and his role as a custodian were both essential to the instruction going on in that building."

Blake shared the story at her conference workshop to underscore some key characteristics of instructional leaders: They take risks and understand that "people will come up to the plate if you invite them." In that spirit, Blake then asked members of her audience to identify other

essential traits. According to participants, instructional leaders must be knowledgeable and continuous learners, understand human nature and interpersonal relationships, provide support and encouragement to all stakeholders in the school, and foster a sense of possibility and high expectations for all.

Blake added to that list, stating that instructional leaders also

- ✦ **Use data effectively.** Educators need to review, analyze, and communicate what the data reveal and then make decisions based on those data.
- ✦ **Build professional learning communities** so teachers can learn about effective instructional and assessment practices. "It's critical that we find ways for teachers to learn on the job," Blake maintained. She suggested, for example, that principals invite faculty and staff to "become experts" in at least two research-based instructional strategies, such as differentiated instruction and learning styles, then ask them to share what they learn with their colleagues. This would be one good way to "use faculty meetings as opportunities for job-embedded professional development," according to Blake.
- ✦ **Serve as coaches.** This means being willing to step in and offer expertise in the classroom. "Good coaches don't watch their team practice something the wrong way and think, 'I'm going to wait until after practice to correct them.' Good coaches correct on the spot and offer support," Blake stated.
- ✦ **Motivate staff members.** To be inspirational, educators must "let their caring and passion show," Blake said. Instructional leaders have to help their staff members "see themselves in this mission" and understand the import of their contributions, she said. "This is what motivation is all about."

Ultimately, Blake maintained, educators must use their leadership abilities to accomplish what is perhaps their most important charge: to remove barriers to student achievement. "Success is our only option," she asserted, and helping all stakeholders become instructional leaders goes a long way toward closing any achievement gap.

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