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COMMENTARY

Creating an Environment for Change and Getting Results: Montclair Public Schools (NJ) Rethinks Special Education Practices

by Dr. Frank Alvarez

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Creating an **Environment for Change** and Getting Results:



Montclair Public Schools Rethinks Special Education Practices

| FRANK ALVAREZ

This year marked my ninth and final year as superintendent of the Montclair Public Schools (NJ). In many ways, becoming superintendent here was a coming-home story. I had volunteered at the schools during my graduate studies and served as principal for an elementary and then a middle school in the district during the eighties. When I became superintendent in 2003, I already had a good understanding of the values and history of the district and our community. Montclair Public Schools (MPS) prides itself on being a highly diverse and high-performing district. Our district-wide magnet system was created to serve this purpose—to ensure that each of our schools is integrated and provides an equally high level of education. In the spirit of continuing this tradition, closing the achievement gap became my administration’s core priority. We focused first on the gap between African American and white students in general education. That focus has consistently shrunk the achievement gap over the last five years, and we are now seeing only a 3% difference in achievement.

When our team of school and district administrators gathered in the summer of 2009 for our

annual full-day data retreat, a persistent though often-neglected achievement gap called out to us. During our data review, as in past years, we scrutinized achievement and outcome data at each school and grade level. We pored over achievement gaps, the impact of new programs on learning, and academic progress across the district. That summer, however, we also asked a more targeted question, “How are our students with disabilities performing?” We had known for some time that our students with disabilities were not performing to our expectations. Past retreats had highlighted the issue, and each year the schools would take the initiative to implement programs and practices to address the challenge. But still the issue persisted: students with disabilities were underperforming their peers considerably; in some cases, that gap was increasing despite our increased attention and effort.

Like many districts, MPS had made a commitment to continuous improvement, which means having open and honest dialogue about what we are doing well and where we might need to improve. The data revealed a pretty clear picture for us: we needed to increase the achievement of our students with disabilities and to do it in a much more cost-effective manner. My role was to create the right environment in which to conduct this inquiry. By providing multiple opportunities for collaboration and consistently reinforcing expectations for achievement, I made it possible for our great teachers and talented administrators to unleash their potential. Starting with this first day of planning at the retreat, the administrators and staff in the district would rise to the challenge of uncovering solutions that would save us over \$4 million during the first two years alone, and set the framework for students with disabilities to perform at the same level as their peers. By moving past a view of special education as an immutable monolith and ▷

Montclair Public Schools Fast Facts (2011-2012)

Number of Schools: **11**

Number of Students: **6,657**

Number of Students with IEPs: **1,188**

IEP rate: **18%**

Total annual budget: **\$111.5 Million**

Source: Montclair Public Schools

instead studying each area of special education with a pointed lens, we were able to both apply better interventions and manage special education services in a more efficient way. I am proud of

the transformation that we brought to our special education practices. Moreover, I am proud of the way the district's teachers, staff, and administrators worked collaboratively and with the community to effect meaningful change that will be sustained.

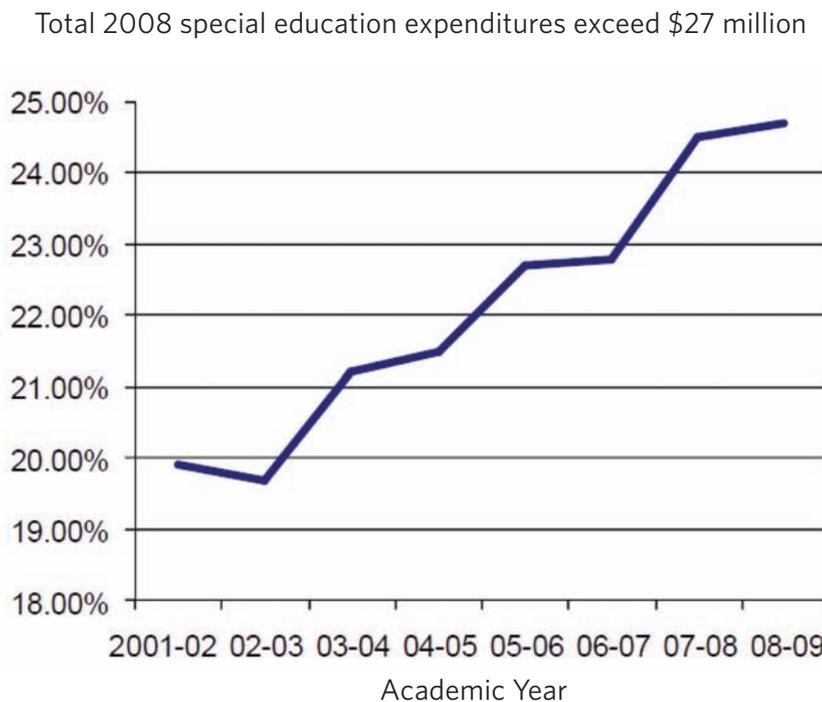
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Why Now?

The comprehensive rethinking of our special education program built on the strong commitment to integration and achievement that I have both witnessed and promoted as superintendent of the Montclair Public Schools. This same laser-like focus on closing the achievement gap had to be applied to special education. Both the middle school and high school levels had widening achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities in English and math. The high school had not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for students with

EXHIBIT 1

Where we were in 2008: Special education expenditures as a percentage of total budget



Source: Montclair Public Schools

disabilities in Language Arts or Math for two years in a row. The district's achievement gap in English between students with and without disabilities ranged from 18% in some grade levels to 54% in others, whereas the Math achievement gap ranged from an 8% difference in some grades to a 57% difference in others. While some gains had been made, they were not enough and they were not happening for all children across the board.

These results alone warranted a new approach. But the fiscal context reinforced the importance of taking a hard look at our special education model. While our district was advancing on a number of fronts, we, like most districts in the country, were facing a tighter fiscal situation. By the 2008-2009 school year, our overall spending in special education had been rising consistently by about 17% each year since 2004. Special education expenditures had gone from approximately 20% of the total budget in 2003 to nearly 25% in 2009 (Exhibit 1). During that same time period, the percentage of students classified with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) dropped from 17% to about 15%. State aid for special education also decreased from \$4.5 million

to \$3.7 million that year. The decline in state and federal funding could no longer be managed through minor budget adjustments (Exhibit 2). We had to acknowledge that we were serving fewer students with more resources, and we were not fully aware of how those resources were impacting outcomes. As a district, we knew that we could not effectively manage our overall budget without carefully examining how we were serving students with disabilities.

Taking a Closer Look

With spending at nearly a quarter of our total budget and fewer than half of the students with disabilities scoring proficient, the academic and financial data combined to make a clear case for a new approach. But where to begin? Special education is a difficult program area for a school district to examine. There are complicated regulatory and compliance factors, and service provision guidelines can be daunting to review and understand. The truth of the matter is that it was always easier to say we would do more rather than change what we were already doing. ▷

EXHIBIT 2

State aid as a percentage of total budget



Source: Montclair Public Schools



A working session in the district with Superintendent Alvarez.

Given our commitment to continuous improvement, we were usually able to quickly identify challenges in achievement and spending. The harder question to answer was, “What works?” We decided to engage the District Management Council (DMC), whose expertise in this area brought a critical outsider’s perspective to our work. We began with an Opportunities Review, which involved surveys, focus groups, and interviews with parents and staff. In addition, classroom visits provided a look into the actual practices at the school level. Detailed financial and operational data on areas such as related services, out-of-district placements, transportation, and reimbursement were also reviewed in-depth.

The Opportunities Review offered us benchmarks and insight into best practices in similar districts within the state and around the nation. We were able to understand what it was about our practices that caused us to deviate from those benchmarks. The analysis highlighted which of

those practices were intentional and which may have been the result of limited oversight. Receiving that type of data and information is not always easy. We had caring and hard-working professionals who believed they were providing the best programs for students with disabilities. Yet, the hard facts showed that many practices, some of which had been in place for over ten years, were not helping our students advance.

It was difficult to accept that the support we were providing was not having the positive impact that the students critically needed. For example, we examined the academic effectiveness and impact on student independence of one-to-one paraprofessionals at the secondary level. Secondary-level students with disabilities need to gain greater independence and learn to self-regulate. When examining each paraprofessional assignment, we learned that many assignments at the secondary level were simply carried over from elementary to middle and high school without a thorough

review. Our practices were both expensive and, in some cases, unintentional. High school students with one-to-one paraprofessionals did not have as much opportunity to build those critical independence skills. And, as a district, we could not afford to continue supporting programs and activities that were not resulting in improved student outcomes.

Taking Action

After reviewing the results of the benchmarking study, we identified four areas to target: the role and scheduling of paraprofessionals, equity in the delivery of speech and language services, in-district programming, and raising achievement of students with special needs. Changing practices within the district was more than a matter of implementing a series of steps; we needed to change the way we thought about supporting students with disabilities. That level of change takes time and would only happen if the staff was grounded in a firm comprehension of the challenges and was allowed to wrestle with possible solutions to determine those best suited for our district. To that end, we rallied our staff and developed cross-functional steering committees to investigate each of the four target areas. For each target area, the committee undertook a three-step process: understanding the issue, defining a solution, and preparing for change.

The composition of the committees cut across areas as well as functions: general education teachers were included with special education teachers, and the committees comprised not only teachers but also school principals, related service professionals, and district administrators. We chose committee members who we believed could lead and needed to lead these efforts. Leadership included not only district and school administrators but also the key change-makers at the staff level—professionals who had previously impacted the beliefs and behaviors of their peers. The inclusion of school staff would prove particularly important when we started to implement the plans developed by each committee. Then, school-level staff would not hear a directive from above but rather would hear the problem explained by their peers. Instead of outlining the

path to change, I set a focused vision and consistently reinforced our commitment to that vision.

Before the teams even started planning, I wanted to ensure that every stakeholder—from parents and students to school staff and board members—was aware of the endeavor and would be prepared for the outcome of each committee's work. It was important that I communicated the same message

We had to acknowledge that we were serving fewer students with more resources, and we were not fully aware of how those resources were impacting outcomes.

to all stakeholders—that this was about increasing the achievement of students with disabilities. I met personally with many, many stakeholders because these meetings grounded the importance of the project and the commitment of the district to supporting this work. Before we even knew the solution, I wanted to prepare everyone for change.

Improving Planning and Decision-Making

Understanding how to improve speech and language services and how to address the rise in out-of-district placements came very quickly. The core issue in both of these areas was a lack of centralized planning and decision-making, which had created variation of service provision and lost opportunities to better serve students.

The speech and language committee identified two facts: MPS had more speech and language therapists compared to like-districts, and MPS students received 6 to 15 times the rate of these services compared to other related therapeutic services. In addition, since each speech and language therapist typically worked alone, there ▷

was often much variation in caseloads and direct service from school to school, and few district-wide systems existed to manage staffing. The committee quickly determined that centralizing the scheduling and the monitoring of caseloads would be necessary to manage staff and caseload equity. To ensure students received equitable services across schools, the committee also established criteria regarding who received speech and language services and standard exit criteria to determine when students would no longer receive services. The result was a more data-driven assignment of staff in each building without reducing services to any student. This change resulted in nearly \$200,000 in savings in the first two years alone.

By moving past a view of special education as an immutable monolith and instead studying each area of special education with a pointed lens, we were able to both apply better interventions and manage special education services in a more efficient way.

The team examining out-of-district placements knew that the cost of these placements, in terms of tuition and transportation, was exorbitant and growing—to nearly a quarter of all special education spending in 2009. Because we had not developed the appropriate in-district offerings, our students were being sent on long bus rides to other facilities far away from their community peers. Out-of-district placements also prevented students with disabilities from being educated with their typically developing peers in an inclusionary model. As a solution, the team proposed the development of high-quality, in-district programs. Once the team had established which programs to implement and had built staffing models to support the new programs, the next step was

communicating with parents of out-of-district students about sending their children to their district school. Who took the lead in initiating this communication was important. As a result of their involvement on the committees, the principals of each school with new programming were the ones who reached out to parents to describe the benefits of bringing students back into the district. Not only were the new programs of equally high quality to the out-of-district programs, but school principals assured parents that students placed in-district could be part of the school community and would have equal access to programs and activities. Many students began returning to the district and fewer students needed to be placed in out-of-district programs. Parents and students were happier with the shorter transportation times and greater inclusion within the district. School staff were also developing increased capacity in serving students with special needs because they had access to the practices and approaches of the in-district programs. In two years, we saved nearly \$1 million by bringing students back to the district.

Developing New Models

The other two areas of focus—rethinking the role of paraprofessionals and raising achievement for secondary-level students with disabilities through math and reading remediation and interventions—required more time to fully address. The challenge in these two areas was that the solution required *abandoning* some of our current practices and embracing innovative paradigms. Both of these committees spent their first year examining the data and reviewing best practices from districts around the country.

The Role of Paraprofessionals

For years, providing paraprofessional support, especially one-on-one, was considered a great option for students. Another adult working with a child should lead to positive gains. But this was not what we were seeing in Montclair. The central need of many students who were assigned paraprofessionals was in their core academic subjects. These students needed much more intervention



Adjusting practices, however, would require more than simply creating criteria and managing assignments centrally—it called for a new understanding of how to support students based on their needs.

and support from their general education teacher than other students in the classroom needed. We found that students with paraprofessional support were often, however unintentionally, given less attention by their general education teacher because they already had adult support. The conclusion was a difficult one: our intention to provide more support was not resulting in improved outcomes. Another layer to this challenge was that paraprofessionals were assigned at the school-level with limited consistency in terms of who received adult support and who was provided alternative accommodations. Adjusting practices, however, would require more than simply creating criteria and managing assignments centrally—it called for a new understanding of how to support students based on their needs.

The first level of work centered on identifying why students with disabilities were assigned paraprofessional support. At MPS, nearly 70% of students receiving paraprofessional support did so because of an academic need. Similar to the situation with out-of-district placements, we provided additional adult support because we did not have tailored academic support structures. While additional adult support is necessary and vital for many types of needs, the committee agreed that academic support should come primarily from the teaching and intervention staff. These students needed additional support in learning the core content areas from a core content teacher. We could not shift paraprofessional assignments away

from academic needs, however, unless we were able to establish these appropriate academic supports. At the elementary level, a plethora of intervention and remediation supports were underway. Staff were able to develop more tailored support for students with academic needs and shift away from providing full-day paraprofessional support. For students with behavioral or health needs, scheduling was examined to identify when exactly students required adult support and when they would be able to support themselves with the teacher's guidance. This shift in scheduling had the effect of promoting greater skill-building and self-reliance and redirected paraprofessionals to other students who needed direct support.

Secondary Math and English Remediation and Intervention

Taking its cue from the paraprofessional committee, the fourth committee focused on how best to create the necessary tailored academic support to raise the achievement of students with disabilities. The committee found that the need of most students with mild to moderate disabilities is very similar to the need of struggling peers without disabilities. Both groups of struggling students needed re-teaching and remediation in core subjects. Elementary schools had already worked to develop significant general-education remediation programs to serve students both with and without disabilities in mastering core content. Where the achievement >

gap was greatest, at the high school, was the first area to be addressed. Our high school principal quickly jumped to implement a model devised by the group that provided double the time on task for all students who struggled in math. Struggling students were identified by a set of criteria and then rescheduled to receive two periods of math instruction. The principal focused his efforts at the ninth-grade level, where the need was most acute.

Before we even knew the solution, I wanted to prepare everyone for change.

Now every ninth-grade student who struggled in math received two periods of core instruction from an expert math teacher. The classes comprised students both with and without IEPs, and typically had about one-third fewer students to better support differentiation. During this process, the committee continued to meet to examine lessons learned and to support the implementation. This coming school year, the middle schools are implementing a similar model for both reading and math and the high school is expanding the model to tenth grade.



Timing and Results

The four focus areas progressed from understanding to implementation at different rates (Exhibit 3). Some of the target areas required more time for the team to fully comprehend the impact of changing practices and to reach agreement that we would be pursuing the right path. When a solution requires changing the way things are done, implementation can and should take much longer. To make change stick, that time is essential.

I would say that we are at the midpoint of our work and still have some ways to go in order to embed the changes within the district. However, we have already seen a number of improvements. We have instituted a best-practice-based academic program at the high school level and will soon do the same at the middle school level. We have increased equity in the provision of paraprofessional and speech and language services for students with disabilities. We have met the needs of more students within the district and reduced out-of-district placements. And we have saved over \$4 million in two years.

To ensure lasting change in the district, we are working to put in place concrete tools and procedures including staffing and scheduling protocols for secondary math and English; explicit, written criteria for paraprofessionals and speech and language services; and monitoring the frequency of out-of-district placements by need in order to identify new potential programs that could be created in-district. These tools will allow us to continuously monitor the efforts of each committee as well as to transfer the full ownership of these efforts to district champions and responsible staff members.

Lessons Learned

There are three aspects of this process of rethinking our special education practices which I believe continue to contribute to our success.

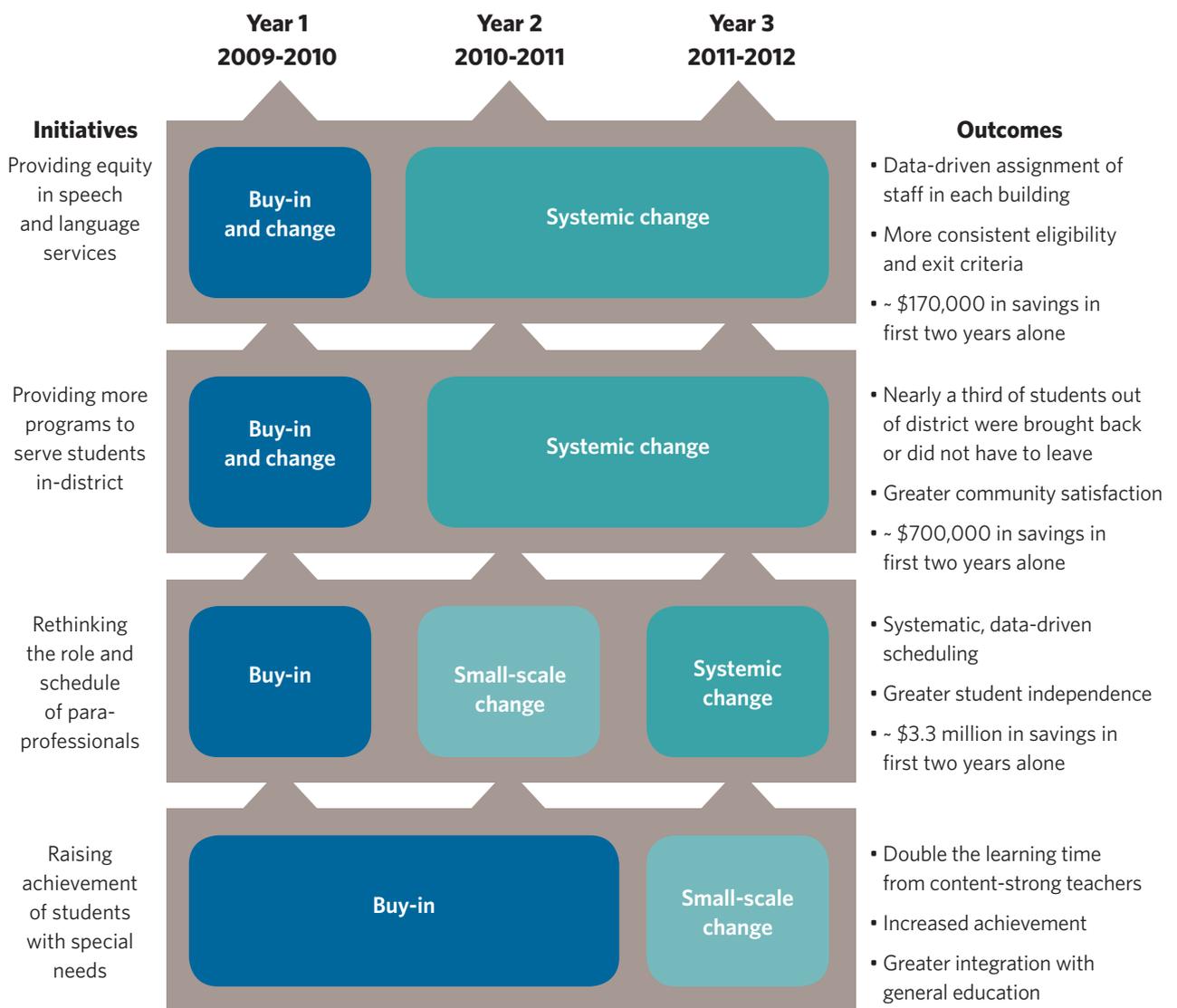
First, as superintendent, I did not define exactly what type of change needed to happen. Our district has an incredible resource in its staff and in its community. We have innovative teachers, experienced administrators, and a supportive parent community that keep our district pushing forward.

A top-down reform process would have stymied the potential of this human capital. Each committee of administrators and staff worked through the data and research to develop its own action plan for how to meet the vision and objectives I had laid out. The amount of time it took for each committee to implement a plan varied significantly, but that variance in time was necessary to ensure that

everyone developed the capacity to understand why change was necessary. Each committee member had to understand and embrace the rationale for change and eventually had to communicate the change to parents and students. A common pitfall of implementation is moving too quickly and not bringing enough people on board: this approach results in the great rise and dramatic fall of school >

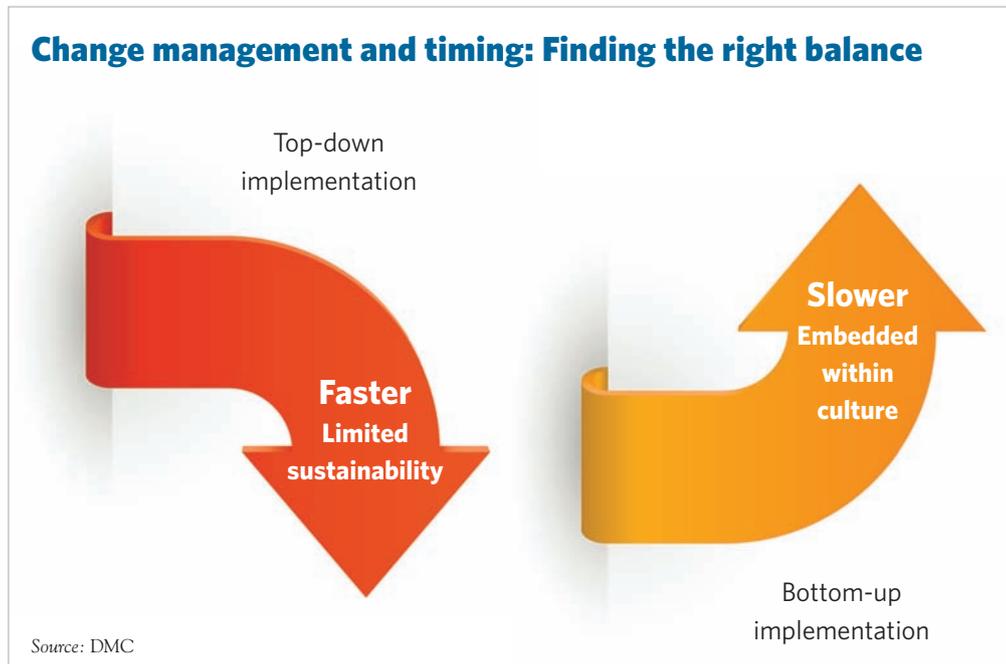
EXHIBIT 3

The Process of Implementing Change



Source: DMC and Montclair Public Schools

EXHIBIT 4



district initiatives (Exhibit 4). To prevent the demise of all of its efforts, each of our committees was empowered to take the necessary time to carefully understand the challenge and plan for change.

Instead of outlining the path to change, I set a focused vision and consistently reinforced our commitment to that vision.

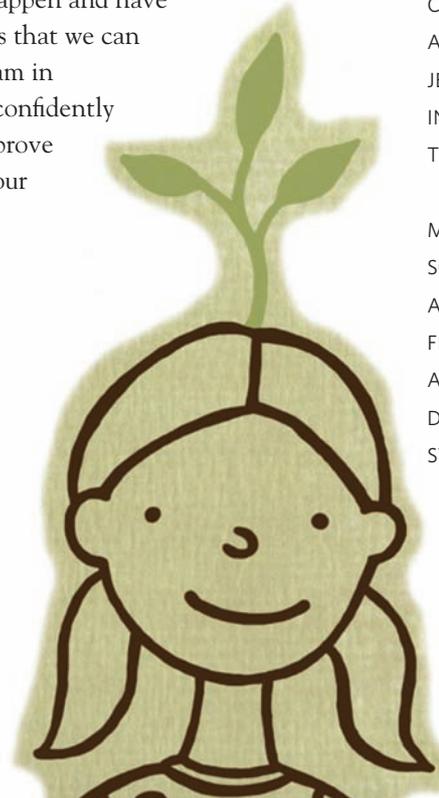
Secondly, critical to success was that my role was centered on creating a vision and communicating a consistent message. The goal was increased achievement for our students with disabilities. The message can get lost in the details of all the activities that stem from new initiatives, and I knew it was imperative that I communicate regularly and broadly to all stakeholders. I wanted to be sure that every stakeholder—from parents and students to school staff and board members—

was aware of the initiative and would be prepared for the outcomes of each committee’s work. I personally scheduled meetings and attended sessions with school staff, the Montclair Special Education Parent Advisory Committee, and the school board to bring them up to speed on what the district was undertaking and why. The message that we delivered to these stakeholders was the same one that guided the committees’ work: we must increase the achievement of students with disabilities. All the work that would be done revolved around improving outcomes for these students. We also communicated that many of the efforts would identify inefficiencies in current practices and would likely result in savings, but the primary motive was and had to be achievement. I stress the importance of this personal touch because visiting with each of these groups grounded not only the importance of the project but also the commitment of the district to supporting the work.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we made sure to include in the planning process the people who would have to change. It would not have been

effective, for example, to create criteria for speech and language therapists without including those professionals in the discussion. They brought critical insight and often shared nuances that needed to be addressed before changes could occur. Ensuring principals were members of each committee was also vital. While principals' support is necessary, principals' ownership of projects is critical to making sure the initiative is fully implemented at the school level and is sustained. In order to shift program offerings, schedules needed to be shifted and staffing redone. Without principals' buy-in, that level of implementation may not have been possible.

Although the committees are eagerly looking forward to our achievement data to see the results of the changes made, I personally feel that the greatest effect this work has had is the change in mindset in our district. I am eager to see the team at MPS continue to address challenges head-on with the same commitment and honesty with which they undertook this process. This process—from early reflection to the three-year planning and implementation—has been a great example of making difficult decisions and sustaining improvements. Now that we have created the environment for change to happen and have shown ourselves that we can succeed, the team in Montclair can confidently continue to improve services for all our students.



A common pitfall of implementation is moving too quickly and not bringing enough people on board: this approach results in the great rise and dramatic fall of school district initiatives.



FRANK R. ALVAREZ RECENTLY BEGAN HIS NEW POSITION AS SUPERINTENDENT OF THE RYE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT (NY). HE SERVED AS SUPERINTENDENT OF THE MONTCLAIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS (NJ) FROM 2003 TO 2012 AFTER SERVING IN THE DISTRICT AS PRINCIPAL OF NISHUANE AND MT. HEBRON SCHOOLS FROM 1989 TO 1994. DR. ALVAREZ WAS THE SUPERINTENDENT OF THE RIVER VALE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (NJ) FROM 1997 TO 2003, AND WAS SUPERINTENDENT OF NORTH CALDWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS (NJ) FROM 1994 TO 1997. AMONG OTHER POSITIONS, HE HEADED THE NEW JERSEY STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S URBAN INITIATIVE: OPERATION SCHOOL RENEWAL FROM 1986 THROUGH 1989.

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