

# Study Guide

## Breaking the Low Achieving Mindset: A S.M.A.R.T. Journey of Purposeful Change, by Susan L. Abplanalp, Ed.D.

### Part I

#### Prologue: Changing expectations and results

- The author writes that Lawrence Elementary had a “history of under-performing students.” Would you say the same about your school? If so, what are the accepted reasons for having continued poor performance among certain groups? What efforts have been put in place to address poor performance?
- The big picture look at the timeline points out that this scale of change takes multiple years—and that the first few years (these have labels such as “skepticism and doubt” and “overwhelmed”) might be difficult. Have you participated in any kind of large-scale change effort before? What has your experience been? What worked and did not work in that effort? Have the efforts continued over time, or has there been a shift in momentum? If there was a shift, what might you suspect caused it?

#### Chapter 1: Where did we want to go?

- The work at Lawrence Elementary was supported by a needs assessment that had taken place shortly before the author became principal. Has your school ever participated in a needs assessment? If so, what did you learn? If not, do you think your school and its district has the capability to perform a needs assessment? If not, what changes can be made to support a thorough needs assessment?
- Mary Lippett’s work on “managing complex change” forms the basis for planning throughout the Lawrence story. Think about each of the five elements: vision, skills, resources, incentives, and action plans. Look back on a change effort you know about or were involved in that did not go very well. Can you identify which of five elements was missing? If you are familiar with or have been involved in a large change effort that did go well, were all five elements present? If you are in the process of a change initiative now, what in these five elements may be missing and slowing it down?
- A clear vision provides the guiding light for shaping a change effort. Does your school have a vision? What is it? Does it provide clear guidance on the direction you should be heading? If there is no vision or yours needs to be updated, how could you go about shaping a new vision through consensus?

- One tool that helped Sue and the Lawrence teams stay on track was having clearly documented school improvement plans linked to their goals. Does your school have a planning format that it uses? Have you used it? Does your format have an accountability section for increasing performance of your goals? What did you find useful or not useful about the format? If there is no format for planning or you haven't used what your district offers, what will it take to get a format that everyone knows about, is comfortable with, and will be easy to monitor?
- Though change at Lawrence took hard work, Sue was able to reduce the resistance to change and make sure the best possible actions were developed by enforcing **shared governance**: giving staff the authority and responsibility to decide what changes would be made and how they would be implemented through Action Teams. Parents were also involved as much as feasible. Does your school or district have any experience with shared governance? What are your concerns and hopes for developing shared governance at your school? What steps can you take to increase shared governance?
- Sue was able to secure grants to help fund the resource center and other efforts associated with Lawrence's reform. Has anyone explored the kinds of resources that might be available to your school? Is there a way to shift resources to realign to the needs of your school or district?

## Chapter 2: Using Data to Create a Sense of Urgency and Purpose

- The key lesson in this chapter is the importance of looking at the same metric (a particular reading score, demographic number, etc.) over a period of time rather than just seeing a single data point for the current year. Have you ever seen any data for your school displayed on a chart that captures past as well as current levels? If yes, what did you learn? If not, do you have access to the data so you can create such a chart and disaggregate the information (divide it based on subgroups) to better understand student performance?
- A key "aha" moment for Sue's staff was looking at data charts that summarized past and current demographics for the school. They saw that the patterns had *not* changed over the prior ten years, meaning that something besides the characteristics of their students was responsible for the worsening performance. What was your reaction to those data charts? Can you get the data and perform similar analyses for your school? Define your next steps in retrieving, analyzing and sharing data.
- For Lawrence, three types of data proved important: student test scores, demographics and staff experience. Do you think the same kinds of data will be useful for your school? What other kinds of data would you want to explore?

### **Chapter 3: Balanced Literacy and Other Targets**

- Change efforts are more successful when resources and attention are focused on a specific target. At Lawrence, “balanced literacy” was chosen as the “Greatest Area of Need” based on the needs assessment, and it became the focal point of change (though, as demonstrated in this chapter, what was learned was later adapted to other instructional areas). Is there a clear initial target for your school already? If not, what will you need to do to pick one?
- Once the target was chosen, the Lawrence teams put a lot of effort into defining what “balanced literacy” would encompass both philosophically and instructionally. What was your reaction to that work? Has your school ever done something similar?
- An instructional change that made a huge difference at Lawrence was the two-hour literacy block. What do you think the reaction would be if you tried to do something similar at your school? Has your school ever experimented with longer teaching periods focused on a single subject?

### **Chapter 4: Professional Development in Support of Student Achievement**

- The underlying theory of Sue’s work with Lawrence was that professional development could be used as a mechanism to drive improvement in curriculum and student achievement. What did you think about this approach? Do you agree with that premise? Examine the professional development plan in place for your school or district. Is it scattered among several initiatives or targeted on specific, attainable goals? What can be changed in your district based on your analysis of the existing plan?
- Many professional development efforts are treated as “one size fits all.” Instead, Sue was inspired by Michael Fullan’s work to develop a “stages of proficiency” assessment (inquiry—initiation—implementation—institutionalization) that allowed her to offer different learning and teaching opportunities to different staff. In what areas do you see different levels of proficiency in your school? Do you see the application of these stages to shaping your school’s professional development efforts? How can you individualize for professional development, meeting the needs of all staff?
- Staff at Lawrence welcomed the opportunity for different forms of professional development, ranging from in-services and study teams to workshops, conferences and videos. Does your school offer any or all of these opportunities? What has your experience with them been? What other kinds of learning opportunities do you think would benefit you and your colleagues? Have you considered offering before-school or brown bag opportunities?

- Peer coaching/mentoring was the centerpiece of Lawrence’s professional development efforts. Staff welcomed the opportunity to work more closely with colleagues to develop their knowledge and skills. In what areas do you think you could serve as a coach or mentor to others? In what areas would you welcome a coach or mentor? What are the barriers to developing this teaming situation to allow the coaching/mentoring strategy? How can those barriers be eliminated?

## **Chapter 5: Climate Evaluations and Tracking Progress**

- Reviewing climate data (perceptions by staff, parents, and students) each year helped Sue and her staff reinforce the importance of the changes they were making. Has your school implemented climate surveys? If so, how well have they worked? If not, do you see the advantages of using them?
- Sue used an innovative “metaphor” exercise as a fun way to engage staff in embracing both their successes and struggles. Did that exercise resonate with you? Do you think it would work in your environment? If not, can you think of ways to accomplish the same end?
- Lawrence staff used a variety of data tools to help them identify instructional priorities and monitor achievement both short-term and long-term. Have you had any experience with any of these data tools? How easy did you find it to interpret the charts included in this chapter? Does your school do anything similar? Can you see yourself becoming comfortable with displaying data in charts if it isn’t already? What would it take to get there?
- Sue comments on a number of barriers to becoming data-driven that she’s commonly encountered in schools. Do you see these barriers in your own school? What could be done to eliminate or overcome them?

## **Chapter 6: Overcoming the Challenges**

- Perhaps the biggest obstacle that Sue and the Lawrence staff had to overcome was summoning the strength to persevere after the energy dip in Year 2. Have you ever experienced that kind of dip? Did the effort you were involved in survive? Why or why not? Did you learn anything from Sue’s story about what to do to help people work through the inevitable dips?
- Based on Sue’s experience, every major change will run into challenges around time, scheduling, workload, communication, fatigue, and shared governance. Does that match your own experience? What other challenges have you encountered? Have you seen successful strategies to overcome them?

## Part II: Building on the Foundation

### Prologue

- Sue cites research from the Department of Education about factors that contribute to sustainable change, including leadership, knowledge, assessment, governance, resources and support. Those ingredients are slightly different from but support Lippett's five elements for managing complex change (vision, skills, resources, incentives, support). Do you prefer one of these models over the other, or would you use both in your own work to drive change?

### Chapter 7: Six Recommendations for Shaping Your Own Initiative

- Sue believes that principals and other staff will be able to make better decisions about how to design and implement change if they have researched the components of effective change. Do you agree? Can you think of resources to help with that kind of research?
- Sue has found that her groups are more likely to achieve goals if they follow the QLD model of making them S.M.A.R.T. (specific & strategic, measurable, attainable, results-oriented and time-bound). If your school or district has goals, are those elements spelled out? If not, see if you can define the elements for one of the goals.
- Sue makes the statement that, in her experience, teachers who are given the chance to collaborate prefer that to working in isolation. Does that match your own experience? If not, what factors do you think contribute to staff who prefer to work alone? If yes, what mechanisms does your school or district use to encourage collaboration? What could it do better or more of?
- Have teachers in your school or district ever been given a chance to make decisions about the curriculum they would all teach and how it would be taught? If yes, how well did it work? If not, do you think they would welcome the opportunity to assume more responsibility or would they shy away from it?

### Chapter 8: Enabling Shared Governance

- What Sue discovered at Lawrence was that the *desire* for shared governance had to be accompanied by training in the tools of shared decision making—otherwise, in Mary Lippett's terms, you'd be missing elements of the model of complex change. Have you run into similar situations? What kind of training do you think might be needed within your school or district to support your ideals?

- The 30+ minute meeting model provides a way to divide complex tasks into manageable pieces that can more easily fit into busy staff schedules. Do you see the benefit of using a highly structured sequence of meetings like this? Where could this model be useful in your school?
- Balancing participation with authority and speed of action can get tricky in a collaborative environment, especially in situations where people's workloads are already packed. Sue outlines different models of decision making that she tries to use as appropriate for different situations. How is decision making handled in your school? Is it an either/or (command by the principal vs. full-on consensus) or do you have gradations between that are applied? What criteria would you apply to select one decision model over another?

## **Chapter 9: Becoming an Effective School Leader**

- As Sue relates in the beginning of this chapter, her own vision of leadership changed as a result of her experience at Lawrence and subsequent years as an assistant superintendent. What is your vision of an effective school leader? Has your understanding of leadership changed? Why?
- Below are the nine actions that Sue recommends for leaders. Are you surprised by anything on the list? Why? Do you agree with the actions Sue outlines in the chapter? What would you add or delete? What is your personal experience with any of them? What changes can be made in your school as a result of your reflections?
  - 1) Sharing the vision and beliefs
  - 2) Developing trust
  - 3) Establishing true collaboration among staff to create meaning and purpose
  - 4) Committing to understand the organization
  - 5) Matching the model to the needs of the school
  - 6) Emphasizing culturally relevant teaching
  - 7) Becoming a participant learner
  - 8) Establishing routines
  - 9) Embracing the naysayers