**S.O.S. (A Summary of the Summary)**

*The main ideas of the book are:*

~ Written by two influential, seasoned, and warm school leaders, this book shows you how to become an effective leader.
~ Rather than describing a didactic and impersonal form of school leadership, the authors share the strategies they used to raise student performance by leading in a refreshingly humane and respectful way.

*Why I chose this book:*
At a time when there is a great deal of emphasis on test scores and numbers, these authors bring the humanity back to the role of school leader. Although Fariña and Kotch served in high-level positions, including Deputy Chancellor of the New York City school system, they led in a way that showed they were always close to the classroom. Many will know them from their well-respected work as part of the reform efforts in District 2 in New York City.

I couldn’t fully capture the powerful words these thoughtful leaders use to describe their excitement, commitment, and respect for the learning of both students and teachers. You need to read the actual book to see the energy in the dozens of letters they wrote to their staff as principal/staff developer and Superintendent/Deputy.

A principal’s energy often wanes toward the end of the year, just at the perfect time to reflect back and plan improvements for the next year. This book will reconnect you to the power and purpose of your role. The book is both inspirational – I found myself saying, *Let me read that sentence again* – and yet has lots of concrete ideas you can easily adapt to your own school (or school system).

Each chapter focuses on one aspect of leadership and is incredibly well organized. First is an inspirational letter to the reader, then steps to implement the strategy, followed by pitfalls to avoid, and (my favorite) evidence to look for to know if you are successful.

Note that while the authors have primarily been leaders of grades K-8, most of the book applies to leaders of all grade levels. Because the authors worked at the district level, their advice is appropriate for district leaders as well.
Chapter 1: Formulate and Communicate Your Vision

Why Formulate and Communicate a Vision?
In this current climate, it is easy for school leaders to become narrowly focused on reading and math scores. This is why it is particularly important for you to create and communicate a vision that returns to the original purpose of an education – to help children become productive, humane, thinking citizens. For many leaders, formulating and conveying a compelling vision is one of the most difficult parts of the job. It helps to share personal stories as a way to connect to the school community. For example, one principal who understood how important the arts can be for struggling students shared how crucial music was in her own education. While some school leaders may feel uncomfortable with public speaking or writing, a compelling vision has the power to bring together the school community. As a place to start, consider the following questions: What skills do our students need to be successful in the next two decades? Would you send your own child to this school? Why or why not? Which members of our community are not succeeding? What could we do to help them? These types of larger, open-ended questions can form the basis of collaborative decisions that shape every aspect of school life. Leaders who engage others in this type of discussion will be better equipped to formulate a compelling vision and inspire others to adopt it.

A vision provides the necessary framework for making common sense decisions. It serves as a thoughtful, cohesive action plan that everyone understands. Rather than a generic rallying cry (like All children can learn), an effective vision must reflect the needs of a specific school community. Effective leaders research and analyze student performance, teacher retention, methods of teaching, parental involvement, classroom resources, professional development, and more. They use this information to look for patterns in order to understand the school’s needs. Then – rather than using memos or mandates – effective leaders use talk as the major vehicle of change. Relying on their beliefs and anecdotes, leaders call the community to action around a powerful vision.

Getting Started: Step by Step
• Study your school’s data and create three priorities: one to improve an academic area, one to strengthen staff collaboration, and one to improve communication. Below are examples of three interconnected goals phrased as inquiry questions:
  • How can we help our students become independent readers?
  • How can we ensure our teachers are sharing their best literacy teaching strategies in a collaborative environment?
  • How can we support parents and the community to extend the school’s literacy goals beyond the classroom?

• Be specific about your goals and stay focused over time. For example, if the goal is to improve student writing, year one might focus on narrative writing, year two on expository writing, and year three on writing in the content areas. If leaders choose too many goals or change their goals too often, they will lose support among faculty.

• Make sure every member of the school community is focused on these goals and provides ongoing feedback.
• Celebrate evidence of success through: weekly letters, displayed student work, classroom intervisitations, and weekly demonstration lessons in staff meetings.
• Make your vision concrete. Share books you are reading on the topic. Promote your vision on your own bulletin board. Participate in professional development yourself.
• Continually share your vision through writing and speaking (see pages 9-18 for sample weekly notes, memos, newsletters, and press releases to reinforce the leader’s vision).

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
When setting goals, it is important not to set too many and to make them challenging enough to galvanize the school community. Furthermore, goals should be the result of a communal effort – the leader is not the sole savior of the school. Allow enough time to see actual progress and stay on message during that time. Successful school leaders find the appropriate balance between celebration and criticism to keep the momentum for the goal going.

Evaluating Success
How can you assess if your vision has positively impacted your school? Plan to look for evidence such as the following:
• Is student achievement in the goal areas clearly visible in classroom visits, student work, teacher conversations, and a wide variety of student assessments?
• Do teachers demonstrate a commitment to the vision through their actions (teaching practices, new responsibilities, etc.)?
• Can parents articulate the school vision in terms of their own children?
• Has the vision been emphasized enough that it is evident even when you are not present?
Chapter 2: Engage in One-to-One Conversations

Why Implement One-to-One Conversations?
Carmen Fariña and Laura Kotch got so much from their professional collaboration and discussions with each other that they began to see these one-to-one conversations not only as professionally satisfying, but as the only tool that could truly help them make real and lasting changes in their school (and later their district). Calling a staff meeting to recite needed changes at the school or sending out a memo with a set of directives would not lead to the cooperation or support required to make improvements. Instead, as principal and staff developer, they decided to initiate a series of one-to-one conversations with individual staff members. When given a choice to speak with either one of them, the entire faculty wanted conversations with both. By holding private one-to-one conversations they were able to establish trust by providing an intimate setting in which both parties could share personal motivations and areas of vulnerability. Busy leaders often limit themselves to a few surface conversations, and the resulting lack of personal connection can lead to large-scale resentment in the school (or the district). Instead, leaders who engage in these conversations, and respond appropriately and publicly to the staff’s concerns, show that they are listening intently. Teachers are hungry to have their voices heard. Leaders who fail to listen to their teachers because they believe they have all the answers underestimate the expertise that exists right in their own building. Furthermore, initiating these individual conversations signals to the community that the leader believes in a shared style of leadership. The authors are convinced that one of the most powerful tools of school leaders is to give their undivided attention to staff members by speaking with them individually and listening with an open mind.

Getting Started: Step by Step
• Write a letter to the staff inviting them to speak with you one-on-one. (See the sample invitation on p.27.) Clarify that participation in these conversations is voluntary. Be transparent about the agenda, the questions you will ask, and the anticipated results of the conversation (changes in professional development, staff roles, etc.) The tone should be friendly. If this is the first conversation of the year, focus on questions such as: What are you already doing well? What do you need help with? How can you best be supported? If you were in my leadership role, what would you focus on?
• Model active listening by maintaining eye contact and show you are listening (Did you mean… Can you tell me more about…) Try to find common ground in the discussion.
• Take notes and highlight big ideas. Use these notes to provide immediate written feedback that includes appreciation, a summary of points, a reminder of agreed-upon next steps, and a comment about the staff member’s personal life (see a sample letter on p.29).
• Build on this conversation with mini-conversations throughout the year and an in-depth conversation at the end of the year to celebrate growth and create a plan for continued improvement. Use end-of-year conversations to help you address school needs for the subsequent school year. These conversations can inform everything from grade assignments and schedules to budgets and student placement.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Successful conversations require that the leader keep a few important tips in mind. Keeping these conversations voluntary is what helps faculty to trust in the process and speak honestly in these discussions. Furthermore, as the leader you must show that you are vulnerable and willing to learn. This involves taking the time to reflect on these conversations and making changes based on what you learn. Otherwise you will be sending the message that these conversations are useless and don’t lead to change. This does not mean you should rush to action. It is important to research and reflect rather than impulsively respond to one staff member’s comments. Finally, do not allow anyone to use this as an opportunity to gossip or speak negatively about others.

Evaluating Success
To determine whether one-to-one conversations are having an impact, look for evidence such as the following:
• Do the one-to-one conversations surface important information that helps to improve student achievement?
• Are talking and listening valued, modeled, and used consistently in the life of the school or district?
• Are organizational changes made with the staff’s buy-in and ownership?
• Are conversations leading to the recognition and development of future leaders?
• Is there a better use of people, time, support personnel, and materials as a result of these conversations?

Chapter 3: Implement the Book-of-the-Month Structure

Why Implement a Book of the Month?
Each month the authors shared a picture book with their staff – with teachers when they worked at the school level and with principals when they served as Superintendent and Deputy. They enclosed an introductory cover letter when they distributed the book and created a forum to discuss it. These monthly books served as a tool for the leaders to reach out both personally and professionally to share their values, address an issue the community faced, and invite individuals to respond and take follow-up actions. This practice also united the school community, built a common language to address school problems, and helped teachers and principals build their own libraries with these new books. Another important goal of this initiative was to reinforce the importance of literacy as a top priority. These picture books and letters also communicated their humane and nurturing approach to leadership as this excerpt from their first letter as district leaders to their principals shows (along with the book I Love You Like Crazy Cakes by Rose Lewis):
Dear Colleagues,

We have finally taken a deep breath and are beginning to understand the enormity of the responsibilities we have undertaken in our new roles. The past few weeks would have been overwhelming if it weren’t for your support...

We are going to share a book with you each month to underscore our commitment to literacy – and just because we love books! We have selected this first one carefully: its beautiful language and specific message are so relevant to this time and place. Several phrases from the book have special resonance:

- I promise to take good care of you.
- I was so excited and nervous...
- How did someone make this perfect match a world away...
- It was the end of one amazing journey and the beginning of another...
- Then you smiled as if to say, “I’m home.”

--Carmen and Laura

Chrysanthemum, by Kevin Henkes, was a book the authors used in every professional role they’ve held. As the story of a character who is different, this book provided a foundation for the authors to unite the school around the goal of building a culture in which the school’s diverse populations were respected while demonstrating the power of literacy to address school challenges. The practice of reading aloud to adults in a supportive setting invites open-ended and deeper conversations and can be a true force for change. For several examples of Carmen and Laura’s cover letters introducing the book-of-the-month, see pages 39-44.

It is important for principals to find a balance between choosing books that call staff to action (such as The Three Questions by John Muth) and books that show thanks and appreciation (Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco is a great one to thank teachers and Mr. Lincoln’s Way, also by Polacco, is a wonderful book for superintendents to thank principals). Some leaders address issues, such as behavior problems or bullying, with a picture book for a read-aloud (for example, Hooway for Wodney Wat by Helen Lester) and a professional book at the same time (Why Is Everybody Always Picking on Me? A Guide for Handling Bullies, by Terence Webster-Doyle). Still another approach is to choose a book related to curricular issues. For example, the authors used Leonardo: Beautiful Dreamer, by Robert Byrd, when their middle schools were implementing a new inquiry-based science curriculum.

Getting Started: Step by Step
- Become knowledgeable about picture books (speak with a librarian, browse in bookstores, or subscribe to publications such as Book Links, Horn Book, The New York Times Book Review, etc.) Then choose books that address your top three academic and social priorities as outlined in your goals from Chapter 1 about communicating your vision.
- Choose picture books with important themes such as those mentioned above or these below (see pages 49-50 for more suggestions):
  - Collaboration and community: Stone Soup by Jon Muth; The Quilt Maker by Jeff Brumbeau
  - Celebrations: I’m in Charge of Celebrations by Byrd Baylor; Believe and I Am Amazed by Jodi Hills
  - Dealing with the pressures of standardized tests: Testing Ms. Malarkey by Judy Finchler
  - Overcoming obstacles: Wallace’s List by Barbara Bottner and Gerald Kruglik
- Write powerful book-of-the-month cover emails by using a personal tone, including the word ‘we,’ emphasizing powerful phrases, including an inspiring call to action, and inviting readers to respond via email, conversations, etc.
- Create a regular protocol to distribute books in a predictable way (e.g., at staff meeting) and plan ahead for quality conversations by preparing open-ended discussion questions.
- Follow up in numerous ways such as holding individual conversations, referring to the book when discussing classroom observations, and displaying book covers outside of your office.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Make sure to take the time so you don’t choose the wrong book – one that is too long or too preachy, for example. Also take care to write a thoughtful and error-free cover letter. Consider asking a trusted colleague to preview the book and letter first.

Evaluating Success
To verify that the book-of-the-month has made an impact, look for evidence of the following:
- Is there an increased emphasis on read-alouds?
- Is the community focusing on the important issues introduced in the book-of-the-month?
- Are your values and beliefs evident in your book selections?
- Is the principal’s office a place to read and talk about books?
- Are members of the school community – especially those typically silent – responding in conversations about the book?
- Has enthusiasm for literacy extended to a wider audience including secretaries, lunchroom workers, and maintenance staff?
Chapter 4: Celebrate!

Rationale for Celebrations
If you have been fortunate enough to have had a mentor who gives specific and timely feedback that also included affirmation for what you were doing right, you understand the power of celebration. A large number of talented educators leave the field because they do not receive the acknowledgement they need. Teachers crave supportive feedback but often only receive orders of plans to carry out without any appreciation for what they are already doing well. Celebrations have a ripple effect. When superintendents celebrate their principals, principals in turn celebrate their teachers, who in turn celebrate their students. Celebrations unite the community around small and large successes and communicate an expectation for continual improvement while inviting others to join in this effort. When principals reward the taking of risks and celebrate more than the numerical improvement of test scores they demonstrate that they are on the lookout for creative thinking and thoughtful practices. They show that even in today's demanding climate, they value the people in their community. On a basic level, when staff feel celebrated they are more likely to do more: work past 3pm, collaborate with other teachers, take on leadership roles, and even stay in the job. To combat the high turnover of teachers, principals who create a culture of celebration will find that they are more likely to retain staff.

Getting Started: Step by Step
The book contains 35 ideas for celebrations. Below are just a few suggestions.
- Invite new staff to a summer luncheon to share personal stories and discuss why they became teachers.
- On the first professional development day provide time to honor personal staff milestones that occurred over the summer (marriages, births, etc.) Also allow time for staff to turn and talk to others rather than just lecturing to demonstrate that you value their voices.
- Form a committee to schedule celebrations throughout the year.
- Collect staff birthdays and create a ritual for celebrating them – a lottery ticket, a single rose, or a class coverage so the teacher can get coffee.
- When teachers are tired the day after parent-teacher conferences, provide breakfast and throat lozenges (to help from all the talking!)
- Create a rave reviews bulletin board – when outsiders visit your school ask what they saw that they liked and post these comments.
- Hold curriculum celebrations of student projects, grade-level units, and whole-school learning. Invite outsiders.
- Display photos of your staff members on a bulletin board. You can include their job titles, favorite books, favorite quotations, etc.
- Hold an annual alumni celebration to honor the school’s history. Alumni are a valuable source of mentors, volunteers, speakers, etc.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Make sure you don’t celebrate everything – if you do, nothing seems important. Furthermore, celebrations need to be genuine and feedback must be honest. Empty compliments just encourage mediocre performance. When you do celebrate something, it will be more powerful if it is timely. Improving schools is an ongoing process and celebrations should not be perceived as an endpoint, but rather as a stepping-stone for more opportunities to improve.

Evaluating Success
To determine if your culture of celebrations has had a positive impact on the school, look for evidence of the following:
- Is there more talk about teaching and learning? Does this talk move students forward?
- Is there evidence of successful recruitment and retention due to a positive buzz about your school?
- Are students recognized for their individual contributions in a variety of ways?
- Is there evidence that a culture of celebration will be sustained even when you are no longer part of the school community?

Chapter 5: Supervise Creatively and Evaluate Reflectively

Why Use a Different Approach to Supervision and Evaluation?
When principals were nothing more than building managers, they simply performed one observation of a single lesson all year. Although the role of principal has changed, often this supervisory practice has not. However, this approach does not lead to improved teaching and learning. Instead, Fariña and Kotch, as principal and staff developer, found that approaching supervision differently not only improved student learning, but also provided a wide range of benefits from increasing collaboration and reflection to improving differentiation and better meeting the needs of struggling students. Below are the three supervisory structures they implemented at their school:

A. Participatory Lessons
Participatory lessons are when the teacher and principal plan a lesson together. The teacher teaches the whole-lesson part while the principal observes, then the principal teaches a smaller group of students using a plan the teacher has devised. The principal evaluates how well the lesson went and how well student needs were met. This approach to supervision helps newer teachers learn how to plan effectively and use evidence from the lesson to determine if they are meeting the students’ needs. Furthermore, this approach builds trust by showing the teacher that the principal is willing to be a co-learner and take risks. As the authors write, “When you sit with students on the rug in a writing workshop… you are perceived differently.” Through this process, the principal can insert new initiatives, ensure schoolwide consistency, and come to understand, firsthand, the challenges teachers face and the professional development they need.
Getting Started: Step by Step
To start the process, send a letter to junior staff members inviting them to a voluntary meeting to explain the participatory lesson idea. A good time to start this process is in January because there has been time to get to know the staff by then. For those who decide to sign on, set up a half-hour meeting with each teacher two days before the participatory lesson to plan. Make sure to discuss the lesson in relation to the school’s goals and priorities. The teacher should name the students with whom the principal should work and discuss the plan for that part of the lesson. After the lesson, give the teacher oral feedback within a few days and written feedback within a week. It is important to take notes throughout this process – on the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses as well as the students who need more assistance.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Make sure that participation is voluntary. Although participatory lessons are primarily designed for newer teachers, others may want to join. While you have many commitments as principal, it is important to make your best effort not to reschedule the planning meeting or the class observation/participation. This shows your highest priority is what happens in the classroom.

B. Teacher Portfolios
Teacher portfolios serve as a form of action research. Teachers, with support from the principal and staff developer, study a question concerning their own teaching practice using student work as evidence. Teachers collect data, analyze it, create hypotheses, come up with conclusions, and create an action plan for use in their classrooms. They use portfolios to capture their learning and teaching strategies in writing so they can share this information with others. Portfolios serve as an excellent tool for experienced teachers to become experts in an area and share this expertise with colleagues.

Getting Started: Step by Step
Like with participatory lessons, invite staff to an informational meeting and emphasize that this is voluntary. Create a system to help teachers choose their portfolio topics, have ongoing conversations about their work, and share their results. Provide a timeline for drafting, revising, and publishing portfolios as well as compensation for teacher time. Evaluate portfolios as part of the teacher’s formal year-end evaluation.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Create clear criteria for who should participate and who should not because their classroom skills are inadequate. This process is very time consuming and to do it well, you should support a portfolio program over the course of a few years. It is also helpful to align the portfolio process with the school’s priorities for professional development. Finally, portfolios need audiences so you must be willing to create opportunities for staff to share them in whatever ways possible.

C. Peer Coaching
Peer coaching gives two carefully matched teachers the opportunity to plan together, observe each other, share feedback, and identify practical next steps to improve practice. Not only does this build relationships, but it encourages teachers to become committed to the success of their colleagues. The process of peer coaching promotes collaboration, reflective thinking, and helps ensure a more consistent school-wide approach to teaching.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Because peer coaching is more egalitarian than mentoring, it is important to carefully select teachers who are compatible in their areas of expertise. Peer coaching is not a process to deal with unsatisfactory teachers – they need a different kind of supervision. In order for peer coaching to succeed, teachers need training, time, and a commitment to confidentiality.

Evaluating the Success of Participatory Lessons, Teacher Portfolios, and Peer Coaching
To determine if these supervisory structures are effective, look for the following evidence:

- Does the community see you, the leader, as a co-learner?
- Do the patterns you discover during participatory visits lead to changes that result in improved student achievement?
- Are you more confident discussing teaching and learning strategies after experiencing them firsthand in the classroom?
- Can you better connect teachers with one another based on their expertise and needs?
- Are teachers more competent in their planning?
- Are teaching practices leading to improved student learning?
- Have teachers become more collaborative? Is there more sharing of teacher practice?
- Is there more consistency in instruction school-wide?
- Are your teachers becoming more interested in their own learning?
Chapter 6: Develop a Culture for Sustainable Professional Learning

Rationale for Creating Regular Professional Learning Rituals and Structures

Carmen Fariña and Laura Kotch’s definition of professional development is quite different from the passive, one-shot workshop approach found in many schools. For them, professional learning is an interactive process that is practical and transferable to the real world. It must be rooted in real classroom practice and involve the examination of real student work. Professional development should be predictable and consistent by linking it to well-established structures at the school. As the authors write, “Excellence in teaching and learning requires that professional development become a way of life.” Having regular professional development structures and rituals not only brings the school community together and energizes everyone, but it also leads to consistent teaching practices that improve student learning.

Getting Started: Step by Step

• To understand the professional development (PD) needs at your school, assess student achievement data, previous PD efforts, classroom practices, and conduct a survey of staff (ask how PD could be improved at the school, what they have already learned from PD, and what they could contribute to PD efforts).
• Align professional development with the stated goals for the year.
• Map out a year-long series of professional development conferences with topics such as “Best Practices in Technology,” “Best Practices in Literacy,” and others. (Fariña and Kotch always used the same color folder with a quote on the cover that matched the theme of the month and put conference materials inside.) Establish norms of behavior (e.g., cell phones off and start on time), circulate an agenda ahead of time, keep administrative issues to a minimum, and start with a short inspirational text. Discuss professional texts and share best practices. End each conference by asking for written feedback.
• Set up small-group structures that make professional development the central focus in your school community. Structures include:
  • Professional development team meetings: This team (made up of school leaders, staff developers, and outside consultants) assesses the learning needs at the school (through surveys, walkthroughs, student work, etc.) and assists the principal in laying out and assessing the professional development plan for the year.
  • Cabinet meetings: A small group of divergent thinkers who help the principal lead the school.
  • Weekly grade or department meetings: These groups of teachers focus on school performance data, develop curriculum units of study, examine student work, and share best practices as well as obstacles. Grade and department meetings work best when they use the same consistent agenda as the rest of the school. (See the sample agenda on p.109).
  • Monthly grade or department leader meetings: These leaders represent the principal to the groups of teachers and represent the teachers to the principal.
  • Vertical articulation team meetings: In order to have schoolwide consistency and reduce curriculum gaps between grades, teachers with expert curriculum knowledge should meet in vertical teams (one from each grade) starting in April to prepare for June planning (see Chapter 8). Start small with one curricular area such as reading, writing, or math.
  • Study groups: Using inquiry, these groups come up with innovative ways to improve student achievement. They should focus on the pressing needs of the school community in order to design their course of study.
  • School walkthroughs: A small group can conduct an in-depth tour of the school as a way to unearth the school’s most pressing instructional needs and come up with next steps. (See sample guiding questions on p.117.)
• See pages 106 - 114 for other ideas for small-group structures.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Leaders need to make sure staff get the professional development they need. In order to do this, they should not just rely on staff themselves to sign up for what they need. Instead, encourage staff to participate in the type of professional development that will challenge them and help them grow in appropriate ways. Another suggestion is for school leaders to learn alongside staff members to show that professional development is their top priority. Finally, professional development that isn’t tied to the school community’s needs wastes time. When professional development is designed around knee-jerk reactions to political pressures it will not become an established and effective part of the school. Professional development must be aligned and prioritized based on the school’s needs.

Evaluating Success

To assess whether professional development is fully embedded in your school culture and improves student achievement, look for the following evidence:

• Are professional development structures and rituals aligned with school and teacher needs?
• Are new staff members easily acculturated and supported with predictable and consistent PD opportunities?
• Do teachers value professional development as a means to move into leadership positions?
• Is there more enthusiasm and energy for new learning?
• Do school leaders see professional development as valuable and productive for themselves?
Chapter 7: Nurture Teacher Leaders

Rationale for Nurturing Teacher Leaders
Developing teacher leaders is a powerful way for a principal to take advantage of talent in the building. When principals are able to delegate more responsibilities to teacher leaders, they gain additional time to focus on instruction. Encouraging teacher leaders to engage in further professional development means that when principals have discussions with these teacher leaders they will learn more themselves. Furthermore, teacher leaders can serve as a catalyst for change because a respected teacher leader can pilot new practices in their classrooms and develop buy-in for the principal’s initiatives among the staff. Also, by creating a career pathway for the best and brightest teachers, the school will be better able to retain the most talented educators. Finally, by tapping into expertise within the building, principals can save money that would have gone to outside consultants.

Getting Started: Step by Step
• Identify teachers’ strengths and match these with the needs of the school. Choose how many teacher leaders you would like to support (choose a minimum of two so they can work together) and how you will compensate them (reduced teaching responsibilities, additional salary, professional development opportunities, etc.).
• Set goals for teacher leaders and outline their specific roles and responsibilities (e.g., conduct workshops for new teachers on classroom management, deal with new teacher “anxiety,” run a study group on a professional book, demonstrate lessons in math, etc.)
• Announce this voluntary initiative publicly along with a list of criteria to become a teacher leader. Criteria might include: willingness to attend additional PD, open one’s classroom, share expertise, and the ability to conduct workshops for teachers.
• Once chosen, hold a meeting for teacher leaders to outline their roles and responsibilities and provide a log to record their work.
• Provide ongoing support for teacher leaders: meet with them, resolve conflicts, supervise them, etc.
• Assess each teacher leader’s fulfillment of their role by observing them and evaluating their work and any other data that shows increased student performance. Then meet with them at the year’s end to review the year and plan for the year to come.
• Celebrate your teacher leaders at the year’s end!

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
To avoid jealousy and resentment over which staff are chosen as teacher leaders, make sure that the criteria and the process for choosing them are clear and made public. Do not choose teachers because they are your favorites or the most senior. Then, to make sure teachers don’t resent the teacher leaders, make sure these leaders do not evaluate their peers or make policy decisions on their own. Do not assume teacher leaders already know how to communicate with adults effectively. Help them develop their skills in speaking, writing effectively, listening with understanding, and dealing with difficult staff members. Choose only the number of teacher leaders you are able to support with adequate professional development and coaching.

Evaluating Success
To determine whether your teacher leaders are effective, look for the following evidence:
• Are academic benchmarks being raised due to the work of teacher leaders?
• Is your interaction with teacher leaders increasing their knowledge and understanding?
• Have teacher leaders developed effective partnerships with their colleagues?
• Can you focus more on important issues because of the support of the teacher leaders?

A Teacher Leader Case Study
While there is no one way to utilize teacher leaders, it is important that their role grows out of the goals and needs of the school. Below is one profile (the book has two others) of how one teacher leader helped to address a school’s needs.

Mathematics Teacher Leader
In one district, new mathematics mandates were imposed and one school anticipated resistance from both teachers and parents. In addition, the principal was not yet proficient in the approach to mathematics being imposed. To address these issues, the principal looked to a highly respected math teacher to serve as a teacher leader. This teacher understood the math content and had enough respect from peers to be able to assuage their anxieties. The principal helped coach the teacher leader to improve her communication skills so she was better able to communicate about the new initiative. Furthermore, parents respected this teacher and were open to attending workshops she presented to help them understand the new initiative. Not only did this teacher leader attend all district professional development meetings about mathematics instruction, but she also conducted ongoing professional development at the school and opened classrooms as labs where teachers could observe the new practices. She went even further and created a monthly mathematics newsletter, selected professional articles for the staff to read on the topic, and created a mathematics club for students.
Chapter 8: Plan for September in June

Why Plan for September in June?
One of the wonderful things about working in schools is that each school year brings an opportunity for new beginnings, hope, and a chance to try again. The new school year allows educators to replicate the successes of the previous year and modify what needs to be improved. Unfortunately, many schools do not always engage in the type of comprehensive and thoughtful planning that is necessary to bring about this type of renewal. To ensure this happens, the authors propose using days in June to plan for September. This provides an opportunity for the leadership to introduce new initiatives with enough time to allow the community to engage in meaningful conversations. Teachers reflect on the past year’s performance and ask what they want students to be able to accomplish by the end of the next year. The staff create educational plans to serve as an anchoring framework for teachers to plan over the summer. Because these educational plans are publicly created this leads to more school-wide consistency in planning for scheduling, pacing, teaching strategies, assessments, and resources for the coming year.

Getting Started: Step by Step
• In April, write a letter explaining the concept and the process of June planning. Perhaps have teachers read a book about thoughtful planning (such as Understanding by Design by Wiggins and McTighe or Mapping the Curriculum by Heidi Hayes Jacobs) before the June meetings.
• In mid-May decide which teachers will teach which subjects the following year and distribute this list. Try to include newly hired teachers in this chart.
• With your cabinet, review the school’s data, curriculum, and notes from any grade-level, subject area, or articulation team meetings that contain suggestions that should be included in June’s planning meetings. Meet with leaders of these groups to see if they have any concerns that should be on the June meeting agendas.
• With all of the information above, create a uniform agenda for all of the team planning meetings in June. Distribute this agenda along with clear expectations for outcomes of the meetings, materials to bring, samples of student work, and note-taking materials.
• Arrange for teachers’ classes to be covered during the day their meeting will be held in June.
• At the end of each planning day, collect the resulting minutes, plans, requests for PD or other help, and all other decisions reached.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Make sure you personally participate in June planning to share your goals. If you don’t, this will undermine the process. It will further undermine the process if teams of teachers make decisions and you don’t allow them to implement these plans. Every school has naysayers. Know who they are and try to separate them as much as possible. Choose expert facilitators to help deal with these challenges and ensure that the discussions are not dominated by a few people. Overall, remember June planning requires that details be thoroughly thought through. If you don’t think about hiring substitutes, bringing the appropriate materials, or assigning skilled facilitators, your efforts will end in failure.

Evaluating Success
To determine whether your June planning sessions made a concrete impact, look for the following evidence:
• Are the June school plans developed and implemented collaboratively using appropriate data?
• Can all members of the community articulate the anticipated outcomes?
• Do teachers use the June meetings to deepen their planning of curricula and better meet the needs of individual students?
• Do these planning conversations continue beyond the designated time?
• Does June planning jump-start the new year?
Chapter 9: Encourage Parent and Community Engagement

Why Is Parent Leadership and Involvement Crucial for School Success?
When Fariña and Kotch were school leaders, they involved parents in the school in ways they had never been involved before. Together with colleagues, they involved parents more fully in the life of the school by including them in study groups, school tours, parent-teacher committees, meet-the-author events, parent libraries, and even classroom demonstrations. These efforts did more than improve parent involvement simply for the sake of increasing involvement. These efforts demonstrated the power of parent involvement in helping to raise student achievement and cultivate a positive school culture as well.

Many of the same strategies used to improve trust with teachers work with parents, too. Providing a predictable and regular means of communicating with families helps them to feel well informed. Parents should know about curriculum decisions, controversial issues, personnel decisions, student activities, and more. Asking for and listening to parent feedback increases their commitment by showing that they are full partners with the school. Finding opportunities to celebrate that involve parents and the community brings everyone together to experience joy and appreciation. Finally, tapping into parent expertise can free up the principal’s time to focus on instructional issues. Parents can help raise money, staff after-school programs, and serve on useful committees such as a technology committee to enhance the school’s use of technology.

Getting Started: Step by Step
- Send home a parent packet with information on the first day of school. Include a welcoming letter (see the sample principal letter on p.158 and the letter on p.159 from a superintendent reminding principals how important it is to make parents feel welcome), a year-long calendar of events, staff names and contact information, a sign-up sheet for parents to volunteer, etc.
- Have a committee of parents and teachers create an FAQ booklet for parents with answers to questions such as How will my child be taught spelling? How will the teacher communicate with me if my child has problems?
- Hold a meeting early in the year to welcome parents, answer questions, share grade-level goals, introduce new initiatives, etc.
- Greet parents and students at the beginning and end of each day. This provides opportunities for informal conversations.
- Create committees to meet the needs of your school that can include parents. Examples include a beautification committee (for painting, planting, etc.), a library committee (conduct read-alouds, help with homework, etc.) or a newcomers committee to welcome new parents.
- Offer workshops to parents on needed topics such as helping children survive adolescence, the college application process, or dealing with homework, the pressures of testing, and completing long-term projects.
- Create initiatives for men to participate in the school to support male students. Have opportunities for only male caregivers to do a read aloud, discuss their careers, or talk about their favorite adolescent novels.
- Start reading clubs in which mothers and daughters or fathers and sons choose and read books together.
- Start a First Fridays tradition by inviting parents of elementary children into the classroom the first Friday of each month to participate in an activity as a way to remain up-to-date on what is happening in the classroom. (Full disclosure – my daughters’ school does this and it’s the number one thing that helps me feel informed and involved!)
- Hold an orientation or welcome meeting for parents of secondary students in June. Invite adolescent development experts to discuss issues concerning teenagers and encourage parents to exchange phone numbers to stay in touch.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls
Often one group of parents attempts to influence the principal. Make sure to hear from a wide variety of parents and do not favor some over others. Show that you truly believe in parent empowerment and respect parents by involving them in real tasks concerning curriculum, budget, personnel, and policy. However, make it clear that you are ultimately responsible for the school’s success.

Evaluating Success
To determine if increasing parents’ involvement results in improved student achievement, look for evidence such as:
- Are there predictable and effective protocols for communicating with parents?
- Are parents better able to support their students because of improved communication?
- Do parents feel immediately welcome when they enter your school?
- Are you benefiting from parental involvement by being able to spend more time on instructional issues?

The authors wrote this book to share the types of strategies they used to build supportive, collaborative, and effective schools. As they write, in such school communities, “educators talk about what they do each day, observe one another in action, reflect on what is happening and why, and design curriculum together. Successes are celebrated and extended, reflective thinking becomes a way of life, expertise is built from within, and energy is sustained. The community owns its commitment to continual improvement.” If this is the approach you want to take to continual school improvement, take a closer look at the strategies presented in this book.
I recommend that leaders choose a few of the strategies from the book for their school (or district) to work on, and then get the appropriate chapter (or the whole book) into the hands of their leadership team to follow through. Here’s a way to start:

**Step 1: Choose to focus on 2 - 3 of the 9 strategies that were presented in the book**

Each chapter has an ‘Evaluating Success’ section at the end that consists of a series of questions to use to determine if the implementation is successful. However, you can flip to these end-of-chapter questions and use them as a self-assessment tool to see if this would be a good strategy for your school (or school system) to start with. Below is an abbreviated version. Ask yourself or your leadership team these questions to determine which are the 2-3 areas with which you would like to start.

| Which 2-3 strategies should your school (or school system) focus on? |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Strategy**                | **Questions to assess if this is an area of need (rate from 1 (lowest rating)-10 (highest rating))** |
| 1. Communicate Your Vision | How well is your vision successfully embedded in the school and having a positive impact? Is student achievement in your priority areas improving? |
| 2. One-to-One Conversations | How effectively do you and your leadership team systematically use one-to-one conversations to make school improvements? |
| 3. Book of the Month        | Do you regularly distribute and discuss books to your staff to convey your beliefs, improve student achievement, and increase enthusiasm for literacy? |
| 4. Celebrate                | How well have you established a culture of celebration that positively impacts the school? |
| 5. Alternative Supervisory Structures | How effectively do you use alternative supervisory structures (such as participatory lessons, teacher portfolios, and peer coaching) to improve teaching and learning? |
| 6. Professional Learning Structures | How well are professional learning structures (such as cabinet meetings, teacher team meetings, study groups, and school walk-throughs) aligned with and addressing the school’s needs? |
| 7. Nurturing Teacher Leaders | How effectively are you developing teacher leaders to best meet the needs of the school? |
| 8. Planning for September in June | How well have you created a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to reflecting back on the year and planning for the new one? Does it result in a solid, school-wide educational plan that serves as an anchor for all instructional decisions? |
| 9. Parent/Community Engagement | How well have you engaged parents and the community not simply for the sake of engaging them, but rather to raise student achievement? |

**Step 2: Distribute the book or the necessary chapters to your leadership team and DISCUSS!**

Because I couldn’t fully capture the wisdom of Carmen Fariña and Laura Kotch in my summary, it is helpful to share the authors’ actual words. Distribute the book or select chapters to your leadership team or the staff who will help you to spearhead these new initiatives. Note that each chapter can be read on its own. Choose a date by which the staff involved should read the chapters.

Come together and discuss each chapter chosen. It is best to discuss them one at a time. Here are some general discussion questions you can use regardless of which chapter you are discussing:

**Introductory Letter and Rationale** -- Which ideas struck you as important? Which sentences or passages resonated for you? Share the sentences/passages you underlined. Why are these ideas meaningful given our specific school/district context?

**Getting Started: Step by Step** – There are many implementation suggestions in this section and you don’t need to do all of them. Which do you think are the most crucial steps for implementation given the needs of our school? How would the implementation need to be adapted for our school community to work most effectively? What additional steps would we need to take that were not mentioned in this section?

**Avoiding Common Pitfalls** – Which of the pitfalls mentioned do you think we need to be particularly careful about at our school? What other pitfalls, not mentioned in this section, do we need to be careful to avoid?

**Evaluating Success** – Which of the book’s ideas for measuring success would be best for our school to use? What else?

**Step 3: Plan the initiative, implement it, evaluate it, and make revisions**

After discussing the chapter using the discussion questions above (or your own questions), make a concrete plan to implement the ideas from the chapter adapted to the needs of your school community. To make sure your plan will be effective, make sure you address all of the components below, write it down, and distribute the written plan to all staff involved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to Consider</th>
<th>What is the Plan?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHAT aspects of the strategy presented in the book will we include in our plan?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>WHEN will we implement each step? Create a timeline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHO is responsible for each aspect of the plan?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW well has the plan been implemented? What criteria will we use to evaluate the success of the plan (see the Evaluating Success section of the chapter)? How will we assess the plan’s success (Increased student achievement? Feedback on a survey? Etc.)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOOSE a date in the future to look at the results of the initiative and make revisions to improve the implementation.</td>
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