Embracing the Power of Less

Mike Schmoker

When leaders narrow their focus to one or two powerful initiatives, they can get amazing results—and love their jobs.

> *The skinny is about finding the smallest number of high-leverage actions that unleash stunningly powerful consequences.*—Michael Fullan (2009)

Imagine the great majority of our schools being led by highly effective instructional leaders whose students ascend to new heights of academic achievement—often within a year or two. Moreover, imagine such leadership being marked by a surprising degree of ease, effortlessness, and even joy. Then, imagine all of this occurring without leaders having to work any extra hours.

For most schools, far-fetched as it may seem, this scenario is well within reach. But only if leaders, starting with district leadership, (1) ensure that schools pursue a *severely reduced* number of initiatives and (2) select and focus on only the most urgently needed, evidence-based instructional initiatives (those which, sadly, the preponderance of our schools have yet to adopt).

Meeting these conditions will all but guarantee success. Honoring them is the most probable path to wide-scale effective leadership.

An Example with Focus

Consider an elementary school in the Amphitheater Public Schools district in Tucson, Arizona, where I worked as a central office administrator. In 1995, after years of laboring under each year's complex, multigoal "strategic plan," the principal was convinced (by me and an instructional coach) to focus on just one goal: increasing the proportion of students who could write effectively about both fiction and nonfiction texts. Higher-level administrators gave him permission to focus on this goal. This initiative was chosen on the basis of evidence showing that such a focus was desperately needed in almost all schools and would have an enormous impact; the ability to read critically and then write effectively ranks at or near the top of what equips students for everything from state assessments to college and career success (Conley, 2007; Schmoker, 2018).

By focusing on this single goal, the principal, teacher leaders, and grade-level teams were able to devote their time, energy, and data collection to this priority at *every*faculty meeting—thus fostering all-important continuity, enthusiasm, and momentum. And they had time

to address the resistance, confusion, and small setbacks that inevitably beset any new initiative.

The results were almost immediate. All students began to improve their reading, thinking, and writing abilities as measured by common writing assessments and criteria. At monthly team meetings (I was at most of them), teacher teams often celebrated double-digit growth in the percentage of students whose scores had risen. It was a pleasure for all involved—including the principal, who at year's end expressed his gratitude for being coaxed into focusing on this single, high-impact initiative.

The Case for Less

The case for this limited-focus approach is very strong. Countless leadership studies point to the power of devoting our precious time and energy to only one or a "tiny set" of priorities (Hansen, 2018). The titles of some recent articles highlighting such results are indicative: "How to Do More by Doing Less" by Scott Anderson in *Entrepreneur*, "How Doing Less Allows You to Accomplish More" by Logan Chierotti in *Inc*., and "Do Less to Achieve More" by Ron Ashkenar in *Forbes*. In his 2011 *Huffington Post* article, "Accomplishing More by Doing Less," Marc Lesser writes that a leader's "greatest accomplishment is having the courage to do less."

Several book-length studies confirm these observations. In *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, Charles Payne (2011) found that the primary reason for the general failure of three-plus decades of reform is our addiction to excess. Because schools typically launch too many initiatives, none of them are implemented with adequate "depth and intensity." This is death to successful execution. Similarly, in *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown (2013) urges leaders to focus, whenever possible, on *only one* major initiative at a time—until that initiative is fully and successfully executed and produces results. Success, McKeown writes, is a function of "the disciplined pursuit of less."

A more recent example is Morton Hansen's *Great at Work* (2018), based on a five-year study of 5,000 leaders. Of the seven top factors that Hansen found influence leaders' performance, "focus"—a commitment to a severely reduced number of initiatives—was number one, the single most pivotal factor. Hansen's operative expression is, "Do less, then obsess." That is, apply the (always-limited!) time and energy that now get diffused across several initiatives intensely and obsessively to one or two major initiatives at a time.

That's the power of less. But in our age of educator overload and burnout, we'd also be smart to consider the *pleasures* of less. For McKeown, this "disciplined pursuit of less" transforms work. Obstacles are reduced, and instead of being "hard and full of friction," the execution of our tasks and projects becomes "almost effortless" (2014, p. 174). Both leaders and staff find "joy in the journey."

Hansen likewise writes that those who obsess over a "tiny set" of goals will be "less stressed out, more balanced, and more satisfied with their job." For such people, life improves dramatically both inside and outside of work (2018, p. 193). They experience better work-life balance, higher job satisfaction, and less burnout. Hansen even found that top performers who learned to do less, then obsess *didn't work longer hours*.

But, alas, focus isn't enough. McKeown notes that we must also apply the most "extreme criteria" in selecting what we focus on. For educators, that means we must follow the evidence to what will have the absolute maximum benefit for students.

The (Likely) Three Most Powerful Initiatives

If we want effective instructional leadership in every school, building-level leaders must be allowed to zero in on initiatives that are guaranteed to have a large and immediate impact on legitimate measures of student performance. We have a moral obligation to restructure schools in this way.

For the majority of schools, choosing such initiatives will be easier than it appears. If we honestly apply the most extreme criteria to select the most powerful, urgently needed focus for a school, the evidence will likely point to one or more of the following priorities: creating a clear, coherent curriculum; promoting authentic literacy; or ensuring that instruction includes certain key elements (clarity on what will be learned and how the learning will be assessed, and frequent checks for understanding throughout the lesson). Many studies confirm the primacy of these three aspects of schooling (and, sadly, their absence, even in schools with respectable test scores). So focusing on any one of these will have an outsize impact on all students, from high-achieving to struggling.[1]

1. Creating a Coherent Curriculum

There is a "mountain of evidence" (Sahm, 2017) that implementing a coherent, content-rich curriculum may be the most foundational element of effective schooling and has the greatest impact on students' learning, reading ability, and life chances. Yet such a curriculum is rarely created, implemented, or even monitored in the majority of our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010–2011; Hirsch, 2016; Sahm, 2017). Typically, when I review a school or district's so-called "curriculum" with leaders, I find it's a barely modified catalog of state standards or a thick, jargon-laced document; neither of these provides adequate clarity or guidance on what to teach, and when (Darling Hammond, 2010, p. 295). And only the rare school meaningfully monitors what is actually taught. As a result, omissions and inconsistencies abound; what students learn depends largely on which teacher they happen to get (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

When a coherent curriculum *is* created and implemented, results can come with amazing speed (Marshall, 2003). After years of seeing low achievement at his Boston elementary school, principal Kim Marshall persuaded his faculty to build and implement a coherent curriculum at each grade level. As a result, the school made the largest gains of any Boston public school in 1999, rising from the bottom to the top third of Boston schools (in terms of achievement)—in a single school year.

Any team of teachers can build a coherent, provisional curriculum (subject to administrative review) in about two hours. The process begins with a review of state standards, followed by thoughtful selection of the most essential content and skills. Then the team should decide which content and skills to teach each grading period, and in what order.[2] And we must never forget that any curriculum worthy of the name must include generous amounts of substantive reading, discussion, and writing.

2. Promoting Authentic Literacy

The ability to read, write, and speak effectively may be more critical to academic and career success than any other factor (Hirsch, 2016; Hurley, 2015). Yet authentic analytic reading, writing, and discussion activities rarely occur during a typical school day—even in language arts classes. They are routinely supplanted by a host of *inauthentic* literacy skills- or worksheet-based activities—even in this Common Core era (Schmoker, 2018).

What happens when a leader rallies the troops to change this reality? Brockton High School, the largest school in Massachusetts, was near the bottom in achievement. Under the leadership of associate principal Susan Szachowicz, the faculty shored up their curriculum and built reading, writing, thinking, and speaking into every course. They established that on certain days every week, in every course, students would complete content-based reading and writing assignments. In Szachowicz's words, school leaders "monitored like crazy" to make sure the plan was faithfully implemented.

A year later, the Massachusetts commissioner of education called to tell Brockton's principal that the school had made the largest achievement gains in the state. They made similar gains for the next six years—at which point Brockton had risen to the top 10 percent of Massachusetts schools.

3. Delivering Soundly Structured Instruction

The presence of certain elements of instruction ensures that much higher proportions of students will succeed on daily lessons, projects, and standardized assessments. Such lessons start with a clear statement of what will be learned, why it's worth learning, and how it will be assessed. Then, for each small, manageable chunk of the lesson, the teacher quickly and efficiently checks to ensure that every student can successfully do the work (for instance, by circulating while students work, checking their progress). If some students are

struggling, the teacher must adjust her instruction—by reteaching key concepts or addressing common patterns of error—to ensure the highest possible success rate. Top researchers and practitioners now attest to the game-changing impact such instruction will have on student achievement—on virtually any kind of lesson or task (see Schmoker, 2018, pp. 63–71).

I was once invited to observe a teacher use these methods at a high school in my community. The principal later told me that, almost solely because of the increased scores of students in this teacher's class, the entire school had made the largest percent gains on the statewide writing exam—within one year.

Leaders can ensure that all teachers within their school include these crucial elements in their instruction by thoroughly training and retraining teachers in these methods and by making these techniques the primary focus of both teacher evaluation and classroom observations.

Go Forth and Obsess

If you, as a leader, find something more effective or more urgently needed than these three priorities, adopt it. Then obsess: Give that priority the time, energy, and attention that most initiatives are now starved for.

If our school and district leaders truly embraced McKeown's "disciplined pursuit of less," leaders and practitioners in ordinary schools, in every community, could achieve the "stunningly powerful consequences" Fullan mentions—with less stress and more satisfaction than ever.

Guiding Questions

› For Principals: How might it change your job if you focused on just one or two instructional goals? How might your day-to-day schedule and tasks be different? Would you feel differently about your job?

› Consider the three focus areas Schmoker says are likely to have the most impact within any school. Which of these needs most attention at your school? Could you narrow your focus to that priority for the coming school year?

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Endnotes

[1] A more thorough case for these three priorities can be found in chapters 2 and 3 of my book *Focus* (2018, ASCD). Detailed procedures for their implementation can be found there and in *Leading with Focus* (ASCD, 2016).

[2] A step-by-step process for building high-quality curriculum can be found in *Focus*, pp. 48–51.

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