

A Call to Creativity

A speech delivered by Dennis Sparks, Director of the National Staff Development Council, 2004

In a speech delivered to staff development leaders, Dennis Sparks comes up with a lot of big ideas. Most of his ideas would be considered to be farfetched. However, his logical reasoning would suggest otherwise.

First and foremost, Dennis lists what he wants ideally for kids and professional development...emphasis on ideally. However, what Sparks suggests happen is that just because you dream big does not mean that those dreams cannot be fulfilled. As a matter of fact, school leaders, including principals and teachers, should only be dreaming big.

Sparks first talks about the problems associated with professional development. He utilizes a quote that suggests that schools cannot produce results for such high demands (such as those espoused by NCLB) not because they do not want to, but because they do not know how and the systems in which people work do not support them in trying to meet the demands.

Support, support, support...so much of it is needed and not enough is being given. The goals are set high and no one knows how to get there or even where to begin. This is where good leadership is needed. If a school is not meeting the demands, then what they are doing is not working, and change is needed. "No child left behind". That's a big dream, but not too big for the leader who knows how to guide their personnel towards achieving that goal.

Big dreams are all part of goal setting. It is not enough just to dream big. You must figure out how you are going to make those goals/dreams become a reality. You can do this by having a positive attitude and collaborating with other individuals in your school/school system. As a leader, you probably have a lot of good ideas, or maybe after speaking with those in your realm more good ideas have sprung. As dialogue occurs, think about how to translate all good ideas into action. Listen. Do not judge.

Achieving big goals or even living up to high expectations can make people uncomfortable. In this day and age however, those within schools must step out of their comfort zones and speak with their peers about the purpose of improving teaching, network with others about the best practices for achieving goals, and meet regularly with peers to study teaching and learning.

One problem with having big goals is that people think they are impossible to achieve. One responsibility of leaders is to create a sense of efficacy. This starts with your own personal attitude. If you have the attitude that something can be achieved, others will start to believe that. Making small goals (in terms of the large goal) will also help create a sense of efficacy. After all, a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. Finally, concentrate on past accomplishments, reminding everyone that they really can do something.

When setting high goals, Sparks suggests making an advance structure. An advance structure includes: a stretching, morally compelling vision of what you want to create, a thorough, ruthless assessment of current reality, and some really good strategies to get from where you are to where

you want to be. More simply, state what you want, figure out what is holding you back, and figure out how you will overcome those obstacles.

Sparks also says some compelling things that would be beneficial for any school personnel to hear. In the school setting, what is done matters a lot. Because the job matters a lot, it is important not to dream small simply because it is less risky. Those in the school setting are a part of something that people think cannot be done, which is teaching to all students to reach high levels.

Once the goal is set and there is a rather solid sense of efficacy, it is time to figure out how to actually accomplish that goal. Leaders are extremely important in this process. If there is an idea on the table but results are not being seen, adjust the idea. Keep bringing up ideas. Do not lose faith and do not develop a sour attitude. Having negative results or no results at all can be frustrating. Results are difficult to control and even obtain. Determination and a good attitude are self controlled and can never be taken away.

If there is difficulty in getting people to partake in a large goal or big vision, use well-documented facts or evidence to support your way of thinking. There may be a sense of a lack of support, but before that assumption is made, be sure that there you know exactly where to look to get your materials. By stepping out of your comfort zone and engaging in dialogue with others, the right resources will be made available to you.

One final point that Sparks mentions actually comes from Rosa Smith, former superintendent for the Columbus, OH Public Schools. She mentions that it is time to change the way schools think about education. Teaching is not just in reading, math, or science. It is in saving the lives of children. Most individuals who have overcome some hardship, like poverty, always say that “education is the key”. Education is what saves children’s lives. The job of educators is important, vital, and critical. Dreaming small will get us nowhere.

Source: Sparks, D. (2004). A call to creativity. *Journal of Staff Development*, 25, 54-62.