Paint Creek Elementary and Blankstein's Six Principles of Failure is Not an Option

Maureen Schabel

Oakland University

meschabe@oakland.edu

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Abstract

This paper reflects the six principles of Alan M. Blankstein’s book, *Failure is Not an Option* as they are interpreted and applied to Paint Creek Elementary School in Lake Orion, Michigan. It delves into the school’s mission, vision, and values, as well as analyzes such things as building collaboration, data use, community engagement, and sustainable leadership capacity. This research shows that the school provides a quality education for its students, but has some areas to improve upon to make it outstanding.
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Introduction

Paint Creek Elementary School can be found in Lake Orion, Michigan, surrounded by many trees, trails, and a creek. It is a neighborhood school with an enrollment of 490 students. It provides education for students in grades K through 5, and also houses two district special education center programs for the emotionally impaired and cognitively impaired. It was envisioned and built in the year 2000, and is the newest elementary school in the district. This paper investigates where Paint Creek falls in terms of Alan Blankstein’s six principles from his book, Failure is Not an Option. I submit this review as a teacher in the building who has played various roles since the school opened 11 years ago as a fifth grade teacher, a special education teacher, a parent, and acting Teacher-in-Charge. Given the current state of public education and its challenges, I also believe this evaluation is important. As the job of educating students becomes more scripted and there seems to be less allowance for personal touches, the time spent learning, researching and thinking about what we are doing has proven to be a very rewarding experience. Paint Creek provides a quality education for students, with room to grow in the areas of refining our mission and vision, as well as in rebuilding our climate and building a truly collaborative community with sustainable leadership.

Principle #1- Common Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

The current vision, mission and beliefs statements of Paint Creek Elementary School were developed in 2009. All of our statements of vision, mission and belief were taken in part or in whole from our district’s statements.
Paint Creek’s vision reads:

“Paint Creek Elementary School ensures the continuous advancement of student performance to meet the challenges of our changing world.”

This statement does not give feasibility, nor does it encourage commitment, as good vision statements should. It does, however, mention the future and sets high ideals, through the wording “ensures continuous advancement of student performance to meet the challenges of our changing world.”

We took the district’s mission statement and added our own ending to it: “Paint Creek Elementary School will provide an exemplary education that inspires thought, fosters good character, and promotes independence. This is quite a change from the previous mission statement of “Use your mind. Follow your heart.” Blankstein (2010) reports that “the discussions leading to the final document are as important as the final document itself.” (p. 92).

I recall the discussion around this being short and somewhat contrived, with a new principal on board, and most teachers, instead of all stakeholders, being timid and speaking “safely” regarding their thoughts and opinions. Our mission statement is not displayed prominently in the school, but may be found on our website, and is rarely cited as a guide. I do really appreciate what Blankstein (2010) states about school missions,

Just as a ship sails toward but never actually reaches its guiding star, we too strive toward but never actually fulfill our mission. Why? Because as long as the world continues to change and evolve, our students’ needs will change, and we will need to develop new ways to respond. (p. 90).

Although there is no list of formal values, our belief statements are numerous:

We believe:
* Education is the shared responsibility of students, staff, family and community.
* All students can learn.
* Learning is lifelong
* Our Paint Creek Community advocates and models integrity
* Character Counts.
* All children deserve a safe and nurturing learning environment.
* Our Paint Creek Community expects and respects diversity.
* Every child has a voice.

I feel our belief statements keep the child at the center of our purpose at Paint Creek. I also believe that we recognize, as best we can, despite outside influences beyond our control, the whole child; their affinities, their unique attributes, and their strengths. Overall, I believe our unwritten values absolutely regard the children and their needs. “It’s what’s best for kids,” is a mantra often heard throughout the school and often times, the district.

Our current School Improvement goals are three-fold: 1) All students will be proficient in Reading Comprehension, 2) All students will be proficient in Writing, and 3) All students will maintain proficiency in math problem solving and basic math facts. Like most goals, these are too vague. They do, however, come with objectives that make them into specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound (SMART) goals. Although the way to achievement of these goals is spelled out rather specifically, with measurement and specificity, I believe they as written, are unattainable. For example, one Math objective states, “One hundred percent of students in grades 3-5 will demonstrate a year’s growth on basic math facts by May, 2012 as measured by MEAP” (School Improvement Plan, 2011). The strategy statements include doing one minute math drills weekly, providing parents with information focusing on the importance of daily math fact practice outside of school, and implementing both during and after-school programs to assist students in math. Many of these things put into place last year, are not entirely working as of yet this school year. Additionally, many of the programs offered during the school day are not being completed in the same way throughout the school. For example, our “Helping our Peers” (H.O.P.) tutoring program, developed to assist students in writing personal narratives, reading comprehension, and math problem solving, is run differently by teachers.
The idea is that students are sent out of the classroom for 30 minutes 4 mornings a week, to either tutor or be tutored by an older student. Many teachers, including myself, are questioning the value of this, and are recognizing that we are putting our most struggling students in the least capable hands. Other teachers are sending out their average to higher students to be tutors or be tutees, while he or she works with the struggling students within their own classroom. This way, the students who need the help are getting it from the most qualified person in the building to give it, their own teacher. Another weakness of these programs is that there is a lack of data to support that these interventions are beneficial. According to DuFour (2009), “The most powerful strategy of persuasion is presenting teachers with irrefutable evidence of consistently better results.” (p. 2). As one research study concluded, “Nothing changes the mind like the hard cold world hitting it in the face with actual real-life data” (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, 2008, p. 104).

Lastly, what I feel we are lacking at Paint Creek, is the celebration of our successes. Blankstein states that it is one of the best strategies for building positive school culture (Blankstein, 2010, p. 108). They help mark milestones and build motivation in the long journey of school improvement. We used to be much better at this, which I think is mostly what made us so great, our connectedness to a single purpose, which we were constantly reminded of by our leader. These celebrations took place both within and outside of the school day. Within my ideal school, my colleagues and I are connected on a personal level, with respect to all of our different colors, strengths, affinities and spirits. We are either given the time, or we make the time to reflect and connect on a regular basis. Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) state “Responsibility to community building and welfare begins in the schools and must be an acculturated practice within the schools so future generations possess the knowledge, skills and
dispositions that ensure a connectedness to their society (p. 196). In my ideal school, staff do not report to work, they are committed to the work. We are a work family.

**Principle 2: Ensuring Achievement for All Students**

At Paint Creek Elementary, we have many mantras, both current and from years past. One of them, which seems to have stood the test of time is, “All of our kids are all of our kids.”

As a school with two center-based special education programs within our walls, we have a higher number of students who receive special education services. We have two Learning Resource Center (LRC) classrooms, as well as an Emotional Impairment program, and a Cognitive Impairment program. In addition to the higher number of special education students in our building, we also serve students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. We are a neighborhood school that covers both high-end homes as well as a number of mobile home neighborhoods. According to our 2010 MI Compliance Information Systems report, 32.7% of the students in our district receive free or reduced lunches. With this wide demographic comes a wide range of student predispositions. Many of our teachers take ownership of and advocate for their students, regardless of what program they may be associated with. Our teachers not only feel competent to succeed with all of our students, but do succeed. According to our school’s Annual Report, 2010, 74% of our teachers have master’s degrees (Annual Education Report). They truly care about our students and want to see them succeed. We are very focused on using students’ strengths to assist them with their weaknesses, as demonstrated in our creative way of discipline. We believe that the consequence should fit the offense. It would not be unusual to see a student assisting the custodian with the cleaning of the bathroom floor, or helping clean in the cafeteria if an infraction occurred in those places. Punishments are viewed as opportunities
for learning. We also incorporate the Character Counts model of teaching student behavior, which has served us well in numerous incidences.

Students who are in greater academic need may be referred to our Student Support Team (SST) where data is gathered through the Response to Intervention process. These teams meet monthly and collect data, reassess goals, and set new goals. As the teacher on the receiving end of this process, I can say that we do not move very quickly in terms of assisting students who are in academic need. Blankstein (2010) reflects, “The timely identification of problems is what distinguishes intervention strategies from remediation strategies” (p. 130). The RTI process dictates that after one tier of interventions, the next step should be taken within six weeks, if adequate progress is not being made. However, the U.S. Department of Education did not issue any timelines with the RTI model. Officials believe instructional models vary in terms of length of time required for interventions to have the intended effect on student progress. They believe that local school districts must be free to develop their own RTI models (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006, Comments to Regulations). Unfortunately, this is an area of weakness for us, as we do not have all of the supports in place to assist teachers with moving along quickly with interventions and specific authentic methods of data collecting. Speaking as one of the school’s LRC teachers, my caseload is lower than it has been in years, with only 11 students currently identified as needing LRC support in grades 3 through 5. With a student population of 490, we currently have 51 total students identified as special education. According to the Data Portrait Special Education Operating LEA Summary report, we have 10.4% of our population identified as special education, compared to 11.85% of the district population, and 13.9% of the state population. Our lower number of identified special education identified students is not because other students don’t have the needs, but rather may be because of the process involved for our
struggling students to receive special education services. The process is simply too long, and many teachers are too frustrated and overwhelmed with the paperwork and data collection required to move the process along more expeditiously.

Principle 3: Collaborative Teaming Focused on Teaching for Learning

Of Blankstein’s 9 areas of collaboration, our school actively participates in seven of them. Professional Practice Forums take place at least weekly, as our specials schedule was built to incorporate this. Every teacher at a grade level has at least one time during the week where they are all available during the school day to meet and discuss intervention strategies and plans. We also have at least one teacher on every district curriculum committee where curricula are monitored and synchronized for Curriculum Planning collaboration. Vertical Teams are requested to work on such things as our School Improvement goals, our School Management Team, and our School Improvement Team. In the past few years, the district has gotten creative with our professional development days and has utilized the expertise of teachers through Grade-Level or Subject Area Teams. Also during an occasional professional development day, we gather into Interdisciplinary Teams, which are very helpful for discussing matters that apply to all of us within our own disciplines. Task Forces are often created to delve into specific issues such as, student recess behavior, school logo development, etc.. Finally, we use Teaching Strategy or Professional Interest Teams to investigate and research new teaching strategies and interventions such as Reader’s Workshop, Read Naturally for reading fluency, and Peer Mistreatment seminars. Staff receive training, then bring what they have learned back to the staff. We do not take part in the Classroom Observation of colleagues or Professional Study Groups. However, as collaboration does not come naturally in a traditional school environment, we are presented with certain challenges to successful collaboration.
Currently, I feel our school is in a state of “Contrived Collegiality” where we “collaborate only on the surface without challenging one another’s beliefs to teaching and learning.” (Blankstein, 2010, p. 144). We hold our loyalty to the school, but only within the boundaries of the school day. I feel there are many things to blame for this situation. We are truly collaborative at heart, but the pressure of new curricula, data collecting, and adjusting to a new administrator are taking over our drive to constantly and consistently go above and beyond. This, in addition to the fact that we have a younger staff, many of whom now have one or more small children at home, making it difficult to come in early or stay late, if what needs to be done cannot be completed or discussed within the school day. The current staff might say that we collaborate to excess at times. There are some decisions that just need to be mandated from executive leaders. We have many committees. If asked if at Paint Creek. If asked if we exhibit Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at Paint Creek, I would have to say “no.” We have only two teachers on our staff, and no administrator, who attend trainings on how to assist our school with becoming more of a PLC environment. These two staff members do their best to guide us in more efficient decision making procedures as well as with facilitating more efficient meetings. Blankstein (2010) states that there are a number of possible reasons for the disparity between the number of schools that see themselves as PLC’s and those that actually are. “It is easier to create times when teams meet than to build a true collaborative culture in the school” (p. 74). We need to get to the point where PLCs are more a way of being, rather than something we do at a monthly staff meeting.

One suggestion to improve collaboration both within our school and our district is to hold more efficiently facilitated meetings. For example, meeting norms are necessary, and would most likely be respected if they were continually posted and referred to/ enforced. Effective
meetings have detailed agendas that spell out what will be discussed, have clear process notes, assign roles, set group norms, have clear conflict-management strategies, and have a process that creates true closure (Bens, 2005). When meetings are allowed to begin late, and topics are allowed to be derailed, with little respect to speakers and general etiquette, they become a waste of precious time. Also, as long as there is a lack of relational trust, participants may not always share their true opinions on an issue, until they are in the teacher’s lounge. Having a relatively new administrator explains this lack within the building. Blankstein (2010) reflected “The history of relations between the principal and the teaching staff determines teachers’ willingness to undertake new reforms and the relationships among adults in the school greatly influence the chance to which students in the school will succeed academically” (p. 66).

**Principle 4: Using Data to Guide Decision Making and Continuous Improvement**

We have become data-rich at Paint Creek Elementary. With the development and dispensing of numerous diagnostic common assessment tools, including AIMSweb assessments of reading fluency, math computation, and math applications, Developmental Reading Assessments (DRAs), district created math common assessments at all levels, and common assessments within special education, we are all getting on the “same page” when we speak of student abilities. We use primarily criterion-referenced assessments to give us specific student information. Although we have gotten very skilled at reading data and interpreting it, we are still struggling as a school with the “What next?” question. Teachers with students who do not pass math common assessments, for example, do not know what to do with those students who need re-teaching on specific benchmarks, and, given the demands of their curricular timelines, will sometimes just send practice worksheets home and put the mastery of the benchmarks on to the parents while the student moves on to the next unit in the classroom. Our curricula, especially in
math, are overcrowded with benchmarks that encompass too much, with too little depth. For another example, when an AIMSweb “sweep” is made of the entire student body assessing all students’ reading fluency scores, reports are given within a few weeks and teachers are to come up with intervention plans to get their students proficient in their students’ fluency. Usually, this is done through parent volunteers who come in and assess students reading fluency weekly, keeping track of their scores. It is assumed that students are practicing reading their fluency stories at home throughout the week. Some teachers are also using the computer-based Read Naturally program for increasing reading fluency. Others use a scheduled intervention time, which might be daily or weekly, to work with individual students on their specific goals. We struggle with how to turn our formative assessment results into tangible data that would be admissible within our RTI process. As a result, many of our struggling students continue struggling through valuable months and sometimes, years.

The Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) is vital work in data collection. We seem to put much emphasis on these standardized tests that change every year, both in their development and what they cover, as well as how they are scored. Norm-referenced tests were never intended to measure the quality of learning or teaching. The main objective of these tests is to rank, not to rate; to spread out the scores, not to gauge the quality of a given student or school (Kohn, 2000). Most published tests are norm-referenced. This means that each student’s performance is compared to other students’ performance, and not to expectations set by educators. From the Michigan.gov website: “No matter how well students do on a norm-referenced test, half of them will always be “below” average, even if they meet expectations. For example, imagine a foot race involving 100 people. The person who finishes first performed better than the other 99 participants. Every person who races is ranked-ordered by the time it
took them to finish. Someone must finish first, and someone must finish last... but only half of
the people can finish in the top 50%.” (Michigan.gov). These MEAP results provide the basis of
our school improvement goals, which is unfortunate, as they represent a target that is constantly
moving, and cannot really assess teaching quality. “Virtually all relevant experts and
organizations condemn the practice of basing important decisions, such as graduation or
promotion, on the results of a single test (Kohn, 2000, p. 208). Interestingly, throughout the
research for this paper, a “status report” could not be found on our current School Improvement
goals, which are to be assessed based on our students’ MEAP performance. I also could not get
an answer from our School Improvement Team as to whether or not we have met these goals or
the current progression towards them. This reinforces the thinking that much of this is
procedural rhetoric, to some extent, with little time or effort given to truly assess our data on a
regular, more timely basis. In special education we are to monitor students’ progress on their
Individualized Education Plan goals every two weeks, mark them on a graph every month, and
report the progress to parents every 10 weeks.

In my “ideal school,” data are from various sources, are authentic, meaningful, and
provide support for what we do, and teachers are given time and instruction as to how to interpret
them. Teachers are also given time and assistance with the “What next?” question, given
supports within the classroom through additional staff, materials and programs, with explicit
training on how to use those programs. Data becomes only numbers and graphs if people do not
know what to do with them.

Principle 5: Gaining Active Engagement From Family and Community
At Paint Creek Elementary, parents are welcomed and encouraged to be involved in their child’s educational community. We have no lack of parental involvement at Paint Creek. In the last year we have had 96.8% of our parents attend Fall Conferences, and just recently 75.1% attended Curriculum Night. Unfortunately, only about 15-20 parents, in addition to the board are involved in our Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), which includes party planning, school dances, assemblies, holiday activities, etc. We offer many activities throughout the year to get the parents into our school and facilitate the school-home learning partnership; Curriculum Night, Fall and Spring Conferences, media center volunteering, Spring Family Picnic, Art/Science Fair, Books and Bites during March is Reading Month, Kindergarten Make and Take Nights, Step Up Tutoring, Recycling Activities, Blood Drives, and a Giving Tree at holiday time. Our parents also actively volunteer to assist in classrooms with miscellaneous duties, fluency assessing, copy making, and bulletin board hanging. From my perspective, the majority of parents contribute their time as mostly party planners, and less as educational partners. We expect them to support and follow through with many academic things at home, but do not offer enough direction, or classes on how they could better accomplish this. In my ideal school, parents are seen more as partners in the education process. Parents who wish to come into the classroom to help would be invited to an orientation meeting to discuss such things as rules of confidentiality and cell phone use. Classes would be offered to teach parents how to be their child’s partner or guide in homework completion, instead of, as often occurs, the answer-giver.

Looking more closely at the research, there are strong indications that the most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities in the home. Programs which involve parents in reading with their children, supporting their work on homework assignments, or tutoring them using materials and
instructions provided by teachers, show particularly impressive results (Cotton and Wikelund, 2008). Also, I would make a concerted effort to invite parents of struggling students to come into our school. These parents might feel less welcome, less comfortable in a school setting, or less confident in their abilities to help. The research of Cotton and Wikelund states that the involvement of parents who are well-educated, well-to-do, or have larger amounts of time to be involved has not been shown to be more beneficial than the involvement of less-advantaged parents. The research of Cotton and Wikelund shows that all parent involvement works and works well (p.138).

**Principle 6: Building Sustainable Leadership Capacity**

Paint Creek Elementary is a school filled with teacher leaders. Currently, there are two of us who act as Teachers-in-Charge in the principal’s absence. There are also a handful of teachers currently in Master’s level classes who exhibit many valuable leadership qualities. We also have two teachers who attend Professional Learning Community trainings through Oakland Schools and bring what they have learned back to the staff. There are also leaders of teams such as the School Improvement Team, the School Management Team, the Student Support Team, the Spirit Team and the Green School Team, to name a few. Unfortunately, however, it seems the same names appear in most of those capacities, rather than the leadership roles being completely shared. I see evidence of teachers really not wanting to take on leadership roles in the building, whether it be because they do not feel able, are unable to rethink their role as followers, or they simply do not want to, as traditional leadership is defined. To answer whether or not we have plans of sustainability within our leadership is difficult. Sometimes we are committed to deep learning, sometimes we sustain ourselves and others so we can hang onto our vision and avoid
burning out, and sometimes we ensure that the improvements we bring about will last over time.

Paint Creek has a special history that not many other schools have. We lost our founding matriarch/principal, Beverly Tepper, all too soon and very unfairly, four years ago. Mrs. Tepper was deeply loved and admired by many staff, parents and students. She created a family environment and inspired teachers to think outside the box. She answered our questions with questions, which led us to the answer we had inside us already, empowering us and making us feel validated, professional, and important. After one year of an interim principal, we now have her more-permanent replacement. Blankstein (2010) states, “There is evidence that the departure of the initiating principal or a critical mass of early leaders from model or beacon schools is the first symptom of decline” (p. 224). This can harden teachers against change and poses a threat to sustainable improvement. To improve upon our sustainability efforts, we need to create a culture of more evenly-distributed leadership, not just in training and developing a tiny leadership elite. Blankstein concludes, “When you keep power, people will not work with you” (p. 210).

Findings/Conclusion

These findings reveal that Paint Creek Elementary is a school that provides a quality education for its students. The teachers work very hard within the constraints of what they have. They are committed to student learning and success. We are good at collecting data, collaborating, have considerable parental involvement, and house many teacher leaders. Paint Creek is filled with dedicated professionals who want to do what is best for kids. Currently, it seems our hands are tied, more often than they ever have been, and our jobs are losing our individual personalities, as everything becomes mandated, scripted and standardized. It is my
hope that, with commitment to true collaboration, we will bring the joy back to education, and we will become the great school that we once were, by finding our true mission, refining our vision, building more sustainable leadership, developing a true PLC environment, and getting back to the heart of why it is we all do what we do in this amazing, invigorating, challenging endeavor of educating our country’s children.
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