

Unity of Effort in a Positive Direction for Student Success

J. Bert Freeman interview with Delia Stafford, Education News

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Delia Stafford – The real question is “who is on the frontline”? The Unity of Effort framework is for any organization that serves customers, clients or students.

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A School Improvement Framework by T.A.L.K. Associates
Techniques in Alternative Language Kinetics.

J.Bert Freeman and T.A.L.K. Associates

Unity of Effort in a Positive Direction for educators is a framework in which organizational structures operate successfully. The concept is to ensure and assure that every “frontline” individual has the support he or she needs to perform and deliver to those being served by the organization. In a Unity of Effort framework, the entire organization concentrates on supporting front line performance and delivery in a way that the front line can have the very best performance so that students can receive the very best education and experiences. Rather than a concept, the framework includes practices that are geared toward student success. This interview details the success of a program that would be helpful in any district. Some Delaware schools as well as supplemental education programs have noted success using the system developed by J.Bert Freeman. **Delia Stafford**

DS: What is the frontline?

JBF: The real question is “*who* is on the frontline”? The Unity of Effort framework is for any organization that serves customers, clients or students. The frontline includes those who have the most frequent decision-making contact with the customers, clients or students. In a restaurant they would be the wait staff; in a human services organization they could be the case managers; in K-12 education they are the classroom teachers. Therefore in education the entire organization concentrates on making teachers great in their performance and delivery for student success. The framework also helps everyone stay focused on a clear definition for student success: Students meeting or exceeding grade level performance and expectations and increasing qualifications for post-secondary education.

DS: What about “everybody else”?

JBF: “Everybody else” is a part of the support system that helps to make it possible for teachers to be successful in their performance and delivery. Actually your question is very appropriate. The Unity of Effort framework divides the organization into two parts:

the frontline and everyone else including the administrators. Everyone else is called the Smooth Operating System, abbreviated “Smooth OpS”. Smooth OpS includes administrators, custodians, maintenance, transportation, administrative personnel, IT staff, food service, quality professionals, district staff in almost all capacities and more. For example, Food Service personnel would set schedules and procedures to ensure that lunch was finished in time for students to get back to their classrooms on time. The role of the administrators is to set an environment in which all of the support is in the direction of the student and all of the support is concentrated on the front line because the front line “makes student success happen”. The organizational loyalty is in the direction of the student rather than the direction of the hierarchy.

DS: You stated that everyone concentrates on making the teachers great. What does that mean? How does that work?

JBF: In his research, Robert Marzano tells us that the strongest influence on student achievement gains is a ‘highly effective teacher’. The second strongest influence is a ‘highly effective school’. It would be great if all of the teachers in every public school had the characteristics of being ‘highly effective teachers’. However, based on student outcomes, teachers function at different levels of excellence. In fact, everyone in the school organization functions at different levels of excellence. Moreover, excellence may be in different directions. Schools and districts would use the Unity of Effort framework to get the excellence in the same direction. We call it synchronizing the direction of excellence. Moreover, in a Unity of Effort framework, that direction is established in the direction of student success. The Direction of Excellence includes the Direction of Support – Support flows one way in the direction of the student
Direction of Concentration – Smooth OpS concentrates its efforts for the convenience of front line performance and delivery

Direction of Focus – The student is always a part of the reason why.

We want every school and every district to have what we call ESP – “Excellence on the Same Page”, always focused on students meeting or exceeding grade level requirements and expectations and increasing qualifications for post secondary education. Additionally it always concentrates on supporting front line performance and delivery. Unity of Effort in a positive direction makes that happen.

DS: Where have you been able to put this into practice and what impact did it have on the students?

JBF: Most of our work has been in Delaware. Successful outcomes occurred in different types of institutions focused on improvement of student achievement. In 1999 and 2000 two Title I schools and their use of Unity of Effort practices, were two of only five schools in Delaware to achieve National Distinguished Title I status, with increase in the number of students who met or exceeded state standards in reading and mathematics by over 20 percentage points. In one school we emphasized data-based decision making. In the other school we emphasized instructional strategy and classroom management. Both schools used different types of instruction. A key element was aligning the entire school to concentrate on the performance and delivery of the classroom teachers.

The Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families operates 12 special schools using the Unity of Effort framework. The students attending these schools are either adjudicated, pending decisions on adjudication or they are enrolled

for severe social emotional issues. Since they have started functioning using the Unity of Effort framework, more students successfully transitioned into mainstream education environments than in the history of the institution. Additionally, the percentage of the most transient students have increased gains of at least one grade level by over 30 percentage points during the past two years. The schools that put emphasis on their lowest achieving students, realized stronger increases among all students.

In 2002, we conducted a longitudinal study and outcome evaluation with an organization that worked with low income students outside of the classroom day. The goal of their program was very clear: “participating students will successfully enroll into a college or university when they graduate from high school”. The students had to participate during their 4 years in high school. The students attended various high schools in New Castle County Delaware. Almost all of their activities were after school or on weekends. Prior to the study, 86% of the graduating students enrolled into a 4-year college or university. As a result of following through with the recommendations of the study and using key components of the Unity of Effort framework, over 90% of the graduating students enrolled into a 4-year college or university each year since 2003. Additionally, annual funding more than doubled.

DS: How can educators learn more about “ Unity of Effort in a Positive Direction”?

JBF: We started the Unity of Effort work in 1991. Those years have helped us to be very clear about how to help schools and districts develop a Unity of Effort framework for student success.

Many organizations possess a high degree of excellence among their employees. Often the excellence of many goes in different directions. There are also different levels of excellence-some educators and educational support staff are better than others. A school or district may have almost 100% highly qualified teachers in core content areas. The question is how effective are they at teaching in ways that all of their students are successful in their education, including those most in need of improvement. When corrections are attempted, they are often made to satisfy hierarchical requirements or to protect teachers more than to achieve student success. We help organizations to understand that the direction of everyone’s excellence must be in the direction of the student and student success. Otherwise great corrections can be made but the directions may still be the same. We emphasize, “First the direction; then the correction”.

Whether we start with a school or a school district, we work with the leadership teams or school improvement teams first. We always ensure that the team includes representation from collective bargaining. The leadership teams participate in 5 to 7 half-day learning and development sessions which help them to use the Unity of Effort framework very well. From the very first day, they will use the framework in their real life, real time situations and circumstances as a part of their learning experience. They learn how to concentrate themselves and everyone else on supporting front line performance and delivery in a way that every student can receive the very best education. They learn how to unify their entire organization in the direction of student success with a student-focused vision statement.

They are able to align the Direction of Excellence of everyone in the organization in the direction of student success. That direction of excellence includes this: The entire

organization concentrates on supporting the performance and delivery of **frontline educators** in a way that they provide the very best education for every student to meet or exceed grade level requirements and expectations and to increase qualifications for post-secondary education.

Next, along with the educational leaders we provide the faculties and support staffs with the knowledge and use of the framework at the macro level followed by sessions to assist educators at the team level. They learn to use the Unity of Effort framework to make decisions based on data in instructional strategy, classroom management and classroom curriculum design. We show the schools and districts how to focus their attention on students most in need of improvement, at the inclusion of everyone's success rather than at the expense of any student's success. We work with grade level teams and content teams on real life, real time issues and circumstances focused on student success, providing them with decision-making practices to determine among themselves what works. We help them to understand and use communication and information skills and practices that accelerate progress for student success.

DS: Does it mean exactly what the words say – e.g. “are we unified to do our job”?

JBF: Whatever educational strategies or approaches are being used, the Unity of Effort framework synchronizes everyone's effort and excellence in the same direction. It helps everyone in the organization to align their jobs with student success. That is done by using the skills, practices and approaches that concentrate the entire organization on supporting front line performance and delivery.

For example, we know that IT processes help information to flow faster. They help to speed up reporting processes. However, when putting IT processes in place the primary consideration must be: What is the impact on frontline performance and delivery (the performance and delivery of the classroom teacher)?

What support do our teachers need for continued excellent performance and delivery once the processes are in place?

IT managers and professionals need to ask those questions and get the answers. That will help them to put systems in place that help to make the performance and delivery of classroom teachers even more effective. They are called “Core Questions”. Anyone who internally supports educators or educational efforts must ask those questions in a **Unity of Effort** framework – including administrators at all levels.

DS: After an administration conforms to the structure of communication, have you ever had districts to revert back to the previous culture?

JBF: Yes. That was one of our biggest learning experiences. We had to ask the question: “How does the school or district make it last?” We know that the framework will effect significant improvement in student achievement in less than one year when the organization uses the framework and leadership teams, grade level teams and content teams become solution-focused.

We have seen that administration changes and other personnel changes do make a difference in the outcomes. So now we establish elements of sustainability earlier in the learning and development process. We start with the leadership team . Unity of Effort practices along with positive policy practices are keys to success.

With 4 organizations we used the Haberman Interview to assist them in hiring educators and student advisors. We incorporate the Haberman Star Teacher Interview as one of

the tools in our own efforts to assist school improvement. We also encourage organizations to use the Haberman teacher selection tools. This has been especially helpful for Delaware Futures that began hiring its student advisors in 2004 using the Haberman Interview. Since then, the percentage of their students who enrolled into college was even higher (over 94%), reaching 100% in 2007 and 2009. It has resulted also in an increased retention rate of student advisors.

We assisted the DSCYF Educational Services by helping to assure that all of their programs and initiatives operate within a Unity of Effort framework. That has helped to ensure that everything they do focuses on student success and concentrates on supporting the performance and delivery of their classroom educators. It helped them to more easily adjust to change. Their program efforts have led to grade level increases and increases in successful transitions of 20 or more percentage points.

In addition to its inherent practices, the Unity of Effort Framework increases the assurance of sustainability by including:

- Data-based decision making at all levels
- Assistance with **Haberman Teacher Selection Processes** (we have four people trained in the Haberman Teacher Selection Interview)
- Focus on the lowest achieving students at the inclusion of all students rather than at the expense of any student
- Connecting the Unity of Effort Framework to multiple instructional strategies
- Quality methods of continuous improvement that work
- The use of personal profile instruments to help sustain continuous improvement in team performance and delivery
- **Star Teachers the Ideology and Best Practice of Effective Teachers of Diverse Children and Youth in Poverty** (Haberman 2005)(reprint 2009-2010) as a learning and development text in our professional development sessions with administrators and teachers

J. Bert Freeman, the founder of T.A.L.K. Associates, has been providing staff development programs for educators since 1987. In recent years he has been assisting schools with programs that are compatible with local and national school improvement processes and providing the positive direction skills and frameworks for school improvement leadership. He was a designated Distinguished Educator Consultant by the Delaware Department of Education 1998 to 2007. He is a Haberman certified interviewer for selection of teachers for inner city schools. He is a former commissioned member of the State of Delaware Accountability and Assessment Advisory Committee, and the Lieutenant Governor's Task force on Parental Involvement. He is one of the founding members of the Pioneer Education Project in New Hanover County, North Carolina. He has a B.S. in Engineering (U.S. Naval Academy) and an M.S. in Human Relations (Golden Gate University). He was also an Olympian and U.S. National Fencing Champion. He is the author of *Taking Charge of Your Positive Direction* (2006), *The Unity of Effort in a Positive Direction for Educators Performance Development Manual* (2010), *Your Positive Direction NOW* (2010 – book and audio book) and numerous district and school improvement outcome evaluations (1998 to 2010).

The T.A.L.K. Associates Learning and Development Team provides staff development and expert assistance for educators to **accelerate progress** in academic performance through high performance classroom delivery, organizational unity of effort, Consistent Positive Direction climates and program evaluation. The team is a diverse group of educators with experience at all levels – administrators, teachers, staff developers, researchers, mediators, instructional coaches). The team works with educators at all levels to penetrate compelling systemic patterns in ways that facilitate the academic progress of every student. Everything is connected to real life, real time issues and circumstances. The Resident Facilitators are all adept at using and teaching skills called Consistent Positive Direction (Freeman 2005, 2010). That increases the frequency of solution-focused outcomes, forward movement

and continuous improvement among educators. T.A.L.K. Associates is the only organization that uses positive direction communication skills in every school improvement effort. Educators will expand their know-how to include every child in meeting state and national standards and performing at or above grade level. Every school will be a successful team of educators.

For more information go to: www.positivedirection.net or contact Bert at jbtfreeman@positivedirection.net

Comments

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Terrence

January 1, 2011 at 5:27 pm

Great Work Bert. It has been some time since our last communication, but it is so good to see your message of "Unity Of Effort" is still making an impact.