Now That's Success: Running Our Best Race as Schools

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Introduction
Make us choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong.
West Point Prayer

"Dad, just go on without me. I'm feeling terrible." My 17-year-old son Nathan and I had spent the past several months preparing together for our first marathon, and we had just passed the halfway point, fully on track to meet our finish time goal. I knew that Nathan had started the race really sore from laying flooring all week, but I was still shocked by this turn of events, since Nathan was a talented varsity cross country runner. I looked at my watch, glanced back at my son, and wondered what to do. After months of training, our success would be determined by my decision at this pivotal moment.

Define Success
Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.
Mahatma Ghandi

I really had to dig deep to determine what I truly valued in this marathon. How would I define success from this experience? Would I regret staying with Nathan, knowing that I could have gotten a better time, or would I regret leaving him behind? Our schools and teacher teams also need to dig deep to determine what we collectively value, why we became educators in the first place, and how we will define success. These decisions become pivotal when the pressure mounts and we're faced with difficult dilemmas and decisions. Unfortunately, amidst the pressures and recognitions attached to external accountability, we can lose sight of what we value most in education, allowing other entities to define success for us, and spending our efforts chasing the illusory recognition they promise. As educators, students, and parents, let's collectively identify what we most value and then unleash our efforts and passions to pursue those inspiring ends. "The alignment of individual, group, and institutional values generates tremendous energy," and provides immense motivation and energy, guiding everything we do

as a school (Kouzes & Posner, 2021, p. 33; Quinn & Thakor, 2019). *Have you clarified and articulated a shared definition of success that taps into people's deeply held values and beliefs? Is this shared definition of success consistently discussed and referred to in your day-to-day work and to guide your decisions?*

Study Success
To learn about success you have to study success.
Marcus Buckingham, 2007, pp. 5-6

Once we've defined success, it's time to identify bright spot schools, teams, or individuals who are finding the success we seek (Heath & Heath, 2010). What is working for them? Why is it working for them? How might we learn from their success? Nathan and I relied heavily on coaching and advice from other successful marathoners that found joy in their experience. Some of these people lived in our own neighborhood, and some we found online. Ample research confirms that we think more clearly, identify more solutions, and perform better when we study what works, rather than what doesn't work (Cameron, 2012; Achor, 2010). When we identify a bright spot, we should not feel threatened by feelings of comparison and competition; rather, we should celebrate their success and find opportunities to connect and collaborate with them. This connection and collaboration allows us to identify vital behaviors aligned with their success that we can then customize those success-aligned vital behaviors into our improvement plans and efforts (Grenny et al., 2013). *What bright spot schools, teams, or individuals are finding the success you seek? How have you connected and collaborated with these bright spots? What success-aligned vital behaviors have contributed to their success and how might those be integrated into your improvement efforts?*

Assess Success
Just because information is loud that doesn't make it valuable.
Shawn Achor, 2013, p. 161

Like it or not, marathon organizers repeatedly communicate that elapsed time should be the prioritized metric of success for a marathoner. They provide frequent time updates, award medals to top time finishers, send each runner an official certificate with their final time, and publish racers' times on the marathon's website. This marathon with Nathan was no exception. With Nathan struggling, I had to decide if I was going to continue accepting elapsed time as my primary success metric, or if I would need to find other ways to assess success. In that moment of decision with Nathan, I identified three paramount vital behaviors. Nathan and I needed to:
1. Finish this marathon together.
2. Talk with confidence and fondness about this marathon in the future.
3. Continue running together in the future.

While the race organizers didn't provide any concrete tools for assessing these vital behaviors, if I decided to stay with Nathan, I would have to find a way to do as Andy Hargreaves urged, to "measure what you value instead of valuing only what you can measure."
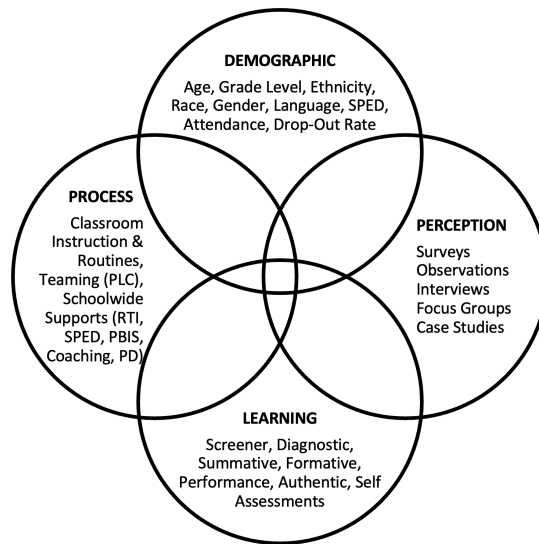
How is your school assessing success? Are the data being provided by other entities prioritizing success metrics well aligned with your school's definition of success? Data can turn from friend to taskmaster when we blindly accept whatever success metric is provided and allow it to control our work. Mike Schmoker warns: "Our current data-driven decision making is to a great degree standardized-test-data-driven decision making" (2009, p. 70). Just because success criteria is concrete or has been imposed on us doesn't mean it's the most valuable metric of success. For example, if as a school we are constantly reviewing and emphasizing reading scores simply because those are the most readily available success metrics, raising reading scores can gradually morph into our de facto definition of success. Let's take control of the data narrative at our schools by assessing progress on outcomes we truly value. If your school values student connection, find a way to assess it. If you value collective efficacy, find a way to assess it. If you value wellbeing, find a way to assess it. Even if the outcomes you identify are harder to measure, it is better than focusing primarily on an imposed metric that doesn't assess what you value. Let me be clear. This is not an either-or proposition. We can still value external assessments of academic achievement **and** assess other things we care about. Finding good ways to assess student connection will in no way will detract from improved reading scores. They're not in competition, but can actually support each other in mutually beneficial ways. *How well do the data provided by other entities support your success-aligned vital behaviors? What other assessments might you need? How consistently do you assess and monitor your success-aligned vital behaviors?*

Better Assess Success
Using multiple measures can really improve decision making.
Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012, p. 103

If I chose to stay with Nathan, I would no longer be able to rely solely on elapsed time as my primary metric of success. I would need to find or create new success criteria based on those three success-aligned vital behaviors I'd identified. These new metrics would be things like observing Nathan's body language and comments during the race, listening to how he talked about this experience weeks and months later, and gauging his desire to run with me in the future. These new metrics would likely be less concrete and less publicly celebrated, but better aligned with what I truly valued. Was I willing to rely on these other metrics of success?

Many schools have found Victoria Bernhardt's model of Continuous School Improvement helpful as they consider what additional metrics they may consider in assessing their success-aligned vital behaviors (adapted from Bernhardt, 2018).

DEMOGRAPHIC
Age, Grade Level, Ethnicity, Race, Gender, Language, SPED, Attendance, Drop-Out Rate

PROCESS
Classroom Instruction & Routines, Teaming (PLC), Schoolwide Supports (RTI, SPED, PBIS, Coaching, PD)

PERCEPTION
Surveys
Observations
Interviews
Focus Groups
Case Studies

LEARNING
Screener, Diagnostic, Summative, Formative, Performance, Authentic, Self Assessments

For example, if fostering student connection is an important part of your school's definition of success, you might initially look for patterns in your attendance data, disaggregating it based on grade, gender, ethnicity, and impact on academic achievement. But don't stop there! You might gain additional clarity by surveying students on their perceptions of connection. The results from that survey may suggest that certain groups of students experience higher and lower levels of connection, so you might conduct some informal interviews or focus groups with students on the topic of connection. This may lead to a review of some of your school process data. What are teachers doing in class to foster connection, how are teacher teams collaborating about connection, and what do we have in place schoolwide to support connection? Identifying multiple sources of information can paint a more complete picture of the overall school experience, and allow us to more accurately assess what we collectively value as a school. *What assessments has your school identified or created that provide you good information on your success-aligned vital behaviors? What is your current reality with respect to those vital behaviors?*

Humanize Success
Keep the entire life of a child at the forefront… prioritize a face, a life, and the story of [those] we are called to serve. Mark Bowerman, 2022

The moment of decision had come. Stick with Nathan or leave him behind? I now cringe to admit that I almost did as Nathan suggested. I knew that family, friends, and colleagues would be asking me about my marathon time, and frankly, I wanted to report a good time. In the brief second between Nathan's suggestion and my response, I considered what this decision would communicate to Nathan not just about this race, but about his value, my view of him, and the nature of our relationship. When I reminded myself that building Nathan's confidence and improving our relationship was the primary reason I had chosen to run this marathon, the right decision instantly became clear. The personal pride and bragging rights associated with a faster marathon time was not going to be the taskmaster. My deep why was master here and would

decide how I defined success. I turned to Nathan, "I'm not going anywhere! We're in this together!"

Nathan and I slogging through the last half mile.

Do we ever forget that behind every assessment of success is a living, breathing, beautifully complex, multi-faceted, fragile human being that can never be fully represented by a single number, percentage, grade, or score? While none of us would ever intentionally objectify students, teachers, or schools by treating them as mere data points, average scores, or a letter grade assigned by the state, we can unintentionally fall into that trap. Too often data are used as a punitive and dehumanizing weapon of fear, blame, shame, and guilt, causing a negative response, rather than improvement. Safir, Dugan, and Wilson (2021) offer an alternative approach: "Rather than positioning students and teachers as objects whose value can be quantified… engage with people as… human beings whose experiences are worthy of careful study and deep listening." In all of our bustling and hustling around improvement, let's never forget that education is about people, and that their current and long-term wellbeing is our real success. *How has your school framed school success in ways that inspire and respect the full humanity of each student and educator?*

Conclusion
Too soon we breast the tape and find the joy was in the running. Walt Kelly

I am not advocating a teddy bears and lollipops approach to school improvement where we coddle students and teachers and only rely on feel-good fuzzy data. Victoria Bernhardt warns: "Too often, schools in this country conduct their education programs with little formal analysis of how well those programs work. Teachers and administrators rely instead on 'gut feelings' about what's working and what isn't" (2000, p. 33). We need good data on the things we truly care about. I love this sensible advice by Pixar founder Ed Catmull: "Measure what you can, evaluate what you measure, and appreciate that you cannot measure the vast majority of what you do. And at least every once in a while, make time to take a step back and think about what you are doing" (2014, pp. 219-220). We are involved in the most important and lasting work possible, building other human beings, building societies, and building futures. How cool is that? Let's get clear on what we value in this endeavor, seek ways to assess our progress, make needed adjustments, all while treating students and each other with deep respect and humanity. Now that's success!

I stayed by Nathan's side as he struggled through the final half of the marathon. His body language, facial expressions, and occasional comments told me that while exhausted, he had not lost heart nor hope. He was going to finish. Although we did not meet our original time goal, we did cross the finish line together. While I don't know that I've ever been more sore, I do know that my relationship with Nathan has never been better. We now talk about this experience with fondness. I was surprised when not long after the marathon Nathan approached me, "Dad, can we run it again next year?" We're already signed up and preparing together. Now that's success!

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<p align="center">**School Success Inventory**
Developed by David Boren (david_boren@byu.edu)</p>

The following success inventory can be used by teacher teams, leadership teams, SCCs, or an entire faculty. Using this inventory at the beginning, middle, and end of the year may be helpful in tracking progress.

<p align="center">4 - Very True 3 - Mostly True 2 - Partially True 1 - Not Very True</p>

Define Success

_____ We have clarified and articulated a shared definition of success.

_____ Educators feel deep ownership and passion for our shared definition of success.

_____ Students feel deep ownership and passion for our shared definition of success.

_____ Parents feel deep ownership and passion for our shared definition of success.

_____ Our shared definition of success is consistently discussed, emphasized, and revisited in meetings.

_____ Our shared definition of success clearly guides our day-to-day decisions.

Study Success

_____ We have identified bright spot schools, teams, or individuals that are finding the success we seek.

_____ We connect and collaborate with bright spots that are finding the success we seek.

_____ We have identified vital behaviors aligned with our share definition of success.

_____ Improvement plans and goals support the implementation of our success-aligned vital behaviors.

Assess Success

_____ We have assessments that provide information on our success-aligned vital behaviors.

_____ We consistently assess and monitor our progress on our success-aligned vital behaviors.

Humanize Success

_____ We frame success in ways that inspire and respect the full humanity of students and educators.

Strengths: What is going well?
Opportunities: What are some ways we could be even better?
Aspirations: What do we hope to accomplish next?
Response: What are some best next steps for us?

Common Sources of Bias and Error

Schools that attend to and reduce these common sources of bias and error often make better decisions about success. A brief review of these may be helpful to a school interested in getting good information.

Measurement Error: The tools we use don't give us accurate information.
We should not administer a parent-to-school connection survey written in English to limited English proficient parents.

Sampling Error: Those included in our sample don't necessarily represent the target population.
We should not administer a student-to-school connection survey first thing in the morning when many students who may feel less connected have not yet arrived.

Confirmation Bias: Favoring information that confirms or supports our existing beliefs.
We share with our SCC and faculty several cherry-picked favorable comments about our student connection initiative, even though there are also several less favorable comments.

Ostrich Bias: If we ignore it, it doesn't exist and will go away.
We don't really like or agree with the results from the last student connection survey, so we'll just ignore those results and move on.

False Consensus Bias: We overestimate how much others agree with or approve of something.
The vocal minority makes their opinion clear that they do not want to make student connection a focus; others are hesitant to speak up, resulting in unchallenged groupthink.

Average Bias: Making inferences and decisions about individuals based on averages.
Overall student connection was high so we assume that all students are experiencing high levels of connection, even though some individuals are not.