

Sunday, August 31, 2008

Top Tips

The Iron Triangle: Geometry that Foils Budget-Cutting Propaganda

One of the most egregious school district (bureaucratic) fallacies is that teachers "Can do more with less." But even the newest, "tin horn" teacher knows that this is sheer "hogwash."

But how do teachers counteract such stupidity when it comes disguised as "prudent, cost-conscious due diligence?" Teacher want budget sanity but have a difficult time speaking out when "stupid-intendents" and campus "unprincipleds" are the sources promulgating these false notions of fiscal conservation. The savvy teacher's response to these falsely-spun ideas requires a measured and professional strategy. Otherwise, teachers will be expected to spend more of their own time working on less-than-useful projects, with no compensation. Sidebar When expanded to its actual meaning, "Doing more with less" means: "Teachers will do more under pressure and criticism, with less per-hour return, less free time, and less chance of being recognized for the sacrifices that their families will have to make to do more uncompensated work at home. The answer to how to respond to the badgering of "Do more with less" lies (no pun intended) in adopting lessons that were learned from Project Managers.

Teachers can reply in a professional way that describes the project management concept of the "Iron Triangle." This concept rejects and debunks the "Do more with less" idea; an idea that is more likely to rear its ugly head during these times of budget distress.

The basic strategy is to focus communication upon what Project Managers call the "Triple Constraint." The Triple Constraint is a way to communicate 1.) simple principles when relating 2.) complex issues to bureaucrats and supervisors.

The idea is to communicate how tradeoffs between a project's quality, speed, resource use affect a project's final cost. Iron Triangle to the Rescue Project Managers, like teachers, communicate complex ideas in simple terms so that even the most attention-challenged school district decision-makers comprehend. The model that Project Managers use for rejecting the "Do more for less myth" is called the "Iron Triangle." This model gets its name because "bureaucrats and hype-spinners, and others with budget-warped minds" can not bend, twist or distort reality with their twisted, poor, wishful or "Pollyanna" thinking.

Here is a definition of the Iron Triangle:

The "Iron Triangle" is a Project Management principle that states that the three main constraints on any project are 1.) time, 2.) resources and 3.) project quality. What this means is that a change in one constraint requires a change in the other two constraints.

Translation: There are always tradeoffs.

For example, if time is the most important factor; then either the quality of the project must diminish, or the cost must be increased to account for the extra resources that must be applied to the project to conclude it more quickly.

Or, if resources (people, materials and supplies) are fixed and cannot be increased (because of a stagnant budget); and quality must be maintained; then the project will take a longer time to complete.

What schools face is a unique situation (mostly due to bureaucratic management). With our schools, time and costs are fixed; i.e., during the school year the budget is static.

What this means is that the quality of educational outcomes must suffer. Or, teachers must stretch the time constraint by either staying at school longer or taking work home, probably both. Sidebar Unfortunately, staying at work for zero compensation, and taking work home for zero additional compensation leads to the opinion that teachers are an unlimited source of budget-fixing.

When budgets squeal because they are squeezed so tightly; "Teachers can always be counted on to take up the slack, i.e., by doing more for their students."

If the State or Federal Governments add another un-funded mandate to a school district's workload, teachers can perform the extra work without impacting the budget because that extra work will be "free." (Or, at least the extra work will not show up on the school district's budget.)

Other Unique School District Constraints First, no bureaucrat or politician will admit to policies or decisions that decrease the quality of education, even though "holding quality instruction at bay" is exactly what their jobs are about.

School district decision-makers know that increasing the quality of education during a fixed schedule (the school year) requires more resources. These resources include: A few more teachers

An army of tutors

Lots of technology (equipment, infrastructure, back-end programming, and technical support)

Lots of paid professional development

Lots of release time for teacher training

Lots and lots of... In addition, school districts differ from other projects (for example a bridge construction project) in that "people make the difference."

It is not possible to bring in a Newbie teachers and produce the same outcomes that a Master Teacher can produce. Therefore, the ramp up to building an effective and efficient teacher takes three to five years. Unfortunately, this is about the time frame when about half of new teachers leave the profession.

Likewise, training an army of qualified tutors would take many years, and, turnover would be higher than the job-change rate for teachers.

So, the bureaucratic panacea of the one-year budget proves inadequate for producing long-term instructional gains that require multiple school years.

The cost of resources (people) and the cost of infrastructure (equipment, software, networks and the technical people to install, manage and maintain them) is complex.

The skills that these resource people need cannot be acquired instantly.

In addition, people with these skills often not immediately available. And the complex infrastructure and facilities to house them cannot be built with little notice.

Realistic, long-term planning based upon paying everyone what they are worth for all the work that they perform is essential. Negotiating Tradeoffs When the next administrator proposes that teachers "Do more with less," the first teacher response should be, "Which of the current priorities and initiatives that we are currently doing after hours at school and at home (without pay) should we eliminate?"

Then, a short explanation of the "Iron Triangle" showing how time and costs are fixed by school year calendars and budget…emphasizing how teacher time is already over scheduled by mandates and initiatives.

The goal is not to belittle or put down administrators, but to win concessions for eliminating unnecessary and unneeded work that is currently mandated.

Further explanation can go into the difficulty of striking a balance between increasing productivity, using scarce resources, and additional costs over the point where productivity cannot be stretched without more devoting more funds to a project.

The key to finding and maintaining such a balance is better long-term planning.

Setting real priorities and sticking with them also helps.

Coming to an agreement on what priorities are important, and having the leadership and courage to "Just say no" to impossible amounts of extra work for teachers are crucial.

Coming to an agreement is necessary when making tradeoffs for what work will be accomplished. Who is in the Driver's Seat? Superintendents and campus administrators often seem to be in the "Driver's Seat" when it comes to assigning more, uncompensated work to teachers. But, with the diplomatic use of the Iron Triangle model can ease the pain of further assignments by explaining how some work must be abandoned if additional work is to be delegated.

Teachers need to affirm their right to live a life apart from their work, and teachers need to obtain recognition, credit, and compensation for their work.

Communicating the principles of the "Iron Triangle" can work for teachers, if done in with statesmanship and professionalism.

Using the "Iron Triangle Model" to show the past administrative directives and initiatives is contraindicated.

Keep your anger and frustration under control when you discuss this issue with administrators, and you just might get your message heard.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 07:00