

The Last Word:

An Interview With Gene Chasin, CEO of Accelerated Schools Plus

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JAA: Accelerated Schools is a national endeavor that is designed to transform whole school communities. What do you define as a whole school community, and how do you go about creating an environment where all the stakeholders in that community are committed to making change within the school system?

Chasin: We traditionally think of a school community as being students and teachers. Accelerated Schools views the community as being much broader. It includes students, teachers, parents, other citizens in the community, businesses in the community, and service organizations in the community. It is not only anyone who potentially has impact on the child, but also anyone who has any kind of interest in children or a financial stake through taxes in the school.

Part of the failure of initiatives over the history of public education has been that they are not broadly owned. Initiatives often come through a district office to a school or from a state department to a school. In these situations, ownership rests with whoever makes the decision to implement that program. Often the people in the school aren't invested in seeing successful implementation because they had no part in the decision. They may not feel that the program targets the needs of their students.

We try to create an environment where the entire community takes responsibility and ownership for what's happening in

the schoolhouse. They invest in the vision, in what they want the school to become, in how success will be measured, in the governance of the school, and in the school decision-making process. Through that investment and knowledge, built over time, people feel much greater ownership. They also participate in setting high expectations for their children, which often is one of the critical missing pieces in the communities in which we work.

We are trying to avoid rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. If schools implement a program and do not involve the whole school environment, they have limited success. Part of what we do is to align all the arrows: What we want instructionally must be supported by the broader culture of the school. To do that, we build a community where there is support for enrichment environments that are characterized by accelerated instruction.

JAA: What do enrichment environments characterized by accelerated instruction look like in a classroom or in a school?

Chasin: In order to close the achievement gap, we need to accelerate the rate of achievement. In order to achieve that, students must be engaged in instruction. In order to be engaged, students need to start enjoying learning, and they need to take ownership for their learning. When this happens, achievement takes off. Classroom teachers can bring student ownership to learning through differentiation strategies and through student initiated inquiry, such as through Renzulli's Triad Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). All students in our fully implemented schools engage in inquiries of their own design. They pose questions and they seek out firsthand sources. They take ownership and responsibility for their learning. Through doing that, students learn to fully engage themselves in the learning process, they learn to enjoy the learning experience, and they take ownership for the learning experience.

We start by building on strengths, rather than looking for what the child does not know or what needs to be fixed in the child or the school. We look for the strengths to build upon,

and we view those strengths as gifts that we nurture. We create learning environments where students have access to the fine and performing arts. Students also have access to the application-based content areas like science and social studies. In a typical high-need environment, students [who] are underperforming are pulled for remedial instruction. Typically, that remedial instruction happens during social studies, science, art, music, or other content that isn't tested in the state testing programs. That process of pulling students from those classes can turn children off. We turn that around. We use those opportunities for engagement and as the key to learning. We build our instruction in math and reading into those content areas and we also use the strategies of student inquiry.

JAA: How long does that process traditionally take?

Chasin: It varies widely from school to school. We have schools that are national demonstration sites after 2 ½ years in the model. Classroom instruction changed dramatically, student achievement took off, and the community was invested. In other schools, it takes 5 to 6 years to reach that level. It is largely dependent on the readiness and capacity of the school. We invest a great deal of our time working with classroom instruction, but we also invest a great deal of our time working with leadership. We don't just work with principals. We work with leadership throughout the school building and leadership in the parent community. In some schools, the leadership is present and ready from the outset, and in other schools, it takes some development work.

JAA: How does this process unfold?

Chasin: Right from the start, even before a school formally affiliates with Accelerated Schools, we go through a process called buy-in where we work with a school, typically for 6 months to one year, to build full knowledge about what Accelerated Schools Plus is about, and what implementation entails. We send people to other Accelerated School sites or have people from other sites

visit the school and talk about their experiences. We try to build their knowledge as much as possible before we take on working with any school. We require 90% buy-in from the staff and representatives of the community before we will begin work with any school. Through that process, they start understanding that it will take more effort and ownership than what is traditionally expected to transform their school.

Goodman (1995) talks about second order change. What we are looking for is not just implementing the program, but changing the substance of the way the school operates. This is a long-term investment that starts with the buy-in process. From that buy-in, we engage the entire school community in developing a vision for their school. This is not something long and flowery, but this is something succinct and concise and defines what it is they want for their children.

JAA: What steps are necessary to transform schools?

Chasin: In Accelerated Schools, we have a defined process that has been researched and implemented for 20 years and has continually evolved and has been modified with further research and experience in the field. Our process begins with the buy-in process. We then take the entire school community through a visioning process where they develop a living, breathing vision of what the community really wants for their children. From there, we take stock, we take a snapshot of where the school is currently functioning and compare that snapshot of where the school is currently functioning with their vision. Out of that comparison, some clear priorities emerge and we form a governance structure around those clear priority areas. At the powerhouse, or working level, of the governance structure are cadres. They are small groups that engage in inquiry. They conduct research around why challenges exist in those priority areas, and they research what solutions have been utilized in the past in those areas. Through the research, they formulate a recommendation on how to meet the challenge. That research is brought to the school as a whole—to parents, staff, in some cases students when the age is

appropriate, community members, and business participants for consensus around what to implement.

There is a great deal of communication that goes on in our model. The entire school community is informed along the way about what the cadres are finding through their research. They are being surveyed periodically about perceptions and what their experiences have been. They are fully informed, so there are no surprises. When we work with the school as a whole, consensus is reached relatively quickly. To implement these changes, schools go through a pilot-test period where they conduct a limited test to see the results. If successful, they move to full implementation with a set timeline for continual assessment. In addition to that work with schoolwide governance, we are doing a parallel path of professional development in the classroom where teachers are developing the capacity to meet the needs of students. This involves promoting engaged learning and delivering the kinds of strategies that one typically sees in gifted and talented classrooms. We typically do about 18 days of professional development on site with the teachers in a given school year. What we have found is that the only way to ensure success is to be working firsthand with the teachers.

JAA: How do you see your approach as different from other comprehensive school improvement initiatives?

Chasin: There are a couple of key differences. The orientation that we approach students (from their strengths) and the way we work with classroom pedagogy is a fairly dramatic departure from what other reforms are providing. Most of the other reforms are prescriptive in that they implement a packaged curriculum. We have some clear benchmarks around what we expect to see in teaching and learning experiences, but we don't have a prescribed curriculum that is content specific. Our work is based on the needs of the school and the community. We have worked in about 1,700 schools across 41 states and 4 foreign countries. The context varies widely in our schools, so we need to be able to adapt and pick materials that are appropriate. The other thing we

emphasize is that materials are used to supplement instruction. They are used as a resource for instruction rather than the basis for instruction. That is also a dramatic departure.

Finally, Accelerated Schools is a capacity building model. Ultimately, we are about building the teachers' capacity and efficacy in the classroom. What one typically sees with other models that are product-based is a big bang in terms of student achievement in the first 2 years and then it plateaus. Typically, in Accelerated Schools the big growth happens in the third year of implementation and then there are stair-step growth patterns from there. We have schools that have been with us for 15 years and they have continued to stair step from years 4–15. This is the case of Sheppard School in Santa Rosa, CA. When we look at recent research on school improvement (The Education Alliance at Brown University, 2004), Accelerated Schools had the greatest impact on changes in teacher behavior and in building on the cultural tradition and resources of the community. That is due to the type of approach we are using.

JAA: What have you learned over the last two decades about increasing achievement in schools with high poverty?

Chasin: Early in our history, when we were growing very quickly, we took the approach of building a regional satellite center to support the model. The belief was that we needed to allow autonomy in those centers so they could experiment and help inform greater change in the model. A great deal of flexibility was built into the model. The model also relied on a trainer-of-trainers approach where core staff at each of those centers trained coaches in the schools. The coaches usually were provided by the district, and in some schools, that was very successful, but in the vast majority of schools, that was an ineffective approach. The reality was that school districts often warehoused people that were ineffective in the classroom or they had effective people and gave them multiple jobs, which watered down their role as a coach. Ultimately, we did not get the kind of traction we really needed, so we shifted to a direct training model. Our staff does

all training at the school. We still have an internal coach, but he or she is there to ensure follow-up and communication.

Improving student achievement is hard and serious work, and there is no substitute for schools meaningfully buying-in, including the administration. If we do not have that buy-in, the chances of implementation are nonexistent. School districts are difficult places. There are tremendous pressures that are brought to bear on school districts. Their ability to support what is happening in individual schools is far from what we would really like to see. We have some entirely intact school systems that are incredibly successful with implementation. The key in those districts is that we have superintendents who are knowledgeable about what happens in the schools. These superintendents participate in the professional development that is occurring in their school buildings. They know what the schools and teachers are undertaking, and they are able to create space and policy to support the efforts. They are also able to keep the school board informed so the support is ongoing.

I think over the years we've put a great deal of emphasis on the role of the principal, and certainly the principal is a key player in making sure the implementation is successful, but we tended to underestimate the impact of superintendents. We have lost more schools due to superintendent transitions than due to principal transitions. Superintendents are typically in a school district for a relatively short tenure. They want to make their mark quickly, and often they want to distance themselves from what worked in the past for their predecessor.

JAA: What roadblocks do you see in schools that keep students from achieving their potential?

Chasin: Expectations for students is at the top of the list. Schools that do not have a deep belief that students are really capable of achieving at high levels do not make progress. It is incredibly frustrating and unfortunate that there are quite a few schools out there with that problem. As I mentioned earlier, it is important to build on strengths.

Another barrier is administrators who do not trust staff with information. I mentioned earlier how important ownership is. Schools need a knowledgeable constituency to make a model like this work, and that means staff having knowledge about where the money is going and how things are operating. This is all part of the capacity building process. It can be a big stumbling block when an administrator is not willing to share that kind of information.

Lastly, another roadblock is administrators who do not engage in the professional development with their teachers. Administrators cannot support instruction unless they know what that instruction looks like. The role of the administration is absolutely crucial in providing a model for learning.

Finally, we are living in an era of disincentive for meaningful change in schools. The penalties for failing to meet adequate yearly progress create great fear of change and moving away from a textbook-driven system. The testing places emphasis on what is tested, preparing for the tests, and a linear approach to education.

References

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Editor's note: Accelerated Schools Plus constitutes a national school improvement organization that builds on the foundation of the Accelerated Schools Project established by Henry M. Levin in 1986 to replace academic remediation for students in at-risk situations with academic enrichment. Rather than

focusing on a particular grade, curriculum, or approach to teaching, Accelerated School communities use a systematic process, encompassing collaborative and informed decision-making, to transform their entire school into one that provides acceleration for all students. Additional information about the program can be found at <http://www.acceleratedschools.net>.