

A Casebook for Aspiring Educational Leaders

Educational Leadership in Action

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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Case Analysis Framework</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>Matrix</i>	<i>xvi</i>
PART I	
Case Studies	1
Case Study 1: Expecting the Best <i>Laurie Barron</i>	3
Case Study 2: Transformational Leadership <i>Wendy K. Jordan</i>	6
Case Study 3: Last In, First Out <i>John Deasy</i>	8
Case Study 4: The Safe Environment <i>Joe Nelson</i>	10
Case Study 5: Wearing Two Hats <i>H. Ronald Smith</i>	11

vi Contents

Case Study 6: A Nightmare Scenario <i>Janet Robinson</i>	13
Case Study 7: Substitute Solutions <i>Danielle M. Eadens and Daniel W. Eadens</i>	16
Case Study 8: The Censorship Crisis <i>Jacquelyn Cornelius</i>	17
Case Study 9: Monitoring Performance <i>Scott Taylor</i>	20
Case Study 10: Digital Dilemmas <i>Mark A. Edwards</i>	22
Case Study 11: Careful What You Wish For <i>David Ryan</i>	23
Case Study 12: A Digital 1:1 Initiative <i>David R. Schuler</i>	26
Case Study 13: Cultivating Trust <i>Paula Vincent</i>	29
Case Study 14: Closed Books, Closed Minds <i>Michael Seanson</i>	30
Case Study 15: Fitting In <i>Maria B. Roberts</i>	33
Case Study 16: Safety and Supervision <i>Nicholas Celso, III</i>	36
Case Study 17: Tenure Is Not The Problem . . . We Are! <i>Kenneth D. King</i>	37
Case Study 18: The Digital Schoolbook <i>Leila Sadeghi</i>	40
Case Study 19: No Place for Hate <i>Ranelle Lang</i>	41

CASE STUDY 9: MONITORING PERFORMANCE

Scott Taylor

Dr. Jack Silverman was a well-established school administrator, having run school districts for nearly a decade when he was asked to take the helm of West Wilmington, an urban district in the northern part of the state. Jack knew the district's overall performance was lacking, yet he was confident in his ability to turn around districts in need. He readily took the opportunity and went to work.

It was only three months into his new position as Superintendent of the district that he was notified by the State Department of Education that his elementary school, Lincoln Avenue School, was deemed a School in Need of Improvement. To make matters worse, the district's high school, Moore High School, was placed on the Department's "watch list" as a school that would also be identified as in need of improvement if measures of academic performance didn't improve within one school year. The district was also informed that a state monitor would be working with the Superintendent to ensure that an action plan was implemented to turn around the low performance in these schools. This came as a surprise to Jack; neither the Board of Education nor the previous Superintendent ever mentioned any issues with the state DOE. Jack immediately called the state monitor, Dr. Sandra Duncan, to discuss next steps.

Dr. Duncan was a veteran school administrator and heralded as one of the most successful superintendents the state has ever seen. After retiring, she was tapped to serve as a state monitor charged with overseeing districts that were placed on the "watch list." Her role was to be proactive and provide a safety net for schools with low performance before they slipped too far. Dr. Duncan had a reputation for being very direct and taking a no-nonsense approach. She demanded results supported by data, and adhered to strict deadlines. Jack knew he had a lot of work to do and that he'd better roll up his sleeves fast before Dr. Duncan took over.

Dr. Duncan sent Jack the school-level data to review and, after looking over the data, it was clear that a major turnaround was needed. The state required schools to meet specific proficiency (passing) goals to be deemed successful by the Department. Lincoln Avenue School was 35 percentage points from meeting its target in language arts. Math scores were not as far off, but still lagged 25 points behind the target.

Dr. Silverman tasked his secretary to cull standardized test performance data from the last three years. It was clear to him that the elementary and high schools saw gradual declines in standardized test scores for three straight years. High priority right now was the elementary school. According to Dr. Duncan, if Lincoln didn't turn things around, the state would take control of the school's instructional programs and put it on a Corrective Action Plan.

Cautiously, Dr. Silverman approached Board of Education President Mr. Perneti about the issue of the two schools and the assignment of Dr. Duncan by the DOE. Jack wanted to present his plan to the Board and share with them how he anticipated moving forward with the turnaround. Despite only three months on the job, Dr. Silverman recognized it was not his "fault" the schools were failing, but he knew he'd be held responsible for a state takeover of Lincoln and Moore. He also knew that he had the state breathing down his neck. Mr. Perneti was very upset over the circumstances and had already spoken with the other Board members. Collectively, they informed Jack that his position and reputation were on the line. Jack understood and assured Mr. Perneti that he would do everything in his power to improve the situation. He now had to face the principals and the teachers in these two schools.

Teachers and administrators barely knew Dr. Silverman. He started in July and hadn't had the time to establish relationships with the school district's stakeholders. Much as he wished he could have developed a rapport with everyone, time was of the essence and Dr. Silverman had to immediately get the word out that Lincoln had ten months to make drastic improvements, and Moore had two years until a state takeover. Jack also introduced Dr. Duncan to the teaching faculty. He wanted them to be aware of her presence in the buildings.

The regularly scheduled administrator's meeting would be Dr. Silverman's first opportunity to announce the problem to all of the principals and supervisors in the district. He purposely did not invite Dr. Duncan to attend out of fear that the principals at these two schools might feel intimidated to speak freely in her presence. At first, Linda O'Neill, the principal of Lincoln School, sat silently as the Department of Education data reports were distributed. After a quick review of the data she said, "This is ridiculous. I know my teachers are better than this. We've been successful for so many years. What could have happened? You know, the parents have been terrible in the last few years. All they care about is sports. I hardly get anyone coming to Back to School Night, and there are always no-shows at parent conferences." Moore High School's principal sat stoically, listening to Ms. O'Neill express her frustration with what she perceived to be lack of parent support. When he finally said something, Principal Mark Antonici explained, "I don't know what to tell you. Ms. O'Neill is right. We don't have a lot of parent support. Getting kids to do homework is like pulling teeth, and I don't think their parents are doing anything to help the situation."

Dr. Silverman left the meeting discouraged. He didn't respond to his principals' points, but he was quietly concerned with their lack of ownership of the problem. He hoped he would fare better at his meeting with teachers in the two schools.

Lincoln's faculty was first on Dr. Silverman's list of teacher meetings. He made sure not to suggest reasons for the four-year decline in performance as he showed a series of PowerPoint slides that illustrated standardized test score data. It was clear from the nonverbal reactions of the teachers that the news struck an emotional chord. Some teachers appeared stone-faced; others shook their heads.

A sizable group of teachers, much to Dr. Silverman's chagrin, frowned. The high school faculty's reaction was strikingly similar to what Dr. Silverman received from the elementary school teachers. He needed to gain a better understanding of what was happening inside the schools.

He decided to spend November and December walking the halls and talking to as many teachers as he could. What Dr. Silverman saw and heard confirmed the sentiments he gathered from his previous meetings. Teachers were clearly disgusted by the test scores. What he heard from Ms. Medford, an outspoken second grade teacher, spoke volumes about what her peers felt but didn't feel comfortable saying. She said to Dr. Silverman, "We've been doing a great job with these kids for years and haven't changed a thing, so I can't tell you what's wrong with our schools. Maybe it's the parents. Maybe it's the administrators. You know, the 'buck' ultimately stops with the principals."

Dr. Silverman continued to visit the schools and by December he became aware of an even greater problem. He knew he had to install a school reform plan to deal with poor standardized test scores at Lincoln and Moore Schools. What he didn't anticipate was the sentiment of his teachers and school leaders. The Board of Education was upset with the quality of the elementary and high schools. The vast majority of teachers didn't believe they were at fault for poor test scores, and the administrators deflected responsibility to the parents. Dr. Duncan was in his office at minimum once per week asking for updates and a plan of action. How could he possibly turn around his district in ten months?

CASE STUDY 10: DIGITAL DILEMMAS

Mark A. Edwards

Dr. Tony Francis was the principal at Dayton High School, located in the heart of Atlanta, Georgia. He was an experienced school administrator, former teacher and technology enthusiast. This enthusiasm for technology led Tony on a mission to reface how students learned and teachers taught in his school.

Tony was one of few principals in the school district that embraced technology and was well-versed in new and emerging platforms and online applications. He spoke regularly to teachers and other administrators about the benefits of integrating technology into the curriculum and advocated for change. However, he knew that if he wanted to make a lasting and sustained impact he would need buy-in from his two assistant principals and a majority of the teachers. To make matters worse, the school's Chief Technology Officer (CTO), Lisa Candida, was overwhelmed with work and focused most of her attention on "fixing" computer issues rather than on exploring new options for using technology in the classroom and beyond.

One afternoon, after months of deliberation, Dr. Garcia, the Superintendent, agreed to allow Dr. Francis to pilot a technology-infused curriculum program at Dayton High School. Dr. Francis was ecstatic. For months he had met with Dr. Garcia to discuss the importance and relevance of technology. Now he had her support and the funding to go with it. Tony was eager to share the news with his assistant principals, Ken and Dominique, along with the teachers. His first task was to schedule a meeting with Lisa to discuss the plan and the role she would play in rolling this out.

Tony and Lisa met the next morning. After Tony explained his plan, Lisa stated, "This will never work. First of all, most of the computers in this building are outdated. Secondly, many teachers don't even use the computers, laptops, or Smartboards, so what's the point of investing more money on equipment? And finally, I am currently looking for a new position outside of the school." This was news to Tony. He ended the meeting and thanked Lisa for her input. His next step was to meet with his two assistant principals. Much to his surprise, both Ken and Dominique were unsupportive of the proposed changes. "We put too many mandates on our teachers already. Why would we add more pressure on them now?" Ken implored. Dominique added, "Maybe we should just offer some professional development around the laptops and Smartboards." Tony was baffled. The three most important people in support of this transition were not on board.

The following week, Ken submitted his resignation. He found a position in a different district and would complete the year at Dayton High School. After careful consideration, Tony decided to not renew Lisa's contract and conduct a search for a new CTO who could effectively manage the transition and one who was on the cutting edge of new and emerging technologies. He simultaneously requested a transfer of his other assistant principal, Dominique, to a different school within the district.

Tony now needed to switch focus to several areas in order to get this plan implemented effectively. First, he needed to devise a strategy to gain buy-in from his teachers. He also needed to address the "human infrastructure bandwidth" problem; i.e. develop the skills of his teachers so they would feel confident to utilize the technologies. Finally, he needed to develop a plan to involve the community.

Tony sat at his desk and began to draft a strategic plan that consisted of a two-phase rollout.

CASE STUDY 11: CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

David Ryan

Brent Turnbull was excited to begin his job as school principal. He was the second principal in the school's history. Sakersby High School had opened only two

CASE STUDY 9: MONITORING PERFORMANCE: RESPONSE 1

Patrick Fletcher

There are essentially three problems that face Dr. Silverman:

1. A lack of ownership of educational results from faculty and staff;
2. A lack of honesty and transparency from the Board of Education; and
3. Unrealistic expectations of the state.

Each problem can be addressed, but Dr. Silverman should do some soul searching to determine if he wants to continue working in this type of environment. As an established administrator, he would have the ability to transition to another district because of his short tenure in the new district, without permanent damage to his career. If he decides to stay, he needs to take some decisive action to allow for any plan he designs to work.

The first problem listed above is a long-term issue. Problems two and three are more immediate. Dr. Silverman should immediately consult legal counsel from his professional association regarding the Board's actions and the "collective statement" he received from the Board President. On the surface, it would appear that a decision was made outside proper Board protocol and without notice to him that such an action was being considered. After receiving legal counsel, Dr. Silverman should consider having a meeting with the entire Board to make sure he has their full support and to clear the air in order to move forward in a constructive manner.

Second, Dr. Silverman should have a meeting with Dr. Duncan to explain his preliminary findings and to provide him with an opportunity to understand the depth of problem one. It is virtually impossible to turn around a school in ten months while simultaneously closing a 35 point achievement gap. More realistic intermediate benchmarks should be created. For example, a five point increase in scores per year for seven years, or a seven point increase per year for five years is more achievable and realistic. A similar benchmark for the high school is also needed.

With these parameters in place, it would then be possible to address the ownership problem. All three stakeholders need to understand that they are key players to reversing the decline. The school, which includes the faculty, administration and Board need to understand that they can influence student achievement. Faculty needs a safe environment to experiment with solutions. Administration needs to be supportive of the effort and nurture a school climate that is a positive one. The Board needs to provide resources and allow the faculty and administration to do their jobs. Parents need to become invested in their children's learning.

This does not mean that all other activities such as sports need to be eliminated or deemphasized. Athletics, artistic expression and academics need to coexist in a balance.

If these issues can be addressed and time provided for the change process to take root, then Dr. Silverman can be successful. If any of these requirements are absent, success will not be possible. And finally, everyone must also understand that the situation may get worse before it begins to improve.

CASE STUDY 9: MONITORING PERFORMANCE: RESPONSE 2

Raphael J. Caprio

Let me start with an observation that, over time, any supervisor who moves up the chain of responsibility experiences much, and usually begins to formulate empirically derived "rules." Reticence to reflect and be constructively critical of oneself plants the seeds for ultimate failure, as is the case here with Dr. Silverman.

My assessment of Dr. Silverman might best be addressed in the following partial, nonexhaustive list of deficiencies. In addition to those specified below, several more may be identified and should be discussed as each provides valuable insight to what will ultimately lead to his complete failure to achieve the necessary goals.

"Monitoring performance" is nothing more than a clerical exercise unless it is linked to a process of continuing quality improvement, which obviously was not in place in his new district, and which Dr. Silverman appears incapable of managing. Triage, in his mind, must be a term solely practiced in the ER and not elsewhere, otherwise he would not have found himself in the situation described in the case.

Although reportedly a "well-established" administrator, Silverman's first failure was to believe his own propaganda. Advocating oneself is essential to establishing a reputation and facilitating progressively higher positions with increasing responsibility. However well Silverman may have performed in his previous district, his experience did not prepare him for an environment with significantly more challenges. Understanding the "business," the "environment" and one's own shortcomings is critical. Asking the right questions is critical.

Hence, it is beyond credulity that, in knowing "the district's overall performance was lacking," Silverman did not ask the right questions even before accepting the position. Which schools were under-performing? Were any in jeopardy? What were performance trends, socioeconomic trends, funding trends? Were these questions asked at the appropriate time—when deciding to apply for and accept the position—he would not have been "surprised."

Second, other than settling into his new office, why was he not assessing where his district stood if, as he acknowledged, he knew the district's performance was

"lacking"? When was he going to ask his own staff about performance data? Why was he being sent data from the state after a state monitor was appointed rather than insisting on appropriate information immediately upon taking office?

This leads to a third failure, that of not having a clear and effective transition plan; one that would identify emergent problems and the level and quality of his own human resource base as soon as possible. How effective were the principals? What about district-wide infrastructure and support (institutional research and planning)?

Given the gravity of the situation, it becomes even more curious that Dr. Silverman then tasks his secretary to "cull standardized test performance data." However talented this person may be, this is information that should already be well-known and transparent, which also raises questions about the competence and motives of the Board. I would not expect the departing superintendent to discuss the downside of life as he/she departed "Dodge City," but absence of Board acknowledgement suggests serious political issues, again at a level Dr. Silverman is probably inexperienced and incapable of dealing with!

This is reinforced by Mr. Perneti's (BOE President) indication that Silverman's reputation and position would be on the line. "Everyone has an agenda" is a principle that Silverman either was unaware of or did not understand. The statement is not intended as a pejorative one. It is neither good nor bad, it just is! A good manager, a good executive, understands this. They place achieving an understanding of what drives each of the major actors as a very high priority, something to be accomplished sooner rather than later. It would seem reasonable that the previous superintendent was well aware of the challenges, and his/her departure may well have been an experienced decision, seeing the BOE as an independent actor that was looking for someone to throw under the bus.

Turnaround of educational performance is a daunting and difficult task that requires buy-in from the entire community: the Board, administration, faculty, back-office personnel, parents and the community as a whole. It takes time, which requires as a starting point a complete and honest understanding of where you are and where you wish to take the institution under your stewardship. Thus, it also requires a vision, a reasonable path and process to achieve that vision, and perhaps most importantly, a level of credibility with the major actors on whom success will be dependent.

Accordingly, rather than further detailing yet additional failures, we should address what steps might have been taken to achieve a school(s) turnaround if one were in Silverman's situation.

First, due diligence is a term that should be used when assuming responsibility for executive leadership. As a professional moving into a new, more challenging role, one must do everything possible to get as much information about what the challenge really is. This takes far more time and effort than most professionals anticipate and is among the most important information one can secure. In the Silverman case, had such due diligence been completed, he would have gotten

information on a variety of issues. Was the former superintendent dodging a bullet and was the Board an active participant in recognizing less than adequate performance trends? He should have received, directly or indirectly, a level of specificity on objective scores from the state that would have assisted his hitting the deck running. Schools are not placed on "monitoring lists" without progressive assessment and oversight; data readily available if sought out. The list goes on . . .

Armed with information that performance data were declining, there were ample questions that could and should have been vetted with the Board. What type of performance monitoring policy did they have in place? Why did they not act sooner?

Similarly, Silverman could have requested (and insisted on receiving) performance data not only for the subject schools but for all schools in the district. He would have had the opportunity before or almost immediately after arriving to prioritize in a more formal way the challenges facing the district. More importantly, he would have been able to develop strategies that would have reinforced the reality that this was a shared problem whose solution was in everyone's best interest.

One of the easiest and most effective management tools is the ability to "walk the floor" and talk to people about what they are doing, what problems they are facing and what ideas they have. Perhaps the most rare and important resource for any leader is an employee who will tell you what you need to know, not what they think you want to hear. This is developed only by establishing credibility, openness and an understanding that it will not be taken personally (i.e. no retribution). Too few employees have the guts to tell the truth to management; too few managers are sufficiently professional to understand that honest critical feedback is important to success. Credibility is difficult to earn and easy to lose!

Sufficient self-confidence (not arrogance) wedded with prudent discretion also allows one to deal more effectively with other actors. Silverman clearly lacked in this department as well. Being newly appointed, Silverman should have thought longer and harder about how to deal with both the state and the Board. Both are well aware that he was not responsible for the current situation, but both also were quite prepared to hold him accountable for a turnaround that would be expected in a timeline completely inappropriate for a new superintendent. He needed more time and should have developed appropriate points for each of these groups to provide a more reasonable timeline.

Additional deficiencies in handling this situation are easily identified, as along with corrective strategies that might have been implemented. For example, by deferring "walking the floor" until November and December to achieve a "better understanding of the business" as it was executed in this district (again, knowing the district had performance issues), Silverman effectively lost 40 per cent of the time available to "correct" the situation. The district needed strong leadership, a proactive yet inclusive vision, a strategy to engage all players in a common acceptance that the solution requires all groups to contribute. It really doesn't make

much sense to figure out how the train got derailed; it is abundantly clear it is off the rails. Blame naturally results in protective self-defense. For Silverman or any other, the real challenge for leadership is getting the train back on track.

CASE STUDY 9: MONITORING PERFORMANCE: RESPONSE 3

John J. Szabo

Clearly, Silverman has made an egregious error by not performing his due diligence about the status of the district before assuming the role of superintendent. Despite the Board and the previous superintendent's "not mentioning" a problem with the state, he should have reviewed the data on the district that is public information and readily available. State data on test performance is not kept secret. After doing his homework, Silverman should have addressed the Board about the issue in order to develop a plan of corrective action that could have been started immediately. Unfortunately, this did not occur. The current situation requires the following to occur.

Duncan, the state monitor, is a veteran educator who has had a great deal of experience in dealing with troubled schools. Silverman should develop a strong collegial relationship with her in order to develop a plan that the state will accept and promote. It is highly unlikely that the schools will be able to raise their scores to the required levels, but they can begin corrective actions to raise performance levels and demonstrate improvement among not only two elementary schools and the high school but all of the schools. It must be understood that meaningful improvement is a process, not an event. The decline took years and the recovery will take more than a few months. However, the signs of improvement should be evident in short order.

It is clear that the staff is demoralized. The statement that one teacher made, "Teachers do a great job, nothing has changed," may be the core of the problem. The students are not the same as they were in years past and require different strategies and approaches to ensure success. The teachers cannot expect improvement if they continue doing what they have always done. What worked in the past is not working now and will not work in the future.

Another concern is that the principals discussed a lack of parental support. This is also disturbing since there was no mention of the actions of the principals to make their schools welcoming to parents. Clearly, there must be improved communication with parents and a plan to enlist their support in school improvement programs. Silverman should enlist Duncan's support and counsel in this area in order to enfranchise parents.

Additionally, the Board of Education cannot be omitted from the process. Silverman should keep the Board apprised of his actions to improve the schools.

The Board should hear from the principals, teachers, parents and students who comprise the educational community and should all be working in concert to correct the deficiencies within the district. The Board must understand that test scores are often a symptom of much greater problems. The causes of those problems must be addressed in order for a transformation to occur. Clearly, the Board must understand, approve and support a plan of action that addresses the root causes of decline.

Principals also need to be informed that they will be given the resources they need to commence the process of improvement. As the instructional leaders of their respective buildings, *they are accountable for the overall performance* of staff and students. In-service training regarding evaluation and instructional improvement must be available for teachers and administrators. Principals must actively engage parents and welcome them as important, vital contributors to the success of the students. Training, in-service, and outreach are important factors in transforming the schools to places where learning is paramount.

In sum, Silverman can orchestrate a transformation. It requires openness, inclusion and communication among all stakeholders. Duncan can be a valuable asset and should become Silverman's ally in developing and promoting an improvement strategy. Teachers and administrators must understand and believe that they are the key to improvement. Schools must be places of collegiality and cooperation. The time has come for all in the schools to accept their role in developing a solution and to work toward common goals.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

Scott Taylor

Presenting an explanation for why standardized test scores were on the decline for three consecutive years was the first step to addressing the issue and was key to persuading teachers and administrators that there were clear reasons why the elementary and high school were underperforming. There were, it was explained, four "culprits" for the change in performance: 1) Curricula was outdated and not aligned to the latest content standards; 2) English Language Learners were not provided specific programs to address their needs despite the noticeable enrollment spike in this population; 3) Assessment data were not being analyzed and teachers were not aware of the individual needs of their students; 4) Teachers were implementing their own instructional strategies absent of vertical and horizontal articulation; consequently, there was little uniformity in the delivery of instruction across grade levels and from grade to grade.

Investing all of the school community stakeholders in the decision-making process to install reforms was the next step toward addressing the schools'

performance problems. Committees provided an effective approach to empowering teachers. For example, a curriculum committee was charged with forging a vision for programs and then selecting textbook materials that support the vision so that these small groups of teachers were provided opportunities to take ownership over the direction of separate content areas.

Parents and members of the Board of Education took part in community-based committees. These groups crafted action plans to address the four obstacles to school improvement and met throughout the year to monitor progress toward meeting the action plan goals. The Board of Education was apprised of the status of the action plan on a monthly basis during regular public meetings that were well attended by members of the community. The state monitor was actively involved in every major decision regarding the turnaround effort at each of the schools. The Superintendent and the state monitor established a strong alliance and worked cooperatively and in an open and transparent fashion. The Superintendent invited her expertise, knowing she had much to offer.

Fostering collaboration among groups of people is a research-proven step toward effectively attaining school or district goals, but it was also vital to “press the flesh” with individuals so lingering concerns could be addressed. Ample time was spent “working the halls and classrooms” to generate conversations about the state of the schools. These one to one conversations, the larger group meetings and the regular monthly presentations helped compel stakeholders to take ownership of the problems the elementary and high schools faced and thus led to the implementation of necessary reforms to improving the district as a whole.

CASE STUDY 10: DIGITAL DILEMMAS: RESPONSE 1

Sousan Arafeh

As he started to write his strategic plan, Tony paused. He reflected on the recent past and reminded himself that everything revolves around people. In truth, his own leadership style and the focus of his efforts had not allowed “his people” to fully contribute or flourish. He had not valued his staff and other stakeholders enough and this had resulted in them not working as engaged partners and co-collaborators. Rather, he had been focused on evangelizing about technology and his own technological achievements while letting his building technology limp along, leaving Lisa to do all in her power to keep things working. A very first step for his change efforts, he decided, would be to review and revise his own focus and demeanor.

Beyond this, there seemed to be a short-term problem and a long-term one. In the short term, Tony and his team would have to figure out what to do about the Superintendent-supported pilot technology-infused curriculum program. Initially, the pilot would need to be small and only involve those committed to the technology vision and able to advance it. In addition, only a bit of state-of-the-art technology would be needed. In the long term, however, Tony and his team would need to figure out how to further inspire and support stakeholders to help grow the school into a 21st Century beacon. This would require more systemic growth and change, additional funding, new technology and much professional development and ongoing, targeted technical and instructional support. Money and new technology were going to be important, but people were going to be just as, if not more, important.

In Phase I, Dr. Francis focused on three things: gathering information to effectively establish a strategic plan, advancing the pilot study and gaining staff and community support. Phase II, he thought, should be about deepening and scaling up those efforts—particularly through professional development.

Tony felt that Phase I should start with a needs assessment. This would be helpful for gathering information in a systematic and thorough way. As a way to crowdsource ideas and create buy-in, Dr. Francis wanted to create a Technology Committee, which would further determine and refine the Phase I components. In addition to creating a strategic plan incorporating his initial ideas, he thought a subset of the committee could initiate and shepherd a fast-track hiring process for the new CTO and assistant principals. He felt the committee should be comprised of stakeholders. Tony wanted to be sure that a wide range of expertise was represented on the committee, including fundraising, business and members connected to the racial/ethnic and linguistically diverse communities served by the school. In this way, the committee members would bring their various perspectives to Dayton High School, but also bring back word from the committee to the community and garner support.