

Remarks of Hayes Mizell on July 12, 2008 at the summer meeting of the 12 Under 12 network. The meeting was held at the Marriott World Center Resort in Orlando, FL preliminary to the National Staff Development Council's Summer Conference. Approximately 45 people participated in the meeting. 12 Under 12 is a NSDC project that includes public elementary, middle, and high schools seeking to prepare all students to perform at the proficient level before the 2014 target date for that goal established by the No Child Left Behind Act. Mizell is the Distinguished Senior Fellow of the National Staff Development Council.

From Storm-Tossed Boats to Safer Shores

Most of you know that when the National Staff Development Council created the network called 12 Under 12, we were hoping that a select group of schools would choose to participate. You represent those schools. With each passing year, your schools become more and more unique for three reasons. First, your schools have chosen to remain in 12 Under 12 in spite of the significant financial investment required to do so. Second, with each passing year, your schools have voluntarily taken on new collaborative responsibilities to make 12 Under 12 more useful to you and to other schools in the network. Third, your schools remain committed to making whatever changes are necessary to enable all your students to perform at the proficient level by a specific year before 2014. You will recall that 2014 is the goal year established in the No Child Left Behind Act for when students should meet your respective states' standards for academic proficiency.

Of course, 2014 is not as far away as it was when schools' representatives attended the first convening of 12 Under 12 schools in 2003. Some of your schools are rapidly approaching the goal year you established. When we created 12 Under 12, we had several reasons for asking you to establish such a goal. We hoped that doing so would focus your schools on preparing all students to perform at proficient levels sooner

rather than later. I doubt any of you are old enough to remember an ancient television game show called “Beat the Clock” that challenged contestants to complete awkward and complicated tasks within a limited amount of time, but when we created 12 Under 12 we had something like that in mind.

We also hoped your schools would use your student performance goals to challenge and mobilize students, faculties, and families to work together towards achieving the goals. We envisioned, perhaps naively, that everyone in your respective school communities would know your goal, understand it, and put their collective shoulders to the wheel to reach the goal. As it has turned out, it took a long time for your faculties to even know that your schools were participating in 12 Under 12, much less to understand its purpose or the fact that they were supposed to be working towards achieving your schools’ goals. As far as I know, no school has a huge banner over the trophy case proclaiming “Teachers, Students, and Families Working Together to Make All Students Proficient By (whatever your goal year might be).” I doubt that same statement appears prominently on your school’s web site or on the masthead of your school’s newsletter. We have very few outright requirements in 12 Under 12, and your schools’ use of such a symbolic message is not one of them. The question remains, however, as to how your schools can achieve your goals if people who are key to achieving them—students, teachers, and families—do not know what the goals are, why they are important, and what they should be doing so students can reach them.

You have told us that as a result of your schools’ participation in 12 Under 12, they have made significant changes they would not have made otherwise. We are pleased that your schools have found your collaborative interactions not only instructive,

but stimulating, challenging, and encouraging. In this respect, your participation in 12 Under 12 is exemplary. It would be easy to use this venue only to meet and greet your colleagues, swap stories, engage in educator chit-chat, and then return home to make change at the margins, satisfied with incremental, business-as-usual school improvement. You have not done that, and we appreciate how seriously you take your 12 Under 12 learning experiences, how you have gone the second mile to create new such experiences, and how you draw upon these experiences to make significant changes in your schools. I encourage you to keep pushing the envelope in this regard. You know better than I that without making major changes, your schools cannot and will not meet the student performance goals you have set. We hope 12 Under 12 will provide you the inspiration, knowledge, and support that will help your schools take the hard steps that lie ahead.

While you have been working towards achieving your schools' student performance goals, the world has not stood still. Even the No Child Left Behind Act has not escaped unscathed. Criticism of some features of the legislation has increased, including provisions that allow different states to set criteria for student proficiency at different levels. Efforts have stalled to overhaul the NCLB as part of the reauthorization process, and it now appears there may be no major changes in NCLB until as late as 2010. Regardless of when the reauthorization occurs, it is an open question whether Congress will substantially revise the law or whether it will replace it entirely with new legislation. It is even unclear whether Congress will retain the goal of all students proficient by 2014.

This possibility could present your schools with an interesting dilemma. If there is no national goal for student proficiency, or if there is no common standard that all

states must use to determine student proficiency, what will your schools do? Without the federal government or your state government establishing a student performance goal for your schools, would your schools have a school-wide student performance goal? How would you establish it? What would it be? If it were your responsibility to determine the level of student performance that constitutes academic proficiency, how would your school respond?

These are hypothetical issues which your schools may never confront. Policymakers do not seem reluctant to pass laws telling your schools what to do, so the day may never come when you are forced to make hard decisions about your own expectations regarding student performance. But the uncertainty of the NCLB's future can prompt useful reflection by your schools' leadership teams. Absent mandates from any external entity, what would be your schools' expectations regarding student performance? What student performance goals would your schools set, and would you establish the same goals for all students, or would the goals differ for different subsets of students, and, if so, what would be your rationale for establishing the different goals?

Whether your schools are willing to struggle with such questions, and how you choose to answer them is important. It impacts how your schools organize education opportunities. It determines your decisions about which students have access to which education opportunities. It defines how teachers relate to students, and it shapes students' expectations of their potential and the value of their education.

I am not leading up to a request that you return to your schools and engage your leadership teams in developing consensus answers to the questions I have posed. I do want to suggest that because you have been in the NCLB harness for six years, it would

be useful for your schools to consider fundamental questions about your schools' values and goals for student performance, quite apart from those imposed on you by the NCLB. In the absence of the NCLB or its equivalent, would your schools simply revert to the bygone era when schools were not accountable for student outcomes, or would you forge and act on a new vision of high levels of performance by all students, and would you hold yourselves accountable for the results? Because your schools are unique by virtue of embracing the 12 Under 12 challenge, I would like to think that you would pursue the latter course. But in all honesty that would require you to be much more brave and bold than you are now.

Nearly everything about the organization, operation, and culture of public schooling creates incentives for compliance and caution, and disincentives for creativity and risk. This dynamic does not benefit schools that have increasingly higher proportions of students from racial, ethnic, language, and income groups that have gained access to public education only during the past 50 years or less. In response to these students' learning needs, schools have made modest programmatic changes, but many of the changes have been the direct or indirect result of legal mandates. Consequently, these are the students most frequently found at the lower end of the distribution of academic achievement.

These students founder in the storm-tossed boats named "below basic" and "basic." They are the constituency of 12 Under 12. It is these students who should be the entire focus of 12 Under 12 and of your schools' leadership teams. If these students do not drive your conversations about how to engage students more effectively in learning, then 12 Under 12 is not being faithful to its purpose. Again, 12 Under 12 is not about

general school improvement. It is not about lifting all boats. It is about helping low-performing students develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to steer towards safer shores.

It is difficult for you to keep this focus and change your schools to raise the performance levels of these particular students. There are many distractions. There are many barriers. There are powerful operational and cultural factors that cause you to focus more on the distractions and the barriers than on the changes your schools must make if you are serious about meeting the student performance goals you have set. Nevertheless, this is the challenge you have accepted by participating in 12 Under 12.

An important component of your participation in 12 Under 12 is to help each other keep focused on 12 Under 12's purpose and on getting the most out of the venues 12 Under 12 provides. You should begin now, at this meeting, and continue on the professional development telephone conference calls we will reconvene in September. You know each other well enough now that no one should take offense at a candid question. In your discussions, I encourage you to listen for whether the conversation is about the right things. If not, I urge you to break into the discussion and ask, "What does this have to do with us making changes necessary to get our low-performing students to the proficient level?" or "How is this going to help our school make changes that will move low-performing students towards proficiency?" If your discussion group does not have a convincing response to these questions, then you should re-focus the conversation and move on to what matters most.

I urge you to be more direct in your conversations and to have higher expectations for the changes your schools need to make because the target dates for meeting your

student performance goals are rapidly approaching. You need to be asking hard questions about whether the changes 12 Under 12 schools are making are producing the results necessary to meet their performance goals. Though you are now more comfortable with each other as a result of your collaborations during the past five years, there is a potential downside. You may be less rather than more likely to challenge your colleagues and to probe for the links between their practice and their student performance goals. As participants in 12 Under 12, you are now well beyond the initiation and getting acquainted phase, and it is time to ramp up your expectations, your inquiry, your candor, and the impact of your schools' changes. The more honest you are with each other about what you hear and see as you interact with one another, the more helpful you will be to your colleagues.

The National Staff Development Council is proud of the progress your schools have made to date, but now is the time to quicken the pace towards achieving your schools' student performance goals. We know this is a daunting task, but during the past five years you have demonstrated the commitment and competence that has enabled your schools to move steadily towards their goals. Thank you for taking your goals seriously and for caring enough to provide your 12 Under 12 colleagues the support and critical feedback they need to meet their goals.

Other speeches and articles of Hayes Mizell are at:
<http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm#system> and
<http://www.middleweb.com/mw/resources/HMreader.html>