

**Schools in Trouble: The Wisdom Of Educational Leaders
Who Transform Adversity into Positive Growth
by Elle Allison, PhD.**

Loss and Adversity

Hardly a person escapes life without some type of loss or adversity—some event that blindsides them or brings them to their knees. Organizations are not exempt from this type of experience—and if you think about it, this makes sense—after all, Organizations are comprised of people and people have a way of drawing experiences into their lives that help them to learn and grow.

Over the past ten years, schools and districts in the United States have experienced increased external feedback regarding their academic performance. While many schools are regularly engaged in productive processes such as looking at student work as a faculty and collecting formative assessment data, others do not. They wait for their state assessment results each fall with bated breath, wondering if they “made it” this year. I’ve begun to notice that schools respond in different ways when they get feedback that they did not “make” their expected results. Compare the two schools depicted below:

Two Schools

“Bummer Middle School” is in the second year of designation as a school “in need of improvement” and the faculty is as angry and depressed as they were the first year. They resent anyone who offers them encouragement or support. “How dare you imply we need help?” they cry. “We are the victims here! It’s not our fault! These kids can’t learn!”

In the same district, Morewater Middle School provides a contrasting picture. They also have been in the category of “in need of improvement” for two years. At a fundamental level however, they felt they really could do better for their students. So, instead of becoming angry and bitter, they committed themselves to making their school a place where all students could learn and feel successful.

How does one explain the different reactions from these two schools? For that matter, how does one explain why some people suffer a blow in life—any blow—and seem to come out stronger and better while others become bitter or lose all hope? I suggest that “wisdom” has something to do with the answer.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a quality of thinking and doing that shows itself most often in times of adversity or peril. Not many people rave about wisdom for example, when someone is choosing what to order in a restaurant or what pair of shoes to buy. No, we witness wisdom most often in ourselves, others, organizations, countries and leaders, when something difficult must be faced—an ordeal with high stakes, one that will impact the future and other people. Moreover, we call it “wisdom” when we see that whatever the dilemma, the outcome is positive and even creates a common or a greater good. Many characteristics are associated with wisdom. They include: the ability to see many sides of an issue, tolerance of ambiguity, acceptance of reality, finding meaning in adversity, reflective thinking, and the ability to relate cause and effect.

Contemporary Wisdom Strategies for Educational Leaders

In my work with school systems, I talk to leaders whose schools are facing the adversity of being told, “you better change.” In schools with wise leaders, students are gaining in academic achievement, the equity gaps are narrowing and the faculty is articulate about what they are doing to achieve these better results. Out of conversations with these wise leaders, I’ve gleaned insights about the strategies they use to make these important changes. Here are six of what I call, “Contemporary Wisdom Strategies”:

1. **Take a reality orientation to the situation.** Wisdom has a way of facing, not running from adversity. It does not negate or ignore information that has to do with a situation demanding attention. Instead, wisdom looks at information with a balanced equanimity asking, “What am I to learn from this?”
2. **Find meaning in your situation.** Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and re-known psychotherapist said, “suffering without meaning equals despair.” Wisdom quietly looks for

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meaning in adversity. It avoids a victim perspective that begs an answer to “why is this happening to me?”

3. **Seek understanding of cause and effect.** People who are wise think about their role in events that occur. They develop a sense of efficacy to call upon when they are confronted with challenges. They are able to discuss the decisions they make relative to the outcomes achieved.
4. **When making decisions, consider the needs of all involved.** Wisdom responds to what life presents by making decisions that are best for the individual, for others, and for the environment. These decisions are mitigated by values—values that support what most of us would consider “for good” rather than “for ill.”
5. **Rush in.** We are all familiar with the old saying, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” I often see that wisdom also rushes in. When what life serves up requires immediate attention, wisdom does not first seek perfection before responding. Reflective practices allow wisdom to adapt or completely change course if needed.
6. **Invite grace.** Wisdom has a way of harnessing all manner of what looks like “good luck.” People, tools, and opportunities seem to come out of the woodwork and to the aid of those who are leading with wisdom. In reality, resources that come in this manner were most likely always there. The openness that comes with wisdom however, made them visible and real. Grace always comes to the aid of wisdom.

Table 1 relates the six wisdom strategies to the educational leadership practices that puts wisdom in action and results in the kind of positive outcomes that wisdom is known for. Which wisdom strategies are in action in your practice? In your school? What do you need to do to consciously choose these strategies?

Table 1: Wisdom strategies linked to leadership practices

Wisdom Strategy	Corresponding Leadership Practice
Take a reality orientation to your situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly create and use both quantitative and qualitative data to confront yourself with information. •
Find meaning in your situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get back in touch with the values that guide the most altruistic educational system. Revisit your own mission statement and audit your results against it. For example, if you say you believe all kids learn, then why is there an equity gap?
Seek understanding of cause and effect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align your practices to your results. Does your system employ practices and policies in instruction, curriculum, leadership or parent involvement that does not have a known association with positive results? If so, stop doing it! Critically evaluate what’s left and judge your implementation effort. For example, does your entire faculty know how to engage all students in learning experiences, but are not putting this knowledge into practice? • Get ahead of assessment by developing your own to inform and shape instruction. • Research other school systems like yours and replicate their successful practices. • Beef up implementation and fidelity to good practices where they are lacking.
When making decisions, consider the needs of all involved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For every scenario, consider the impact on all stakeholders including the larger environment. What would happen for each group if you move forward with a plan? What happens if you don’t? • Do not shy away from serious conversations about the values guiding the faculty. For example, do we believe that all students can learn? Do we believe that we can impact students with quality teaching and leadership? These conversations bring faculties closer to making decisions that consider the needs of all involved.
Rush In	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t wait for perfection or for everyone to be on board. Help students NOW with tried and true methods such as focused tutoring. Reflect on the impact of your interventions. • Hold weekly staff meetings to look at student work together to see if their efforts are paying off and to decide how to adjust.

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Wisdom Strategy	Corresponding Leadership Practice
Invite Grace	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accept responsibility for what has happened and tell everyone you know what you are doing to become a school where all students can be successful.• When I see teachers denying their role in student failure, I usually find a leader either overtly or tacitly, doing the same thing. Wisdom, on the other hand is without hubris. It does not seek to be right—it seeks to grow, learn and change.

Elle earned her PhD in 2006 in Organizational Learning at the University of New Mexico. She also holds bachelor and master's degrees in education. Her work experiences include that of educator, entrepreneur, consultant, coach, and speaker. She is a Senior Professional Development Associate for the Leadership and Learning Center where she wrote their training program for leadership coaches. She is writing a series of three books called Renewal Coaching with Leadership and Learning Center founder, Dr. Douglas Reeves. Elle is a graduate of the National Staff Development Academy, and a member of the National Speakers Association. She travels around the country to speak about wisdom and to conduct interviews of those nominated to the Wisdom Out book project. Elle is available for keynotes and custom seminars for your organization or workplace. In addition, Wisdom Out offers the Wisdom Circle Coaching Club to support individuals, entrepreneurs, and organizations in creating wise lives and environments.

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