

**Almost final book cover!!!**

**DISCOVER YOUR BACKBONE AND BLOW THE LID OFF OF LAST YEAR'S SCORES!**

**Here you have it:** no big and fancy education words and theories, no fairytale strategies, just down-and-dirty conversations that move schools from so-so performance to unprecedented success. This book is your "Get-Out-of-School-Improvement-Jail Free" card and will help you take very specific steps to find your leadership backbone.

This book helps you build your backbone one step at a time by providing SIMPLE guides, REAL-LIFE examples and planning TOOLS for strategizing, delivering and making it out alive from conversations with the most critical people on your campus:

- You
- Your teaching staff
- Your most resistant teacher
- Your instructional coach
- Your department or grade teams

**TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR SCHOOL  
TAKE CONTROL OF THE TEACHING.  
TAKE CONTROL OF THE RESULTS.**

*Excellent principals that get great results have good skills, but most importantly they have a backbone. And they use it!*

**JILL JACKSON** is a "hell if like it is" kind of gal who is happiest when she's working with educators in the field to simplify and power-up their school improvement work. Her motto is, "You have everything you need to get the job done, you just need to do the job differently." When she's not blogging twice weekly at [www.jackson-consulting.com](http://www.jackson-consulting.com) or writing for EdNews 360 and Education News, she's racking up frequent flyer miles on her way to her next speaking gig, client coaching session or JC Team mastermind...all while figuring out how to beat her personal best for getting through the security line at LAX.

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**Get a BACKBONE, Principal**

by Jill Jackson

Get a

**BACK BONE,**

Principal:

**5** Conversations Every School Leader Must Have Right Now

by Jill Jackson

Almost

## Contents

**Chapter 1: A Backbone is Born**

**Chapter 2: You, Yourself and You**

**Chapter 3: The Instructional Coach**

**Chapter 4: The Teaching Staff**

**Chapter 5: The Teaching Teams**

**Chapter 6: The Most Resistant Teacher**

**Chapter 7: So, What's Next?**

**Chapter 8: Resources**

**Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1: A Backbone is Born

I second-guessed myself on whether to title this book series “Get a Backbone!” – it is a little forward after all. But when I review everything I see in real life schools, it all comes down to this: *Excellent principals who get positive results have skills, but more importantly, they have a backbone! And they use it.*

Now, don’t mistake having a backbone for rude, mean and “out-to-fire-everyone” kind of leadership. In fact, principals that lead with a backbone are some of the most beloved and highly revered leaders I’ve seen in action – they’re the kind of leaders that folks will move schools just to work with. They’re the kind of leaders that the staff wants to go above and beyond for. This isn’t to say that their staff members don’t roll their eyes after the staff meeting and whisper in the hallways and say, “Ugh! Why do the other schools get to work in their rooms in the afternoon and we have to go to a staff meeting? Our principal is so...mean!”

Principals with backbone have high standards – and they hold everyone accountable to them. Having high standards for all of their staff members and holding everyone accountable to those standards breeds confidence and purpose. And the cool thing? In the end, those same teachers who roll their eyes at the expectations are the same darn ones who stand proudly as they receive an award from the Superintendent for radically improving their scores or winning a national academic excellence award.

That’s the thing: *When you principal with a backbone, you get results. Every time.*

I’ve seen it in my work with schools that are working really hard to close the achievement gap: principals who are clear about their expectations and make it their sole mission to protect and carry out the plan alongside their teachers, build a results-thinking staff. They work with the kind of staff that thinks first about what is best for the education of their kids. They’re the kind of staff that you overhear talking about “our kids” – not “my kids.” The principal’s backbone supports the work and the staff expects it. The staff can borrow their principal’s backbone when they are faced with a tough call. For example, let’s imagine a few staff members are at a training conference that the district has paid for, and some of from another school want to leave after lunch – not returning to the conference. If the principal of their colleagues the staff has a backbone, the teachers can use that as an excuse and say, “I would love to leave, but you know if Felicia finds out that we didn’t stay all day, we’re dust!” That’s what I call “borrowing the backbone!”

I’m sure I don’t need to point out that when you focus on the students instead of the adults, the quality of teaching is exponentially increased, right? Well, it is. Every time.

You may be wondering, “Now why should I listen to this Jill Jackson anyway?” (Believe me, I wonder the same thing sometimes.) Well, I’ve spent the better part of a decade working in the lowest performing schools, walking alongside them, pushing and shoving them, telling it like it is, getting them organized around their purpose, and all of the other things that come with school improvement. The most interesting part of the work is that, in most cases, it is not the district’s or school’s choice to bring me in – their funding sources have indicated that they need some sort of technical on-the-ground support. And then I show up! I could write a book about what I’ve seen – the good, the bad and the truly ugly. But one thing I know for sure and without exception is this: *without a leader who has a plan, and a backbone, there will be little long term improvement.* What schools should really be looking at is not whether they can improve their scores, but whether they can *keep them there.*

This book is ultimately designed to be an encouragement and resource for folks who need a boost to move straight to getting the work done in real life schools. While I appreciate (and devour) the research books and how-tos on school reform, we don't need another one – especially from me. What we need is a realistic, step-by-step breakdown of what an ol' ordinary principal should do tomorrow to improve scores.

In my quest to find out what backbone-having principals with great results are really doing all day, I watched them in their natural state (in their schools) while they worked with their staff to improve their performance. I studied, but I also cajoled, fretted over them, pushed and shoved them. I held their hands when they thought they just might die having the hard conversations. I gave pep talks, and also acted as resident punching bag. And where I saw excellent backbone-fortified leadership, I saw results. Every time.

And here's what I found that led me to this whole backbone theory:

1. **Principals who lead with a backbone...**have a plan
2. **Principals with a backbone...**work the plan
3. **Principals with a backbone...**know that resistance to the plan is normal and not the end of the world
4. **Principals with a backbone...**are sometimes intimidated and overwhelmed, but they remember their plan and work it anyway
5. **Principals with a backbone...**aren't worried about "doing it perfectly"
6. **Principals with a backbone...**are always walking, talking and just "being" with their staff

Backbone-leading principals are doing things that other non-backbone-leading principals aren't. Those successful principals don't have superior skills or more in-depth training, they're just working their plan in spite of everything that presents itself as a roadblock.

Oh yeah, I've seen my fair share of principals who waffle about the plan, or are swayed by the latest fad and come back from every conference with the next greatest thing that they have to try right now! They wear out their staff, people stop believing that what they say actually does have instructional power and, ultimately, the staff thinks more about their plight (out of confusion and frustration) than about the students.

Now, just having backbone doesn't mean that you'll look up and find that all of your kids are miraculously performing above benchmark. You've got to *do* something with that backbone – lean into it and rely on it to accomplish some very strenuous instructional work at your school.

*Side note: I use the word "strenuous" to describe the work to be done because it's not whether you have a school improvement plan – nearly all of them are identical – but whether a district or school is working the plan at a level of intensity that they never have before. Successful schools are made successful because they work with more intention and intensity than their lesser-performing counterparts.*

It is common that I am met with a "these-are-great-ideas-but-you-don't-know-our-plight" kind of attitude. If I only had a nickel for every time I've heard, "You don't know how unsupportive our parents are," or "You don't know how messed up our schedule is," or "Our bus schedule dictates our instructional schedule – you have no idea," or "You don't know our Board – they're crazy!" Well, if you're reading this book with that kind of thought, I encourage you to lay it aside for a minute and think about this: Our job is to make improvement in learning happen *in spite of* all of this. I promise it works – I've seen it happen again and again.

The first place to start is to get a very clear, very simple instructional goal. Without an instructional goal, this book will be useless to you and you'll be "talking just to talk" during these conversations you'll have.

One of the school districts I worked with was having real trouble getting organized and focused in its work, and it was really frustrating to all the leaders. It seemed like they were trying everything and nothing was working. So, I handed out index cards and asked them to write down the district's three instructional goals for the school year, and to write them in the plainest English they could. Then they flipped the index card over and wrote what their individual school goals were related to the district goals.

Do you know what? *One hundred percent* of the school and district leaders in the room wrote something different for the district goals – in fact, they were nowhere near each other on what they thought the district goals were. And the flipped side of the card? Each school site had different instructional goals and several principals said that they couldn't name their goals.

I didn't have anything to say – the writing was on the wall.

So, guess where we started? With getting really clear on *one goal*.

Folks started to get frustrated with me, and one of the principals pulled me aside during the break and said things like, "You know, I think it's great that we're picking one goal and all, but I've got a school improvement plan and an RtI plan that has a total of 38 goals that we have to meet this year, so I've got to move much faster than just one goal." I get it – I've been there, but I also know that just the simple act of setting a bunch of goals does not increase the likelihood that we're going to actually get anything of value accomplished!

Now I know you probably can't relate, but it's a lot like dieting. As I consult my 50-plus books on weight loss, they all have one thing in common: if you want to lose weight, start small. For example, stop drinking regular soda. Or consider cutting out late night snacks. The problem is, when I'm highly motivated or under the gun because I have a big event coming up, and I need to fit into a not-so-big dress for the event, I tend to overdo it. I get motivated to cut my calories down to 1,200 and I decide that I'm never, ever, ever, ever again going to eat bread. And, while I'm at it, I'll cut out all carbs. Forever.

If you catch up to me a few days later, I'm so dang hungry that I end up sliding so far back, I'm worse off than when I started! Can you relate?

So, as soon as you go judging those principals and 'tsk-tsking' about how they should have focus, I want you to stop and think for a minute. What would you answer if I asked you these questions: Would *your* staff be able to have the school's goals roll off their tongue? Can you confidently spout off the district's instructional goals for this year?

I challenge you to take a stack of index cards to your next staff or team meeting and ask your staff to jot down what they believe is the school's primary instructional goal for this school year. Then, have the teachers jot down on the reverse side their instructional goal for their classroom this year. Give them only one minute to jot this down anonymously – this shouldn't be an over-thought task – either they know it or they don't. Bring the cards to your next leadership team meeting and have the team sort them into the patterns that they see. If the responses are pretty random, then you know that folks are confused about the message. If there's little

written, it signals that there really is no message. If the responses are in line with the other instructional goals that you've set and carried out, pat yourself on the back!

The real deal is that most school improvement plans are built upon the very same foundational ideas: student engagement, behavior management, direct teaching, data analysis and decision-making, instructional planning and teaming. By focusing on just one of these areas, you will be able to cross off many of your school improvement "to do" items. Going small to go big (also called "starting small") is a very logical way to attack school improvement one step at a time. And the most awesome by-product is that you'll build incredible confidence among your staff. Successful principals leverage staff confidence to power through their other goals.

You'll notice that I reference "improving the quality of teaching" in every chapter of this book. The reason the phrase "quality of teaching" appears so many times is to remind you that, when all is said and done, *if your efforts have not improved the quality of the instruction, then your efforts have not produced much.*

Most school improvement books spend 90 percent of the time talking about what the district should do about school reform, how the principal should complete a 30-step reflection document to get better results in her role, and how the perfect lesson plan should be birthed. Few books focus on how to improve a school through increasing the quality of instruction in the classrooms and to the kids. If we are going to close the achievement gap, increase the test scores or see that our work has a measureable and actual impact on students, then at the heart of every one of our conversations has to be this: *How will this help us improve our quality of teaching as we are standing before our students and delivering the content?*

The conversations in this book are built around just that that: improving the quality of the instructional delivery.

We should not be focused on whether there's work going on in schools, rather we have to be most concerned with whether it is the right work – the work that is aligned with your instructional goals. So much time is spent on removing roadblocks to reach the goals, and successful schools know that as they prioritize the work on the quality of teaching, many of the roadblocks are removed – simply because they are focused on what instructional improvements they will make. That's the thing: roadblocks are removed when you focus on something other than the roadblocks themselves. In fact, if you're spending more time on what *won't* work, you will never see what *will* work.

If you're looking for a resource that uses big words and big formalized ideas on school improvement, then I'll bet you'll be disappointed in this book. I've written this book from a down-and-dirty perspective – from my knowledge of what really happens in schools. My hope is that you have a sense of humor as you read it because, while everything in it is absolutely true and factual, some of it is written a bit tongue-in-cheek.

I'm most inspired by regular principals who make a choice to do things differently with the staff they have, in the time they have, and with the resources they have. They aren't waiting for the Promised Land to arrive on their campuses, they're getting down to business right now. If you're not one of those principals now, I hope that by the end of the book, you realize that you have everything you need *right now* to become a highly successful principal. There's no need to wait any longer because the time to do so doesn't get any better than this moment.

So, now it's your turn. Your very first exercise. Yay! If you're anything like me, you won't do this exercise because you think it's not really meant to be done and it's only in theory that you need to complete it. But, I really want you to do it – you'll get a bigger payoff if you do, I promise.

So take a deep breath, grab the nearest pen or pencil and let's get started.

These three questions are going to help you map a very clear pathway to your main instructional goal and will become the focus of your actions following each chapter.

### **Paring Down My Instructional Focus**

**Question 1:** *What is the one thing that is getting in the way of instructional power in most of the classrooms on your campus?*

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**Question 2:** *What is the instructional practice (the “doing” of the teaching) that your staff has received the most professional development on and in which they are closest to becoming proficient?*

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**Question 3:** *What is the one instructional practice that, if implemented regularly in every classroom on your campus, would increase the instructional impact?*

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Now you want to take this information and craft it into an instructional goal. Your goal should incorporate these pieces:

- Why the change is necessary?
- Very specifically what the change or action is
- The measuring tool or the how you'll measure it
- Your timeline for implementation

For example, an instructional goal for a school that has students dealing with many behavior issues that either end up in your office and/or get in the way of instruction might be:

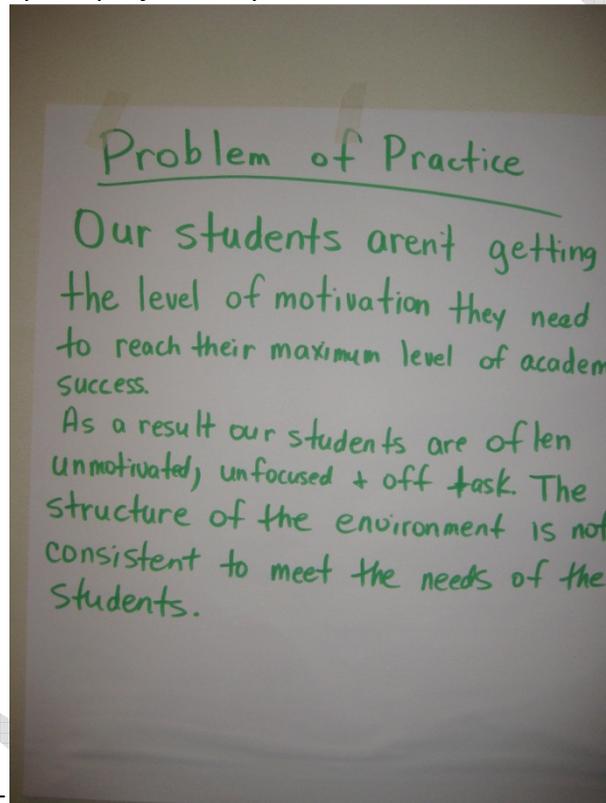
*Currently, we recognize that teachers are often having to redirect behaviors, repeat directions for a task 3-4 times and are resorting to shushing students as they are instructing. This is causing us to lose many instructional minutes each day. To combat our problem, we will implement an “all eyes on me” rule in every classroom that will require the students to be looking directly at the teacher with no talking as the teacher gives directions. By January 17<sup>th</sup>, we will have 100% “eyes on the teacher” during direct instruction.*

Now some folks will say, “Wait a minute – we need to increase twenty-four points on the state test this year and your instructional goal is having all eyes on the teacher? You've got to be kidding me!” They're skeptical about such a seemingly small goal having such big impact. Heck – even *you* might be skeptical! But what you have to remember is that a goal such as the “all eyes on me” is going to have an impact on so many facets of the teaching – more than you probably realize. Here's just a small list of how the above goal has tentacles in other, very important instructional areas:

- Time management – Teachers no longer have to repeat directions, etc.

- Instructional minutes – We have *gained* actual instructional minutes because we spend more time teaching, practicing and giving feedback than repeating and redirecting
- Behavior management – We are no longer wasting instructional minutes on behavioral concerns and students get what it “feels” like to be in control and respectful of their teacher
- Increased stamina – Kids are able to “hang in there” and keep their focus until the end of the lesson
- Continuity of instruction – We limit stops and starts, which allows the lesson to gain momentum which, in turn, allows the instructional intensity level to increase

Here is a real-life example from a principal just like you:



You are so much closer to defining your backbone as a leader – it begins right here, with focus.

When it's all said and done and you've read all 3,041 “school improvement” books on Amazon (I checked!), you'll probably realize what I have realized: *backbone-having principals constantly have pointed and purposeful conversations with their staff members*— both casually and formally.

What they talk about, how often they talk about it and with whom they talk is the key to their success.

Those ongoing conversations are the backbone (pun intended!) of this book. My dream for you is that by the end of this book, you are more confident in purposely conversing about the work of your school with your staff than before you started reading. I can spend fifteen minutes with a principal during a casual interaction with a teacher and determine the power of his leadership – that's how power-packed these conversations are. Yes, I know, you have a zillion things to accomplish on your School Improvement Plan. I know, you're out of the school constantly for training. Yep, I know you have a crabby parent or two waiting to see you at the end of the day. Uh huh, the reports are keeping you up and running 'til midnight every night. All these things are true, no doubt.

But in the end, successful principals who lead with a backbone, spend important time talking with the folks who carry out the mission with them: the teaching staff. Your greatest asset in your school is your teaching staff, and in order to be successful and close the achievement gap, you must lead them with purpose, show up boldly for the mission and remember that you do, indeed, have a backbone.

In fact, sometimes all of us have to reach back and feel that hard, bumpy thing running the length of the back – it's the backbone. It's always there, but we've got to use it, exercise it and remember to lean into it while we're in the trenches doing good work.

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