

Improving Teacher Morale

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There are many challenging issues facing public schools today from an array of directions. As the instructional leaders of the school, campus administrators must face many of these problems head on. While some problems are considerably complex and take much time and effort to correct, others have a fix that might be slightly more within reach.

Most campuses have issues that must be dealt with in order to become an effective learning center. The issue that we will look at today is that of low teacher morale. Teachers are the school personnel that are on the front lines when it comes to instructing our children and must be given every opportunity to do so at the fullest capability. Administrators have the responsibility to create, “professional, safe, secure, and encouraging environments where everyone feels appreciated, listened to, and respected.” (Connors. 2000. p. 12). Happy teachers have a tendency to produce happy students and happy students have a tendency to be more successful students.

Due to extensive changes in administration over the last several years, the teacher morale on the campus has been on a steady decline. A beloved principal was promoted and the new principal was brought in from another campus while administrator on campus had also applied for the position. This caused immediate division on the campus. Due to retirees, two new administrators were brought in and one on campus was promoted, furthering the feeling of a lack of stability on the campus. This feeling was compounded when the principal was out for an extended period of time due to personal illness. During this time there was a breakdown of communication and trust between the faculty and the administration. The existing division, lack of communication and trust, and the fear of the unknown has created and extraordinarily high

level of tension and anxiety within the school. At the end of the year many teachers chose to leave the campus for a more stable environment. While the morale of the teachers has seemed to plateau, there is much work to be done to return to the level of trust and morale among the teachers that was present several years ago. While test scores and accountability ratings have not been affected as of yet, this lack of trust and low level of teacher morale prohibits the campus from performing at the highest potential for the students that it serves.

The issue of low teacher morale is one that should be carefully considered by any school leader. This issue is one that can easily destroy a school if ignored. School leaders must be change agents to help and create an ideal working environment for teachers and students to spend a large portion of their day. Leone et al. (2009) describe “one of the most important roles of a principal to be, “that of the ‘navigator’ who directs the future course of the school through an active approach that involves being a change agent, developing strong community bonds, and focusing on a successful, productive future for all involved.” (p. 89)

In an effort to raise the morale of teachers, there are many paths to choose from. Several steps will be taken to improve the morale of all employees on the campus. By addressing the areas of teacher-to-teacher and administrator-to-teacher relationships, providing opportunities for recognition of teacher accomplishments, a detailed mentorship plan that empowers teachers to take an active leadership role, relevant staff development, and opportunities for self-reflection, an increase in the morale of the campus teachers should be witnessed. In a 2008 study of teacher job satisfaction, Perrachione et al.(2008) found “that when teachers had the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, receive recognition from supervisors and administrators, serve in a

leadership role, and improve professional skills and abilities they were significantly more satisfied with their role as a teacher than those who did not have these experiences.” (p. 26).

The first step is to foster a culture in which positive relationships are not only encouraged, but expected. It is known that employees meet a higher level of production when working for a supervisor that shows the employee respect and acknowledges their job performance. In order to earn the respect of teachers, administrators must work diligently to form strong relationships of trust with their teachers. In order to achieve this type of relationship, educational leaders must make themselves seen. They must leave the office and make rounds, of sorts, to visit the teachers in their classrooms. Not as formal walk-throughs, but as a way to show the teachers that there is care and support for what they are doing in the classroom. While in the office, there must be an open door policy where teachers can feel like they may share concerns with the principal and be heard. Teachers must be granted the opportunity to opening share their thoughts about the operations of the school, important decisions, and any changes that might be occurring on the campus. This builds a strong relationship between the administrator and the teacher. Glickman et al. (2013) expressed that, “Teachers trust supervisors when they are allowed to share in decision making about change, when their opinions are respected, when the commitments made to them are consistently kept, and when they are supported during the change process.” (p. 290). A commitment to this type of relationship building is of the utmost importance in building the morale of all employees on the campus, as well as the students, parents, and any other individual who might come upon the campus. Shields (2004) states that, “Education leaders must take responsibility for developing a

meaningful relationship with each person they encounter – student, teacher, parent, board member, or legislator.” (p. 39).

Supervisors must also provide opportunities for the staff to build relationships with one another. This can be done by creating Professional Learning Communities on the campus and adjusting the master schedule to provide common planning periods for the members of each PLC. Time can also be provided to allow for a PLC to visit another PLC and share concerns and success stories. Something as simple as assigned seating at campus staff development encourages teachers to visit with and learn with teachers that they may not normally encounter during a typical school day. Plan for time during the professional development to allow the teachers to share information about themselves. They can share personal goals and successes, professional goals and success, or any other information that might fit the topic of the session. This allows staff members to learn about one another and build positive relationships with those on campus that one may not work with on a regular basis. This type of activity allows for the building of a team rather than a group of individuals.

The second step is to install the practice of teacher recognition on a regular basis. All people enjoy being recognized for their accomplishments, whether they are large or small. Acknowledgments do not need to be elaborate events. Small things such as a bulletin board in the lounge dedicated to teacher successes, doors signs indicating good work, or a note in the teacher’s box can drastically improve the morale of most teachers. Connors (2000) says that, “Everyone wants to be appreciated. The best leaders take time to feed their staff by instituting random acts of appreciation continuously.” She goes further by saying, “great leaders provide

authentic praise and work effortlessly to implement, maintain, and sustain a positive morale.” (p. 70)

To increase the empowerment of teachers as campus leaders, a mentorship plan would be introduced as the third step toward increasing teacher morale. This plan would require the teachers that have been in the profession for several years to work closely and plan with first-year teachers and teachers that are new to the campus. Administration would work to create a schedule that would allow for these teams of teachers to have planning time together and time to observe and collaborate in the classroom. According to Clark (2012), “For mentoring programs to influence novice teacher retention and teacher growth, proper mentoring partnerships need to be established with time allocated to develop these relationships and for learning to occur.” (p. 198).

“Education is a human enterprise. The essence of successful instruction and good schools comes from thoughts and actions of the professionals in the schools. So, if one is to look for a place to improve the quality of education in a school, a sensible place to look is the continuous education of educators – that is, professional development. Virtually any experience that enlarges a teacher’s knowledge, appreciation, skills, and understandings of his or her work falls under the domain of professional development.” (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon. (2013. p. 234). This brings us to step four which is to implement effective and relevant teacher staff development. To make the staff development effective, it must be relevant and provide teachers with the opportunity to grow and improve both personally and professionally. Teachers must be introduced to instruction that will be useful in their classrooms with the possibility of

immediate implementation into their instructional practices. Engstrom and Danielson (2006) declare that, “Effective professional development models recognize the knowledge that teachers have about their content areas, school environments, and students. These models are centered on the concept of shared leadership or teacher leadership and utilize a collaborative learning process that is authentic and embedded into the teachers’ work day.” (p. 170). The benefits of such a model of staff development will help to increase the level of morale among the teachers by allowing them to feel empowered through the process of learning relevant skills that will benefit both themselves and their students.

Teachers will not only be asked to help in the planning of professional development on the campus, but to teach the sessions, themselves. This will further empower all teachers on the campus including those teachers that plan the content of the sessions, those that provide the instruction, and those that attend. Teachers will be a part of the decision making process and will therefore feel as though they are playing an integral role in the growth of the school.

The final step is to encourage and allow time for teachers to reflect upon themselves and the culture that has been created on the campus and within their own classrooms. This step is essential if there is going to be measurable and valuable change within the school. While change can be difficult, Glickman, et al, (2013) state that, “A good first step toward improving a school’s capacity for change is for members of the school community to study and critique their own school culture.” (p. 190). Teachers and administrators will be allowed time to critically reflect upon the work that has been accomplished throughout the first four steps of this plan. This will allow for all involved to see what has worked and what has fallen short of the initial

expectations. After a time of self-reflection, all will come together to share their experiences and offer the principal recommendations toward viable solutions to the identified issues. Hanna (2014) states that, “it is upon us teachers to confront our own fears and better understand ourselves first before we can begin to help students with their worries. This is the best way in which a trusting classroom environment can take shape and teachers can begin to see changes in the engagement of their students – and hopefully – in themselves.” (p. 225). This understanding of oneself can only be achieved through heightened self-reflection.

In order to implement this plan, many supports and resources will be needed for success. Support of the administrative team will be essential to the success of a plan of this caliber. All members of the team must be willing to take the time to build relationships with the teachers and make themselves seen and available throughout the school day, each day of the year. The administration must be willing to fully listen to the comments and suggestions of the campus teachers as they work toward a change in the school climate. Administrators must also be willing to devote time to create a master schedule that will allow for the PLCs and the mentor-mentee groups to have coexisting planning periods. The administration will also need the support of the teacher leaders, or coordinators, on campus in order to help increase teacher buy-in. As the year progresses and teachers start to see a noticeable change in the climate, the support of the more experienced teachers will be necessary for the mentorship plan to reach its full potential. Teachers will also need to be willing to provide support to help with planning and staff development throughout the year.



The greatest required resource will be time. Time must be made available for planning, mentoring, staff development, reflection, and relationship building. A large amount of time will also be required in order to plan for all of the time that will be needed to create an effective change in the campus climate. Manpower will also be needed in each of the plans. The mentoring plan will require the manpower of all teachers involved so that they may have the ability to work as a collaborative team. The staff development phase will also take many administrators and teachers to effectively plan the sessions and then to deliver the instruction to the members of the staff. Money will also be required, but should be minimized due to the use of campus resources rather than hiring others from off campus to supply staff development.

The implementation of this process will begin in May to allow time to plan for the following school year over the summer break. In May each teacher will be asked to complete a survey created by the administrative team. This survey will measure the morale of the staff on the campus at the time and ask for suggestions for areas of improvement. This survey will also ask teachers what areas they might feel are relevant for staff development the following year and ask for any volunteers to serve on the staff development committee over the summer. At the conclusion of the school year, the administrators will review the results of the survey and culminate the data to draw educated conclusions as to the level of teacher morale and in what areas change might need to occur. This will provide guidance to the administrators as to where to begin setting goals for the following school year. Suggestions for possible areas of professional development will be given to the staff development committee for review and planning purposes. Through the summer months both teams will review the data and develop plans that will meet the perceived needs of the teachers on the campus. Administrators will work

to develop a master schedule that allows common planning periods and will also assign experienced teachers to serve as mentors to novice teachers. The staff development committee will focus on topics that are relevant to the teachers and to the vision set forth by the principal and secure those that will lead staff development sessions throughout the school year, beginning during the in-service week in August.

The focus of the August staff development time will be that of building professional relationships on the campus. This will be encouraged by assigning teachers to groups with members from all departments. Activities will be centered on meeting and getting to know colleagues that teachers do not interact with on a regular basis. Mentor teachers will also meet their mentees and begin working on those relationships. Relationships will be the focus of the first day. This focus will not only be on the professional relationships, but how to build effective relationships with students. The remainder of the week will be devoted to those topics that were identified through the staff survey. Designated late start meetings will be used to follow up on all topics covered in August. Other late start meetings will be designated as time for teachers to reflect and discuss their feelings about the school year and the currently climate of the school. It is imperative that the administrators are attending these meetings to receive feedback from the teachers.

The October and February staff development dates will both begin with campus staff meetings where a State of the Campus will be shared with the staff. Teachers will also be asked to share success stories or concerns that affect the campus. By allowing teachers time to reflect on their own successes and concerns, they will hopefully gain a sense of ownership of the

changes that are occurring on the campus. The remainder of these days will be used to provide instruction on other areas of importance identified by the staff survey. At the conclusion of the year, another survey is given to the teachers. The cycle begins anew.

If executed properly, this plan should show notable differences in the morale of the staff from one year to another. Formative assessment opportunities will occur throughout the school year. The staff meetings in October and February are to serve as formal assessments of the morale of the staff. Administrators will use the feedback provided by the teachers during late start meetings to assess the current climate of the school. Administration can also use visits made possible by the open-door policy as informal assessments. The summative assessment will occur in May through a follow-up survey of the teachers. This survey will ask many of the same questions as the original, but may also ask new questions that are more specific to the plan that was put in place.

The aforementioned timeline is for one school year. Once the results are achieved, the work must continue to maintain the desired level of teacher morale. When speaking of schools that reach this stage, Glickman, et al. (2013) remind us that “we should recognize that they all have developed the capacity to continuously assess themselves in light of changing external and internal conditions, to identify needed change, and to move toward that change. It is not that these schools have reached a state of perfection. To borrow from the language Abraham Maslow used to identify high-performing individuals, they are ‘self-actualizing’ (but never ‘self-actualized’) schools.” (p. 296). To reach the status of a “self-actualizing” school, there must be caring instructional leaders that care about their teachers and work tirelessly to create a school climate that strives to raise the morale of its teachers.

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