

# Building, Constructing and Renovating: My Journey to Save a School, a Community and My Life

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## **Background That Led to Your Inquiry:**

As an administrator of a k-12 building which serves approximately 1400 students in an urban setting, I found myself running place to place addressing issues, putting out fires, meeting with parents, students, faculty members and community members. In July 2011 I was assigned as the Principal of George Rogers Clark Middle/High School. This was a school historically labeled as an underperforming school and was placed in the spotlight for

- its poor letter grades,
- being placed on a mandatory Corrective Action Plan with IDOE in terms of its delivery of services to the special education population,
- Being cited for disproportionality in terms of discipline to students of latino descent,
- Gang presence in the building, and poor aggressive climate,
- low graduation rate,
- low morale and support from all stakeholders,
- low pass rate on state exams,
- multiple citations from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR)

Upon my assignment I soon learned a bit more about these issues and also discovered that in four months we were scheduled for an AdvancED Accreditation visit. To my dismay the teachers had little to no knowledge of the process or their School Improvement Plan.

At the very beginning, I realized the severity of the situation-**EVERYTHING** was of the utmost importance! The demand for my attention was high, I found myself entrenched with task after task, meeting after meeting. As I did this I looked to locate assistance from a established leadership in the building. Unfortunately, many left with my appointment to this position, and the teaching staff was very divided. I found pockets of leaders in the building and did what I could to utilize their talents and influences. The timeline for turnaround was extremely short, yet I resorted to developing a task list and assigned some of these leaders tasks that could be accomplished easily, aka-low hanging fruits. Meanwhile, I gained the assistance of a close friend and assistant principal who volunteered to transfer with me. We found ourselves burning the candle at both ends. Personal and family time became secondary out of necessity. We told ourselves that this was temporary, only until we could settle things and put systems in place to obtain smooth operations and consistency and accreditation. We achieved accreditation on advisement, work out systems for many things, designed plans with the OCR but didn't ever regain time for ourselves.

As a person, I was becoming unhappy. I found that my job was becoming and defining me and that I was not defining the job. In addition, my health was becoming an issue. I was placed back onto medication for my diabetes, medication I was off of for 19 years! My blood pressure and cholesterol were not good! I began to feel out of touch with my family, my profession, and myself.

Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to find an appropriate balance between work, my personal and my family life to increase happiness, health and renew my passion to my vocation.

### **Statement of Your Wondering:**

With this purpose, I wondered how scheduled time for exercise or a personal hobby would affect my job performance and attitude toward my career as an educational leader.

### **Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insights into my wondering, I decided to combine a hobby and an exercise that I enjoy. I decided to commit to fitness through the use of a bicycle. I enjoy being outdoors, and need the changing environment to keep me honest to exercise. I struggle with stationary exercise and require a stimulating environment. I felt that bicycling may be the answer. During this action research cycle, I decided to commit to bicycling setting a target of 75 miles per week. During the months of June, July, August and September, I would commit to this meeting this regimen as a minimum. I also decided that I would commit to completing the Apple Cider Century during the last week of September. As began my journey, I decided that I would utilize the activity and exercise app on my Apple Watch. I used this data to construct a chart of miles ridden. To do this, I had to find time in the day to get this done and plan how I could sustain this practice should it have a positive effect. This now forced me to have meetings with my administrative team, my instructional coach, and my instructional leads. As I met with them I shared my vision of how we needed to assume responsibility for certain areas of our normal operating functions. I worked with the instructional coach and the instructional leads to identify areas of needed professional development and supports. I developed a Google classroom in which my instructional coach was to utilize for embedded professional development, follow-ups, evaluations of development sessions and overall professional development offered. This was also to serve as artifacts for future accreditation purposes and to archive resources and tools for teachers. My next focus was to concentrate on our faculty meetings and look at how to make them a better use of time. To do this we sat down as a collective group and reviewed our goals. Continuing to drill down on these goals we reviewed our interventions and activities. As we did this, we generated a difficult conversation and discussed what was working well, what was not working and attempted to answer why they were or were or were not working. We quickly came to realize that professional development related to interventions and activities in our improvement were needed. The team leads were empowered and came up with dividing into groups per goal and then working to develop needed professional development to create consistency and common practice.

The next step was to create and share the plan and schedule for the faculty meetings and professional development led by the instructional coach. Once this was shared, I began to see an increase in collegiality among the teachers. I began my personal AR and started to log my miles spent on my bicycle. During my rides, I actually was able to do a lot of thinking and had more uninterrupted time to evaluate, critique and refine our current practices. These rides relieved stress and allowed me time to think. I also was forced to hand over the reigns on certain things and allow others to carry out my plan. Teachers that were once apprehensive about taking charge often citing that they were not an administrator evolved into a contributor to the school improvement process. These teachers appreciated these roles and their attitudes and moral positively increased.

As I continued to log my biking hours and distances I began to feel better physically and mentally. I was proud of what was being accomplished in all facets of my life. At work I was hopeful and quite proud as I witnessed a group of leaders finally coming together to achieve common student centered goals! I used a brief narrative

log to document my process paying detail to my overall attitude, health, mileage and time spent riding, increased family time, school accomplishments and progress of the leadership team. To track my AR and evaluate the effects on my quality of life, I reviewed our PD catalogues, PD evaluation and sign-in sheets, activity and fitness logs generated by My Fitness Pal and my Apple I Watch/Phone. I also met weekly with the leadership team to provide support and advice as they took charge of the School Improvement Process. Lastly, I used lab results of my health screens done before and after this Action Research.

### **Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data I learned that an effective leader must be self-conscious in terms of taking care of their personal needs including leisure and activity. I also realized that a leader cannot do everything on their own...they should start by planning for succession. Increased activity often leads to increasing the capacity to think creatively.

As a leader, you are looked up to by many. You are the individual who sets the tone, dials in the culture and climate. Therefore it becomes imperative that you as a leader set your personal fitness and leisure activities as a priority. According to Psychology Today, physical activity is the best way to improve cognitive function. Given that the majority of a work day requires problem solving, decision making, and focus, leaders who make exercise a priority definitely have a leg up over those that don't (Duncan, R. 2014). According to the numerous studies, people who workout are better workers, more productive and happier. Studies show that workers who engage in regular physical activity perform better at their jobs-both in terms of the quality and quantity of work performed (Demitropoulos, B. 2011).

I also realized that a leader cannot do everything by themselves. When I was first appointed principal at Clark I was simply handed the keys and wished good luck. The superintendent stated the school was in dire need of a major overhaul and that it now fell upon my shoulders. He afforded me the opportunity to take along one of my assistants, acknowledging that this would most likely be my only support. The staff at Clark was an eclectic bunch that shared one fear; the fear that I was leading the school into a state turnaround process as they were told from the office of the Superintendent the previous spring. Clark was forced in. A good leader, while they may initiate a process needs to be planning on who onto a Corrective Action Plan as mandated by the IDOE, the Office of Civil Rights substantiated eight claims against the school the year before, Clark was an "f" school historically, and the teachers did reveal any knowledge of the accreditation process nor knew what a School Improvement Plan was. As I worked to set up committees I had difficulty know which teachers were positive leaders and which were not. I found myself leading each committee and entrenched myself into the caldrons of endless projects and efforts. In the beginning I knew that I needed teacher buy-in and trust but I couldn't wait and need to address action items immediately. Over the course of my first year I had a handful of teachers who assisted me with carrying out the plans. Over the course of the years my teachers became more willing to chair committees and help move the school forward. Unfortunately, I now realize I was still entrenched in the work and didn't recognize that I had a good group of teacher leaders who were ready and willing. This project forced this realization into me and required me to turn the wheel over to them. The first initiative the teachers tackled was to develop a formal Professional Learning Community (PLC). This was to take place during our faculty meetings and learning sessions would take place inside classrooms. The teacher leaders (Instructional Leads) decided to closely tied session topics to areas noted in our improvement plan. These teachers then separated the remaining teachers into small groups and scheduled them into specific sessions. The teachers then rotated to a different session the next faculty meeting until they attended all sessions. I witnessed how the Instructional Leads seemed motivated after developing, delivering and assessing their PD program. In fact, they were so motivated they began volunteering to engage to help our schools in other ways. The three most beneficial products from this group was the increased support, the

development and implementation of a (PLC) program, and various testing schedules for state and local exams. Additionally, I created a student advisory committee. This committee was developed to help myself and others get a more authentic perspective of the students. I also learned that an effective leader must empower and employ the skills and specialties of many.

Again, Through this process I learned that a healthy leader is a more effective leader. Exercise is not abandoning your work duties, exercise should be considered part of your job. In fact, by incorporating routine exercise, you are ensuring that the hours you put in on work tasks have value. To be an effective leader a person must be energetic and creative. Without an outlet to employ and develop these skills in a fun, low stakes situation, ones creative capacity becomes limited and simple solutions consume massive amounts of energy.

### **Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

I learned that it is easy to get caught up in the moment and become a specialist at “solutions” and problem solving. This is especially true if you become an administrator of a building that has a history of performance and cultural and climate issues. I realize that the standard response from Central office personnel- “The building principal is ultimately responsible”, only perpetuates this dynamic.

Additionally, by placing emphasis on exercise you motivate your staff to take the lead on many initiatives. Your faculty will see you as an energetic, upbeat and empowering leader. I believe that this project helped me out of the trenches, I have gained more energy and happiness and I have become a leader who is a facilitator, a supporter and cheerleader of those he once oversaw. Through this process the school continued to progress forward with professional development programs that were planned and developed by the teachers. As I write this last sentence I begin to ponder a main ideology in Jim Collin’s book, From Good to Great. The ideology that the measure of an effective leader is whether or no the institution continues to thrive when that leader is no longer present (Collins, J. 2001).

### **References:**

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