

Changing School Culture: Myth or Reality

By: Richelle Miller, Aboite Elementary

Team Members Names: Jeanne Holmes, Lauren Hoghe

Contact: rjmiller@sacs.k12.in.us

Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

Although we have clear cut expectations in a evaluation rubric, there appears to continue to be some feeling of unclear expectations and uneasiness in how teachers are evaluated. For instance, when we talk about engagement what does that look like? Some kiddos are engaged in meaningful work while others are compliant and doing what they are told. Do those both fall under highly effective? That question popped up more than one time over the past 2 years. Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to take a closer look at 6 instructional strategies, define what those looked like, define how we would know if they were solidified in a classroom setting, and provide professional development in areas of need.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

With this purpose, we wondered if designing and implementing an intentional 6-month professional development, that focuses on instructional strategies and connecting them to the walk-through process, would improve those instructional strategies and in turn improve student achievement?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wonderings, we began with professional development on the SACS Teacher Rubric and the walk-through form that is used on a daily basis. We then identified 6 instructional strategies that we would focus our 6-month action research. The following is a schedule of those strategies:

- October – Learning Objectives
- November – Active assessments
- December – Create a culture of respect and collaboration
- January – Small group
- February – Differentiation
- March – Student engagement

We then created 6 professional development sessions to take place each month for 6 months. During these sessions we worked as a team to produce a tri-chart on what each instructional strategies will "always look like, sometimes look like, and never look like." Once we were in an agreement we identified each indicator, on the walk-through form, that correlated to the instructional strategy. We focused on one strategy a month to allow the first 2 weeks to be "learning weeks." During the learning weeks teachers could attend scheduled professional learning, work with their team members, and/or work with the instructional coach to become confident in the given strategy. The last 2 weeks of the month would then be "evaluation weeks." During the evaluation weeks each teacher knew exactly what indicators I would be coming in to evaluate. This would lead to specific praise and specific growth areas. Lastly, we created a data board, in the teacher's lounge, to reflect the progress on each strategy. The data was posted by grade level so there was no stress placed on individuals. A pre and post survey was also completed to evaluate the teacher's comfort level with the rubric, their comfort level with the walk-through process and form, and their feels of comfort or uneasiness during the walk-through process.

Stating Your Team's Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing our data 4 important things that we learned are...1. Sometimes life and "playing school" gets in the way of the best laid plans. It is important to realize that this is a very human business and that flexibility is paramount to implementing any initiative. 2. There were some teachers whom used the "sometimes" column of the tri-fold to find loop-holes in the expectations. This led to very different conversations with individuals. 3. It helped to build a common language to begin these conversations. We quickly realized some of us were saying the same things with different verbiage and we weren't really that far apart from each other. and 4. We went in to the action research with the expectation that all teachers were full aware of the 6 instructional strategies and we would just be setting clear expectations for each.

That was not the case and we quickly realized we needed to begin back at building a base of clear expectations and commonalities before we could move forward in our work. I do believe that sometimes you need to go slow to go fast so we backed up and only were able to get through 3 of our strategies; however, I believe this work was very valuable and the staff was committed to continue our work at the beginning of next school year. This commitment was also evident in the pre and post survey results.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

Through this work, a unintended benefit was the closeness staff members became with each other. The more work we were doing as an entire staff the more work the staff wanted to do together. From this work a natural outline surfaced for future work. By the end of the year we had planned and participated in a "What I like about you" activity giving positive praise to each other, we threw a "Prom Themed" breakfast that came with prom pictures and a fun backdrop, and a "Newlywed Game" as a team-to-team fun on how well you know your team. With these activities we were able to model the team building we would like to see in the classroom and we were able to have fun with our teams but also break those team barriers to learn more about member of other teams.

Although the team building is a critical piece of changing culture the true indication came from the conversations teachers began to have. Our school improvement team conversations changed as well. Through these new conversation we began to identify whole picture goals, grade level teams created charts of their goals, we held gallery walks, we conducted cross-grade level collaborations around standards, created grade level vocabulary, and took a look at the vertical articulation of priority standards. This work was NO longer directed by me...this was TEACHER DRIVEN and TEACHER LEAD. For our school this was and is a big, scary step in a direction we have not yet gone. I was so incredibly proud of all the work each and every member of the team committed to and jumped in feet first willingly. The last semester of the 2016-2017 school year was a turning point for Aboite Elementary and one I was proud to witness and blessed to be a part of!

References:

N/A