

Building Morale: Battling More Than COVID-19 in School, Post-Pandemic

Ethel Jones Elementary School
Jenna Blech, Principal
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Background Leading to Inquiry

The 2019-2020 school year was filled with trepidation, uncertainty, and a great deal of stress. We were faced with returning to school in a virtual teaching environment. Many were fearful about the health implications of returning to teaching in-person. In addition, the staff of my building were returning to a new school leader. There were unanswered questions and a great deal of stress.

A few staff members had shared with me that the overall morale of all staff members were at an all-time low. What made this even more complicated was the fact that even though we returned to school, we were still separated by virtual meetings and no (or limited) in-person gatherings. This led people to feeling disconnected, isolated, and very anxious. Something had to be done to help boost morale in the best interest of staff, students, and families of Jones Elementary.

Purpose of This Inquiry

Therefore, the purpose of my inquiry was to infuse positivity among staff members, decrease stress as much as possible, improve building culture and climate, and do everything I could to help all staff members feel heard, validated, and appreciated. My ultimate hope was that these initiatives would have a positive impact on student achievement.

My Wondering

With this purpose, I wondered:

Calling on my base need as a harmonizer, how might implementing team building activities and infusing positive recognition from staff and myself improve the building's culture?

My Actions



- I met with my Site-Based Team in May or 2021 to talk about frequency of staff meetings. They wanted bi-weekly staff meetings.
- Included “Meeting Norms” in all meeting agendas:
 - Start/End on time
 - Be present (ignore phones, emails, etc.)
 - Assume positive intent
 - Focus on what we *can* change
 - Practice mutual accountability
- I created a shared Jones School calendar that listed all meetings for the following school year.
- I created a Jones shared drive that had all information shared with staff.
- I began including a “Rock Star” of the week in my weekly staff newsletters to acknowledge efforts and achievements of staff members.
- I asked my Art teacher to create a “You Rock” award that staff members would pass to each other at each staff meeting.
- I scheduled monthly meetings with our Instructional Assistants.
- We brought back having monthly staff breakfasts to carve out time for camaraderie.
- We put a suggestion box in the staff lounge.

Data Collection

- Individual teacher discussion/input
- Team Leader discussions
- Site-Based Team discussions
- Teacher Building Representative discussions
- HRS Level I Survey
 - Teachers
 - Students
- Student NWEA data

My Data

- Staff was feeling as if they did not have a voice in district and building decisions (informal discussions and HRS survey).
- I went from having 6 staff meetings in 2020-21 to bi-weekly staff meetings in 2021-22.
- As of April 8, 2022, 34 staff members have received “Rock Star” recognition.
- As of April 8, 2022, the “You Rock” award has been given to 16 staff members.
- As of April 8, 2022, there has been no negative feedback from the suggestion box.
- Staff members are gathering, talking, and laughing more in the hallways before and after school.
- Through our HRS certification process, we have had open discussions about opportunities to improve communication and increased access to information through shared drives.

My Data

We saw tremendous growth from Fall to Spring on NWEA:

	READING			MATH		
	Percentage of Students Who Met/Exceeded Projected RIT Score	Percentage of Projected Growth Met	Median Conditional Growth Percentile	Percentage of Students Who Met/Exceeded Projected RIT Score	Percentage of Projected Growth Met	Median Conditional Growth Percentile
KS	50.00%	111%	47	55.00%	101%	49
KT	41.20%	93.50%	40	50.00%	92.10%	48
1HA	66.70%	125.10%	60	62%	113.00%	62
1HE	55.00%	96.20%	51	62%	113.70%	51
1R	60%	109.00%	62	70%	128.30%	72
2G	55.60%	120.70%	68	61.10%	98.90%	65
2J	55.60%	92.70%	52	61.10%	109.30%	55
2S	35.30%	79.40%	38	25%	77%	33
3K	66.70%	135.20%	60	70.80%	126.80%	69
3P	73.70%	124.20%	72	68.40%	147.60%	87
4B	50.00%	87.80%	48	64.30%	126.70%	71
4C	56%	95%	58	38.90%	102.30%	40
4G	60.00%	116.80%	50	53.30%	105.70%	53
5B	57.90%	120.60%	47	63.20%	147.40%	73
5L	68.80%	193.30%	83	75%	172.90%	84
5W	56.30%	101.40%	62	62.50%	138.50%	60

My Discoveries

- Student growth in NWEA from Fall to Spring was greater in every grade level than the previous year.
- Teachers are interacting and laughing more, and fewer people are in my office overwhelmed and upset (compared to last year)
- There has been positive feedback from staff about changes made to improve communication.
- Conclusions:
 - Even when faced with a big task, start small. Small changes can make big impacts.
 - Never underestimate the power of helping people feel heard.
 - Run toward criticism- not away from it.
 - People need each other.
 - Visibility of a building leader is essential to all stakeholders.

Was this because of the changes I implemented this year? Was it because we were not virtual at all this year? It is difficult to say which had the biggest impact on student test scores. However, the positive feedback I have received and the positive work we are doing with our Level I HRS certification have proven that this year has been more positive than last. I will continue to gather feedback from staff and look for ways to continue to support our staff, work to make them feel heard, and infuse positivity as much as I can.

Where Am I Heading Next?

- Provide positive feedback to staff on Post-It notes during/after walkthroughs.
- Continue requesting feedback from staff, students, and parents through Panorama and HRS surveys.
- Check the suggestion box monthly for anonymous feedback.
- Continue to improve what we can change at the building level through the Level I and II HRS process.
- Seek opportunities to increase transparency and communication with all staff members.

Bibliography

- Gruenert, S. and Whitaker, T. ((2015) *School Culture Rewired: How to Define, Assess, and Transform It*. ASCD Member Book.
- Marzano, R. J. (2018) *Leading a High Reliability School (Use Data Driven Instruction and Collaborative Teaching Strategies to Boost Academic Achievement)*. Solution Tree Press.

Building Morale: Battling More Than COVID-19 in School, Post-Pandemic:

Slide 1:

My name is Jenna Blech, and I am the principal of Ethel Jones Elementary in Portage, Indiana. This is my 2nd year as principal after being a teacher in the same district (different building) for 24 years.

Background Leading to My Inquiry- Slide 2:

The 2019-2020 school year was filled with trepidation, uncertainty, and a great deal of stress. We were faced with returning to school in a virtual teaching environment. Many were fearful about the health implications of returning to teaching in-person. In addition, the staff of my building were returning to a new school leader. There were unanswered questions and a great deal of stress.

A few staff members had shared with me that the overall morale of all staff members were at an all-time low. What made this even more complicated was the fact that even though we returned to school, we were still separated by virtual meetings and no (or limited) in-person gatherings. This led people to feeling disconnected, isolated, and very anxious. Something had to be done to help boost morale in the best interest of staff, students, and families of Jones Elementary.

Additionally, several staff members had come to me concerned about the negative culture. In getting to know the staff, I learned how incredible the teaching talent and dedication of all staff members were. I just needed to help improve the climate so all staff members felt heard, happier, and more satisfied. My hope was that this would also have a positive impact on student achievement. I've always been a "fixer," so this tapped into my strengths.

Purpose of My Inquiry- Slide 3:

Therefore, the purpose of my inquiry was to infuse positivity among staff members, decrease stress as much as possible, improve building culture and climate, and do everything I could to help all staff members feel heard, validated, and appreciated. My ultimate hope was that these initiatives would have a positive impact on student achievement.

My Wondering- Slide 4:

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My Actions- Slide 5:

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Data Collection- Slide 6:

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A great deal of methods of collecting data was done in conjunction with my building's leadership team (which we call a Site-Based Team). We are in our first year of HRS certification (Level I) with HRS coaches. Much of this work was completed through that process and I found it an incredibly valuable experience with gathering input from all stakeholders, having those difficult conversations, and being solution-based, rather than problem-based.

My Data- Slide 7:

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My Data- Slide 8:

We did have a big increase in our NWEA and IREAD data this year. This could have been due to being in-person all year. However, I can report that the overall feel of the building is so different. It is so much more positive. I see teachers collaborating and helping each other more. We are meeting in weekly PLCs in a common meeting place which promotes vertical articulation. The staff has seemed to have gotten more comfortable with me now that they know me better, and those lines of communication continue to grow.

My Discoveries- Slide 9:

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Where Am I Heading Next?- Slide 10:

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