

Pushing the Positives Through Twitter

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

During my first year as principal, I often felt that I was stuck in my office more than I wanted to be. Some of my best days were those spent interacting with teachers, sitting with students in the cafeteria, completing classroom walkthroughs, and simply being immersed in the day-to-day functioning of the school. Those days I loved the job and gained a tremendous amount of respect and passion for my school. I quickly learned that the other days that tended to be full of hours spent in my office attending meetings, responding to emails, on the phone with parents, and dealing with paperwork were not only less appealing, but they were happening too frequently. I made a goal to be more intentional about being present during the school day this year.

Coupled with my goal of being more present in classrooms during the school day, I also began to notice that some negative perceptions of our school existed among other schools in my district, parents, and the community. Since taking the job at Belzer, I've realized that many of those perceptions were untrue. In addition, I learned from Principal Baruti Kafele in his book *The Principal 50*, that the principal is the one primarily responsible for controlling the message and shaping the brand of the school. One way I can efficiently send out positives about my school is through social media. My goal was to continue to increase the use of this communication tool, and also become more intentional about the message being sent.

With both of these missions at the top of my priority list as building leader, I began to wonder how committing to these goals might impact my leadership. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to explore how intentionally Tweeting positive pictures and messages about my school would impact my leadership as principal.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how it might impact a variety of aspects of my job. Would focusing on the positives change my personal attitudes or behaviors? Would being in classrooms more give me better insight to the climate and culture of my building? Would it impact the relationship I have with students, teachers, parents, and the community?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I conducted my action research project. This included being mindful every day to get into classrooms with my phone and nab at least one picture for posting. Sometimes I just "happened" on to what I considered a good photo, while other days I had to be more intentional, and still others I admittedly did not get a picture Tweeted out. I also began to encourage my staff to interact with Twitter by encouraging them to sign up for an account if they hadn't already. They began to see Tweets about what was going on in other areas of the building, and they began to favorite and retweet the posts creating even more social interaction for the posts. Finally, I began to track the data provided by Twitter to see how many Tweets I had put out there, the types of interactions my posts were getting, the number of followers the account was adding, and more. I collected data from August 2016 through the end of March 2017.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

Findings:

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned three important things.

1. Going into classrooms with a lens for finding something “good to Tweet” opened my eyes to the amazing instruction that was happening on a daily basis in our school.
2. Teachers welcomed me into their classrooms and enjoyed it when I asked questions about the lesson, took pictures of kids working, and told them that I was going to put it on Twitter.
3. I realized that the principal is the most important factor in creating and controlling the brand of a school.

Being so intentional about finding positives directly impacted my lens as principal. I was literally on the lookout at all times of the school day for positive things that I could share. Students working on interactive projects, a new quote put on a teacher’s bulletin board, students working on coding/programming on their laptops, or students cashing in their merit points for our PBIS system were all great examples. I began to notice more of the excellence going on in my building, and was less consumed with the negatives. I shared this positivity throughout the day and it proved to be contagious with both students and staff.

A shift also began to occur in the relationship between teachers and myself when I entered classrooms. During my first year, teachers were still trying to figure me out and always seemed guarded when I entered the room. Now there is a comfort level, and in fact teachers verbally share with me what the students are learning when I enter the room. I’ve been invited into classrooms without asking to observe and take pictures of “cool” things that teachers have planned for students. Teachers have also begun taking pictures during class and emailing them to me for Twitter purposes or sometimes even putting them out on Twitter themselves. They are proud of the work students are doing and they are sharing that pride publicly as well. Finally, I began to reflect on the importance of WHAT I was putting on Twitter, more so than HOW OFTEN. I did a great deal of reflection regarding the posts and pictures I had put out there. What message was I sending out about our school? What story did my pictures and posts tell about Belzer? I realized that I was promoting our dedicated staff, our diverse population, our dedication to STEM, our decorated athletics and performing arts programs, and our relations to the community. I began to realize that Principal Kafele was spot on in his book *The Principal 50* when he said that the principal is the single most important factor in creating and controlling the brand of a school. I realized that each of those posts was quite literally creating a picture for the outside world about what it’s like at Belzer Middle School. I realized that is a powerful responsibility, and one that must not be taken lightly.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

This action research project taught me a great deal about myself and about my role as school leader. I am by nature a positive person, at times even taking criticism for being so optimistic and always mentioning the silver lining in negative situations. I learned throughout this process that positivity can be contagious. Being on the lookout for positives helped me to focus more on the excellence happening in my school and giving less focus to the more negative things. Teachers began to see and feel my positivity, and it became a shared experience. I also confirmed my belief that my happiest and most rewarding days as principal are those spent with children in the classroom, interacting with them and their learning.

I also learned that this role as principal has so many important responsibilities. One that is very important, and that cannot be overlooked is the one of maintaining a positive culture in the building. If teachers, students, parents, and community members only hear about the negative things that happen at school, those are the only ones on which they will focus. As principal, I must ensure that the positive messages are being put out to all of these groups to counterbalance the negatives they may hear. In our current era of school choice, a school's brand and public perception become increasingly important.

Finally, I learned about the action research process. I learned a great deal more than I set out to do, and the experience was meaningful. As leaders we often wonder "what would happen if..." but we seldom take the time, planning, and data collection process to find out. In this case, I learned a great deal because I moved forward with a specific plan, stuck to it, and took the time to track the data. Now I don't have to wonder "what if" I actually know what the results are. I also learned the value of sharing my learning, experiences, and questions with others in the field. I learned so much from the other principals in my cohort who went through this same process, and I hope that others can learn from my experiences as well.

References:

Kafele, B. K. (2015). *The principal 50: critical leadership questions for inspiring schoolwide excellence*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.