

The Fun Factor of School

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

New challenges continued to arise, and our staff was diligently working to meet them. Two consecutive redistricting years followed by a new developmental preschool program increased our student population from 684 in 2015 to 904 in 2018. Our class sizes increased. Our building ran out of space, and six classrooms were moved into mobile units. Discipline rates rose significantly.

Our school had been focusing on curriculum, instruction, and data. We were repeatedly recognized as a “A” school and a Four Star School. In spite of the new challenges that had arisen, we still expected high academic achievement and were working extremely hard to accomplish this success. With the number of students who were new to our school, coupled with our high academic expectations, it was imperative that I foster the most positive climate and relationships among stakeholders. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to motivate, celebrate and reward our students and staff and increase my personal connections with them.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered, “How can I create a more joyful learning environment for students and staff?”

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I began creating experiences that staff and students would find fun and motivating. We had a new assistant principal, so he and I made a Cheers themed Triller video to welcome back our staff and invite them to our first staff meeting. That staff meeting was also Cheers themed, and we painted the picture that our school would be a place “where everybody knows your name.”

As the year continued, I dressed up to motivate, celebrate, and reward our students and staff. In October, I dressed up as a character from medieval times when we met a PTO fundraising goal, and the students locked me in a “dungeon” (a walk-in glass display area) for the day. In December, I dressed up like an elf to celebrate our students’ progress in Guided Reading Levels. I surprised classrooms as they came back from their related arts classes by sitting on their back counters like an elf on the shelf. Later in December, I dressed up like Mrs. Claus, and the assistant principal dressed up like Santa Claus. We handed out candy canes in celebration of the students’ good behavior and hard work. In February, I worked with our PTO to provide a free Family dodgeball game on a Friday night. Parents and staff members played our students in a series of dodgeball games. I dressed up in a silly outfit that included a t-shirt with a bullseye on it, tube socks with stripes that were pulled up to my knees, safety glasses, wristbands, and a headband. It was a well-attended event that promoted school spirit.

During the ISTEP testing window, our grades K-2 classrooms were partnered with our grades 3-5 classrooms for encouragement. Each K-2 classroom made encouraging drawings and remarks on butcher paper, which was used to cover up any reference materials in the grades 3-5 classrooms while they took ISTEP. Throughout the year, I wrote cards to students and staff members, recognizing them for a variety of positive things I had observed. I also utilized a mobile cart to be as present with teachers and staff as possible, while also being able to complete necessary computer work.

I collected data by taking pictures of the special events we had as well as some of the cards I had written. In addition, I monitored our monthly office referrals and compared them to that of the previous year. I also surveyed our staff at the beginning, middle, and end of this process and analyzed their feedback.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I discovered where: 1) The number of discipline incidents was lower every month except October; 2) I felt more connected to students, staff, and families; and 3) Staff members seemed more relaxed, and I became more empathetic, forgiving, and relaxed in all situations.

My first discovery was that the number of discipline incidents was lower every month except October. Fourteen of the 39 office referrals in October were due to bus behavior. In spite of having 81 more students this year, there were 58 less office offenses and a 2% decrease in the number of students who had an office discipline offense. Table 1 provides a summary of the comparison of our discipline referrals and our total student population for the past two school years.

Table 1 Comparison of Office Discipline Referrals and Total Student Population

	2016-17 School Year	2017-18 School Year	Reflection
# of K-5 students enrolled (EOY)	753	834 (pre-k students not counted in this total)	<i>81 more K-5 students in 2017-18</i>
# of Offense Discipline Offenses	356	298	<i>58 less office discipline offenses (w/ 81 more students)</i>
# of students w/ at least 1 office discipline offense	103	98	<i>2% decrease in the number of students, in the current year's enrollment count, who had an office discipline offense</i>

My second discovery was that I felt more connected to students, staff, and families. Each year, I have gotten nice cards and letters from students and staff. However, this year I wrote more cards and letters, and I noticed I got more cards and letters in return. In addition, students and staff shared very meaningful and connected points of appreciation in their letters and cards. I also noticed this in comments on the staff surveys. Two examples include: 1) "I think you are doing a great job of reaching out to kids. I noticed you pulling kids off to the side and then giving them notes of encouragement. I have seen you show more light-heartedness (ex: the dungeon, elf, etc.). I think it is impressive to see you seeking ways to better yourself. You set a good example for striving to grow." and 2) "Your calm disposition and encouraging manner is very much noticed and appreciated. Meeting individually with students before ISTEP to encourage them was great. The students love to see you and talk to you!"

The third discovery was that staff members seemed more relaxed, and I became more empathetic, relaxed, and forgiving in all situations. While this emerged from comments in the staff surveys, it was especially observed when staff members were working with students who were having behavioral meltdowns. Many of these meltdowns ended with the student and staff members hugging. Staff members and I became even more consistent with re-establishing rapport with the students after these occurrences. When parents questioned any of these occurrences or expressed disagreement with consequences given to their child, I found it easier to empathize with them as we explained the rationale for those consequences.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

As I reflect upon this action research and prepare for the future, there are three specific actions I plan to carry out to continue building upon the connections and relationships each year. First, I will intentionally plan for fun like I intentionally plan for curriculum, instruction, and professional development. In this way, I will continue developing more connections and positive experiences with students and staff that will also support our hard work on curriculum and instruction. Second, I will schedule time each week for writing positive notes. This was a well-received strategy for recognizing and supporting students and staff with their hard work throughout the year, and it also encouraged them to share more with me. Finally, I plan to work more from a mobile cart. This enables me to complete the large amount of computer work a principal has while also being visible with students and staff. Multitasking during the day in this way will also help me achieve the work/life balance principals need to accomplish by allowing me more time with my family outside of the school day.

This action research project helped me learn how to organize my reflection into productive thinking that resulted in specific actions that led me to achieve my goals. I collected and reflected upon data in a way that helped me discover some important benefits of taking time to have fun at school. While implementing these strategies and analyzing data, I referred to the following three books for guidance: 1) *Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The Principal as Action Researcher* (Dana, 2009); 2) *School Culture Rewired: How to Define, Assess, and Transform It* (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015); and 3) *What Great Principals Do Differently: 18 Things that Matter Most* (Whitaker, 2012). The project inspired me to find new ideas and helped hold me accountable for implementing fun strategies and analyzing data related to these efforts. This experience definitely made me a better administrator.

References:

- Dana, N. F. (2009). *Leading with passion and knowledge: The principal as action researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Gruenert, S. & Whitaker, T. (2015). *School culture rewired: How to define, assess, and transform it*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Whitaker, T. (2012). *What great principals do differently: 18 things that matter most*. New York: Routledge.