

My Staff Positivity Plan

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

Huntington County Schools, like many district in the state, has been declining in enrollment for several years. The 17-18 school year brought with it, the quest to right size our district. As board votes came to fruition, it was decided that two elementary buildings would be closing and our entire district would be getting new districting lines. While change is the only thing that is guaranteed in life, it seems to always be accompanied by fear and uncertainty. Our community was no different in the midst of this big redistricting task. Negativity and the wide range of "what ifs" began to make their way through families, businesses and our school halls.

Our particular elementary building would be the least effected by all these changes. We would not lose any staff members, in fact we would likely gain a few. We would gain some families but not a lot and they would be coming from a more affluent area of our community. While I was really hoping that this would allow our school to be a support to others found in the trenches of the change, I quickly realized that we were not exempt from the negativity and uncertainty. Our own staff began to mirror and circulate the fears running through our community.

As I observed this vibe creeping into our own building culture, I knew that some of it was normal and almost a part of the cycle of grief that our community was navigating as community pillars and long standing traditions and school pride were being torn down. I pondered long and hard what I could do as a leader to make a positive impact on the culture of our own building in the midst of this redistricting year. Therefore the purpose of my action research was to support my own staff in a year of stress and uncertainty so that we could be a positive influence to those more effected by this very emotional change in our school and community.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how a monthly positivity plan might impact our school culture in the midst of a redistricting year.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights to my wonderings, I carried out a subtle but intentional plan of gaining information, making and implementing a plan of attack and reflecting on the impact I saw take place within our halls.

The first step that I should mention to my project, involved some pretty meaty conversations with my IPLI mentor. I was having a hard time reconciling what I felt I needed to do for my project in terms of focusing on this cultural aspect of redistricting and what I saw personally as more "important" work in terms of leadership. I tend to be a more data and instructional focused leader and embarrassingly, I felt like this project was a little fluffy. After much deliberation, I felt a real inner conviction that my teachers and students needed me to put my efforts in this area of cultural need and positive focus. As I reflect on the changes and innovation that I introduced into my leadership practices or mindset, I realize that it came really in the form of my own paradigm shift of the importance and intentionality to positivity and support to my staff. I've always planned fun things but this plan really took what I had done in the past to a whole new level.

The next thing I set out to do was review the positive things I had scheduled for the second semester of school. Fun activities, little "pick me ups," team building, etc. What I realized was astounding. In my mind I am very strong at implementing the fun factor but as I really looked at my plans and history in this area, I realized that my efforts in this department were really focused more on the students than on the staff. Now, don't get me wrong, I believe 110% that we need to do those intentional positive activities with for our kids but I came to understand through this project that I need to be equally as intentional with what I do for my staff.

In preparation to get this project off the ground and into practice, I set out to plan some very intentional and strong positive experiences for my staff. I sought insight from two primary sources, a newly joined facebook group of administrators connected to The Principal Blog and the every popular book, "If You Don't Feed the Teachers, They Eat the Students." After reading the book and scouring the facebook group for ideas, my wheels started turning and I got so excited to plan events and activities for my staff that would help them focus on how blessed we are to do this job and to keep the fun factor front and center in the midst of busy and stressful times of our school year. I put together a calendar from December through May that focused on fun, bonding, support and stress relief.

When you are focusing on a more soft skill type goal of your leadership development, data collection certainly takes on a more qualitative approach. While I was careful to make sure my data collection spanned the months of the events I had scheduled, I decided to collect pictures of the activities as they were carried out and keep a log of comments that I overheard or were brought to me in regard to each event. The data was overwhelming! As I compared the outpouring of positive reactions through staff comment to my initial thoughts of feeling like this project was fluffy, I was so convicted of how much I had to learn as a leader! Teachers sent me emails, personal thank you notes and posted on social media over and over throughout our months of fun. I noticed that these intentional activities did make an impact on the attitudes of our staffers and that they needed this in a big way. One strong take away though was that this needed to be done each year and not just because of what we were facing as a community in the middle of redistricting turmoil.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include; 1) When you think you're being positive, be positive some more; 2) Teachers are just big kids, they need positivity just as much as the students do; 3) Humanity fears the unknown, end of story.

I've heard it said before that when you think you've communicated, communicate some more. This held true with the positive events and activities that I planned out. I really felt like I was strong with small positive actions for and towards my teachers. It was clear to me early on that those little things are meaningful, but easy to overlook. In fact, sometimes I think they are even expected.

When I received the emails that read, "You have NO idea how much my heart needed this," and "This was SO MUCH FUN," I realized that teachers are no different that our students. They get bogged down with life, they are motivated by fun, they need to know they are loved and our relationship with them drives their learning too. Finally, I saw such a change in negativity and morale regarding the redistricting once all the moves had been announced and lines had been made public. Many teachers made comment about their fear of the unknown. In fact, twenty one of our thirty-seven staffers made this comment in one form or another. It made me realize that while the positivity plan was needed and a great lesson for me in my leadership, it really had little to do with the overall culture of the redistricting issue. The simple fear of the unknown is a battle of humanity in general.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

This action research project was definitely a beneficial practice for me as a leader. It led to several reflections and learnings. I learned that it's important to practice the things we're not good at. As I stated before, I tend to be very data and instructional minded so it was so good for me to focus my efforts and growth on an area that was outside my realm of natural strengths. It showed me that I'm not as strong in the area of staff morale support as I thought I was. In terms of my learning from a school or staff perspective, my biggest take away was that notion of this job really being about loving people. Whether we're talking about students, staff or families, we are charged with loving our people and doing it well! I will be making an intentional effort each summer to plan out my staff positivity plan with purpose!

Finally, I realized that as leaders we do action research all the time. If we prize learning and growing, we must be in this cycle to become better at what we do. Completing this project made me understand the various stages of the process as outlined in our action research reference book, . I also know the importance of the data collection and review. I think that while I've taken part informally with action research many times, I've not really been as reflective as I could or should be with my data.

References:

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