

Oh... That Is What New Teachers Need!

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

I am in my 7th year of being an elementary principal. In reflecting back, I can't believe how much I have learned and grown over the years in the job. Every year is different and just when I think I have experienced it all, something new comes my way. However one of the areas I feel that I have been neglecting is support, providing resources, and professional development for new teachers.

When I took over the building, most of the staff members were within ten years of retirement. In the first 3-4 years, I only hired 10 new teachers combined. In the last 2 years, I have had a really big turnover rate. Now 90% of the teachers in my building have less than 5 years of experience. In reflecting on what are some areas in my job I feel can do better, it was an obvious shift to support and professional development to my young staff. Each year it is a constant schedule of meetings with new staff with questions about schedule and curriculum to where do teachers use the restroom. Every summer I have intentions of creating elaborate new teacher orientation schedules and activities to give them the best preparation and comfort before starting a new job in my building. However, they have remained as intentions being replaced with the "must get things done" list. I found that my new teachers were getting overwhelmed with the little things that take them away from what is most important.... teaching. I found myself throughout the school year putting out little fires that could have been avoided with prior training and development before the school year started, or at least within the first couple of days. Let's face it, when the students come, that is when flexibility and adapting take over. Teachers were not feeling equipped or prepared as much as they or I felt they should be.

It is time to make this a priority and do something that can influence all aspects in our building from culture to assessment. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to provide those needed resources and better prepare new teachers for what is to come.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how much better would my beginning teachers perform if they were given more time for questions, professional development, and tools to start the school year?

This also led to the following sub questions:

- Would my action research lead to more effective and highly effective observations and evaluations of my staff?
- Would my action research lead new teachers to have better health and overall energy?
- Would my action research lead new teachers to have a more positive classroom environment and rapport with their students and other staff?
- Would my action research provide more time for me to lead and feed the fire, rather than deal with early frustration and burnout?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I started out the school year by implementing a mentoring program. On the first teacher workday, I brought my mentor staff together and discussed the purpose of the program and laid out a schedule for meetings for the year. A discussion sheet was gone through and that opened my eyes tremendously in realizing what teachers really needed and wanted over what I thought they needed to know. After this, a meeting with new staff members, pairing them with mentors, was held. We discussed the program and scheduled future meetings for the school year.

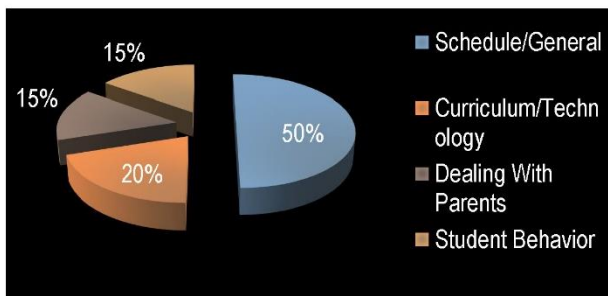
From this point, mentors and their new teachers communicated throughout the school year. Once a quarter, we had meetings together with discussion sheets on how things were going and how new teachers were adjusting [See END for discussion sheets] I would return after our meetings and read through the notes and comments on the discussion sheets. This data led me to act more precisely to areas of need that were identified by my staff.

I also found out through these discussion sheets and information, that even veteran teachers felt a need for support, resources, and development in some of the areas I felt didn't need to be addressed. Because my staff is small in numbers, about 50 percent were either new teachers, or mentors to new teachers. Our discussions and ideas quickly rippled through the rest of the staff, which again, led to some professional development and learning communities within the building.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

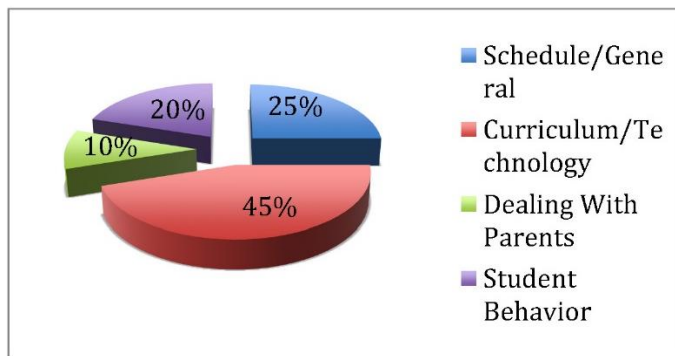
As a result of analyzing my data, two important things I learned include:

- What new teachers received prior to the first day of school was not what they wanted.
- In some areas, I need to step out of the way and empower my excellent teachers to lead. When I look back at my new staff orientation agenda, I broke down the information presented in the chart below:



New staff came in a couple of days before everyone else. Half of the day was spent going over keys and codes, showing them the building, and puffing my chest about our facilities. I had schedules and handbooks full of procedures and policies. I would give them a book to read entitled "Whatever It Takes" to help them implement strategies when kids don't perform. We talked briefly about dealing with rowdy students and parents and I let them know I had their back. Then we would go to lunch and the rest of the day was set aside for them to set up their classrooms.

After I met with the mentors on the first teacher work day, I had a discussion sheet asking them what they felt like they needed as new staff members (some of them only a couple of year prior). The chart below shows that information



As you can see the results were very different in what I felt they needed and what they felt they needed. So this changed my entire approach. They wanted more curriculum training and time to talk with other grade level team members. They felt overwhelmed with the amount of technology and wanted more professional development time with digital devices and curriculum. They felt too much time was spent on schedules and general information, which they rarely used in a school year. They felt supported in dealing with parents but wanted more tools to help the “strong-willed” child.

The second important thing I learned was let my strong people lead in the areas they are strong. I forgot the principal’s rule of thumb, according to Todd Whitaker’s book *What Great Principals Do Differently*. That is: “we must delegate anything that anyone else can do. We must use the same rule for our highest achievers and best staff members.” It was hard for me to admit and realize that I don’t have to know it all and have all the answers. After all, I have never taught an elementary class in my life. I was a high school Choir teacher before entering the administrative field. But my nature is to be a servant leader and I wanted to lead by doing. However, the professionals of the field were sitting in front of me at every staff meeting. Why not use them to lead professional development and PLC’s. It changed my focus and really made me take a step back and listen to my staff. I have always had a great rapport and felt my staff and I were a great team with common goals. But I realized the veteran staff member could help the new staff members with curriculum and dealing with students and parents. The new staff members could help the veteran staff members with technology and creating STEM centered learning stations. It was actually less work on my part and the outcome was better for our students.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

As a result of the action research, my professional development schedule will change next year as well as the new teacher orientation. This action research project turned into a professional eye opening experience. Although the project help address a concern I had as a leader, it also made me realize that my staff had needs that were just not known. For myself personally, I need to be less of a manager of schedule and more of a developer of leaders. When you are the only administrator, it is hard. I held tight to a quote from the book *Standards for what Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. The quote says: “There are many days when management issues scream for attention. These issues can sometimes be delegated, but generally not when one is the only administrator in the building”. When I started, I felt that if I took care of the small things, they wouldn’t turn into big things. Through this project, I learned that there is a difference in my small things and my staff’s small things. There was also a difference in what they felt important over what I felt to be important. This is not only a reflection of new staff orientation and professional development, but has changed my thought process on all educational topics.

I also learned that I have some excellent teachers that just need me to get out of the way! “Effective professional development allows teachers to learn from and teach their fellow faculty members, through continued discussions, demonstrations, and assistance”. (Standards for what Principals Should Know and be Able to Do). As this past year went on, I felt the need to empower more of my teachers to lead PLC’s and other staff development exercises. By this being teacher led and tied into our school improvement goals, I felt the staff were more invested with hopefully better outcomes in student achievement to show for it.

Since this project, I have revised my new staff orientation for the upcoming year, scheduled more curriculum development, and have started to pick out strong team leaders to assist in creating valuable and needed professional development. I have also changed my leadership style to allow others to lead more. I realize I need to empower excellent teachers to help lead others to be excellent. I have realized that I don’t have to be the “front guy” to be an effective principal. I will be using the professionals in my building that have the passion and the skills to lead their peers much more this year to drive our learning communities and development.

I have learned so much more than anticipated during this project. Although it set out to help address a specific area in my leadership, it opened up so much more. The project made me take a much-needed moment to self-reflect, evaluate, and make improvements as a leader. I am positive that through new wonderings in my career, I now have the tools and steps necessary to use a data-driven action research to guide school and staff improvement.

References:

National Association of Elementary School Principals, (2004). Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do. Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications Group.
Todd Whitaker, (2013). What Great Principals Do Differently. 18 Things that Matter Most: New York, New York: Routledge Publishing.

APPENDIX

Mentor Meeting

August 7, 2017

10:00

AGENDA:

-Welcome and thank you

-Assignment of new teachers

-Schedule of meetings

-Expectations of Mentors

-Fill out the following questions

1. I wish I had known...

2. Don't waste my time with...

3. I needed to be better prepared for...

4. Things I appreciated knowing was...

-Discussion (Meeting at 1:00pm with new teachers)

MENTOR TALKING POINTS

Session 1
August 29, 2017

Again thank you for taking the time to help our new staff members be a working part of the NVE Falcon Family. Obviously this is just some points to discuss but you can talk about anything that comes up. The idea is to provide a person that new teachers can confide and ask questions and express concerns as well as provide someone on a regular basis to check in on their year of "firsts". Thank you again for serving in this role.

How do you feel the first three weeks of school have gone for you? (if it is not good, have them list some positives as well)

What do you feel most overwhelmed with?

*What resources or support could help you right now?
(ex... establishing learning environment, technology, schedule, assessments)*

What scares you the most: Parent Communication
Dealing with Student Discipline
Implementing Effective Instruction
Other_____

Questions you might have that I can help with for next time?

MENTOR TALKING POINTS

Session 2
December 5, 2017

In the next week, please find time to sit and talk with your assigned teachers and follow the discussion sheet. We will meet as a Mentor group before the break.

You should have a good feel for the schedule and “flow” of the school day now. Do you have any concerns, questions, or comments, about the schedule?

How do you feel about the curriculum you use? (Resources to supplement?, Tiered for differentiation?, Pace and flow is appropriate?)

Do you feel comfortable enough with administration and your grade level teams to discuss ideas, concerns?

With the first semester ending, do you think you would change anything with your classroom for the second semester? (Seating, management, etc...)

How would you rate yourself on your first semester and why? (Not Effective, Needs Improvement, Effective, Highly effective)

Questions you might have that I can help with for next time?

MENTOR TALKING POINTS

Session 3
May 8, 2018

-How do you feel about your first year at NVE?

-Now that you have gone almost through the school year, what would you change about your classroom management for next year (if anything)?

-Do you think your curriculum was mapped out appropriately? If not, what would you change?

What do you feel would have been more helpful for you his past year? (what things can administration and mentors improve on)

What advice would you give a new teacher starting next year to help prepare them for "what is to come"?