

Positively Influencing School Culture Using "Hey!" Notes

By: Michael Gabauer, Wea Ridge Elementary

Contact: migabauer@tsc.k12.in.us

Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

The purpose of this inquiry was to determine if more classroom visits would aid in developing a more positive school climate. In the survey completed by teachers, there was much variance concerning my ability to meet standard 2 which states: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth." Specifically, I feel short in the area of "nurturing and sustaining a culture of collaboration, trust, learning, and high expectations" as well as "supervises instruction and maximizes time spent on quality instruction." Also I feel that I do not spend the amount of quality time needed in classrooms, so I am certainly in agreement with my teachers. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to meet my teachers need to have me more present and become more in tune with what was going on in their classrooms each day.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered if the climate of the building and the attitudes of the teachers would be positively influenced by more classroom visits. Also, I wondered if teachers would respond, via email, to a positive note sent about the time I spent in their classroom.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I visited each classroom a minimum of one time in addition to the short and long observations required by my district. I began this process in December of 2017 and collected data through February 2018. Each visit was a minimum of 5 minutes, sitting in the classroom at a student desk, on the floor with students, or in another area to "blend in" with the classroom environment. At the conclusion of the visit, while still in the classroom, I emailed the teacher a brief note with the subject line "Hey!" so that I could call attention to something positive that I witnessed during the visit. Sending an email after a visit is something I had not tried before but was curious if teachers would enjoy the positive feedback. Instead of just visiting a classroom and then leaving the teacher to wonder what I thought, this gave insight to the teacher about my visit.

I collected data by creating a spreadsheet with each teachers' name and what time he/she teaches various subjects. I used this spreadsheet to record, with a simple tick mark, each visit. If a teacher replied to my Hey! Note, I highlighted the tick mark in green to indicate there was a response. I also made sure each email had the subject line Hey! So that I could review emails sent for data analysis.

The spreadsheet and Hey! Notes served as evidence of my visits.

At the conclusion of my data collection process, I tallied how many Hey! Notes were sent, how many teachers responded, and how many Hey! Notes were sent to each grade level. I then calculated the percent of Hey! Notes that received an email response to me.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include: 1.) Sometimes your initial plan does not work as well as you might have hoped. 2.) I visited some grade levels more than others and that some grade level teacher wrote back more than other grade levels. 3.) The feedback emails I received were ALL very positive!

First, I learned that sometimes your initial plan does not work as well as you might have hoped. My initial plan was to visit each teacher during each of the following: Reading block, math, and community circle. A total of three visits to each teacher. I quickly learned that I was not able to do so and accepted that a visit was a visit to boost confidence no matter the subject and no matter how many times. I was able to send 71 Hey! Notes to 30 teachers - I consider this a success as these were 71 additional classroom visits with positive, written, feedback. Just because I set out to do 3 visits per teacher, which would have been 90 visits, and I only did 71, I am happy with the results.

Next, I learned that I visited some grade levels more than others and that some grade level teachers wrote back more than other grade levels. I sent 6 Hey! Notes to Kindergarten and received 2 responses, for a 33% response rate. I sent 13 Hey! Notes to first grade and received 4 responses, for a 31% response rate. I sent 11 Hey! Notes to second grade and received 5 responses, for a 45% response rate. I sent 14 Hey! Notes to third and received 4 responses, for a 29% response rate. I sent 7 Hey! Notes to fourth grade and received 3 responses, for a 43% response rate. I sent 12 Hey! Notes to fifth grade and received 7 responses, for a 58% response rate. And I sent 4 Hey! Notes to Special education teachers and received 2 responses, for a 50% response rate. It's difficult to ascertain why I visited some grade levels more than others, but I did not realize I did this. I was under the incorrect assumption that I visited all grade levels equally. I realize now that I need to be more careful and more deliberate so that I can make everyone in the building feel appreciated so that it does not appear I am playing favorites.

Finally, I learned that the feedback emails I received were ALL very positive! This was probably the most exciting part of my research. I found myself looking forward to reading the responses from the teachers. It was interesting that I found probably as much joy from the response that the teachers did from receiving the Hey! Note. It was a two way street and I did not expect this. Some samples of my Hey! Notes and teacher responses are as follows:

Hey! Thanks so much for letting me come by today! I love your questioning techniques and how you are so complimentary to your students! The atmosphere in your room is so wonderful and peaceful!! There is a ton of respect between you and your students. I love it! Thank you! Teacher response: You are so sweet, thank you! I love my job!

Hey! Wow! I loved your lesson to review geometry vocab. They had so much fun!

Hey! The handwritten personalized notes at everyone's seats are awesome! Thanks for going the extra mile - always!

Hey! I love your animal bulletin board! Also I love your virtue of the month and student shout outs! Such a great way to involve the kids in learning to be good people. Teacher response: Thank you so much! I had a lot

of help from Mrs. Atwell on that bulletin board. I found the virtue of the month on a second grade website and I LOVED IT!

Hey! I always love visiting your room! Your students are so kind and respectful - and on task! Your positivity permeates all aspects of your room. Thank you! Teacher response: Awe! Thanks so much! :-)

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

The Action Research process is a valuable, and relatively simple, process to achieve a better understating of almost any aspect of your school. When setting out to complete my project, I was certain that I did not spend enough time in classrooms. So many other tasks distract an administrator from what our job really is - to make sure each child receives the best possible education. You can learn so much just by sitting in a classroom for five minutes - no computer, no agenda, just immersion. 40% of teachers responded to my Hey! Notes. Going into this process, I really was not sure if any one would. But what I quickly learned is that teachers love the immediate, positive feedback. Simply typing a few sentences on my phone brought much joy and affirmation to many - including me! This is certainly something I did not expect. I have leaned that it is so important to go above and beyond the districts minimum observations, to be present in classrooms, even if just for five minutes. To sit where the kids are, to experience learning through their eyes is so very important.

As I move forward, I intend to continue with my Hey! Notes. However, I now realize how important it is to keep data so ensure I am on task, to ensure I am spending quality time in classrooms giving positive feedback as much as possible. I have also realized that I must strive to be more equitable with my time. Sure, some teachers may need more positive feedback than others, but overall, grade levels should be seeing me in their classrooms, on average, about the same.

Being intentional about classroom visits is paramount to a schools success. We all like to receive positive feedback, and all teachers bring something positive to the table. If administrators are more present in classrooms, there will be a positive impact on the culture and climate of the building. Teachers need to know they are valued and appreciated. Students should not call attention to you each time you are in the room if you are spending enough time there. If students are excited to see you, call out your name, or say to the teacher "hey the principal is here" perhaps we need to rethink our priorities. Administrators being in classrooms should be second nature to the students. Our presence should be as normal as that of the teacher.

References:

N/A