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From Chaos to Tranquility: One School's Transformation

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The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI) was founded in 2004 at the University of Texas System. IPSI serves as a strategic partner in education program and product innovation as well as an idea incubator and evaluator of program effectiveness and productivity. IPSI's mission is to improve student achievement from preschool through high school via its relationships with The University of Texas intuitions, community colleges, school districts, and state agencies. Funding for IPSI is made possible through the generous contributions from private foundations and public agencies.

From Chaos to Tranquility: One School's Transformation

Imagine driving up to an urban middle school in the early afternoon to pick up your child or attend a parent conference. As you approach the school, you observe students wandering around in the grass, sitting on the steps, and talking to friends when you know they belong in class. Students are wearing clothes that break the school's dress code policy. You wonder what is happening.

You park your car and maneuver through the students to enter the front door of the school. Inside, things are not much different. Students roam the halls and some fight. Classroom doors are closed and little adult supervision is apparent in the hallways. Some parent volunteers are monitoring the hallways, but most of their efforts turn into confrontations. The noise level is hardly conducive to instruction. Chaos reigns.

Unfortunately, you hear that these patterns are an ongoing problem. The discipline referrals are high, resulting in students missing their classes—classes in which instruction is inconsistent at best. Out of necessity, classroom management takes precedence over teaching. These key factors contribute to low student scores on state assessments. Consequently, the school's state accountability rating is low performing.

Four years pass. You are curious and return to this school to see if the same ineffective patterns persist. Surprisingly, everything seems different from your recollections. No students linger outside the building, and all is quiet in the hallways. You peer into a few classrooms and see that students are engaged in academic conversations with one another and the teacher. Administrators, talking to students about what they are learning, are observing consistent, relevant instruction. The principal is sitting in the hallway with a student, discussing the student's test scores and grades, setting goals, and devising an achievement plan. Furthermore, parents are volunteering their clerical services instead of monitoring unruly students.

You realize that within a four-year period, a major transformation has occurred. This middle school has changed from a chaotic setting into a tranquil, productive learning environment. Scores on state assessments have improved; the school is no longer low performing. The school now focuses on meeting the needs of all students. Welcome to a successful system-based, structured school, North Texas Middle School.

North Texas's Transformation

The transformation at North Texas Middle School raises several questions. What has caused such drastic changes in the same school in such a short period? Why did office discipline referrals decrease? How has this become a procedural, system-based school where everyone shares the goal of doing what is best for children? To understand what caused the transformation that occurred at North Texas Middle School, we interviewed six teachers, six students, three assistant principals, and one principal, as well as conducted formal observations in three classrooms. To comply with district policies, we report our findings using pseudonyms for the campus and participants.

Overview

Four themes are relevant from the data we collected and analyzed. Our first theme, "Building Relationships," describes the need for establishing trust and developing respectful relationships among administrators, teachers, and students, which now permeate North Texas Middle School. "A Culture of Encouragement," our second theme, highlights the need to create an environment in which staff and students support one another and work together. With our third theme, "Guiding and Shaping a Team," we explore how one principal sets and models expectations, resulting in a cohesive faculty and staff for whom students are the focus. In our fourth theme, we present student descriptions of the attributes that create "A Motivational and Safe Environment."

Building Relationships

"Individuals and groups flourish best when they are in an emotional landscape where they are valued and heard, accorded respect and allowed dignity," states Steed (2009, p. 465). Walking into North Texas Middle School four years ago, Mr. John, the new principal, had a clear vision of turning around this low-performing campus. He believed his first step, imperative to success, should be to build an emotional landscape. To him, getting to know all of the teachers and students and listening to their needs were pertinent goals. He knew it was vital to establish strong, caring relationships among students and teachers, as with Styron and Nyman's (2008) description: "Creating a healthy school environment for students begins by supporting healthy relationships among the staff" (p. 2). Styron and Nyman (2008) also stress the importance of "proactively initiating team-building activities to encourage healthy interactions" (p. 13). During our observations and through our analysis of interview data, we conclude that the North Texas administrative team is synchronized and shares common beliefs. As Mr. David, an assistant principal, told us, "You can't move people or change things if you don't know the people—genuinely get to know them."

Today, team-building activities precede every meeting, large or small, and often include non-teaching staff. Ms. Gina, a special education teacher at North Texas, explains, "Teachers work to know each other on a personal level in and out of the school setting." The school gym is open on the weekends for the faculty to use; a retreat takes place off campus to start the school year; and throughout the year, administration sets time aside for social gatherings. "Now teachers feel a part of a team, all working towards a common goal. Teachers are here for each other, to vent to and then to help you work through the day-to-day frustrations," teacher Ms. Valerie concludes.

Mr. John knows that people are more important than paperwork. For a school to succeed, a principal has to have authentic relationships with teachers and students. This is similar to one of Curwin's (2010) conclusions: "In order to get through to youth in meaningful ways, they need to know that educators genuinely care about them" (p. 38). Teachers and assistant administrators express a philosophy like Curwin's: until kids know you care, they will not work for you. So, how does the North Texas faculty show youth they genuinely care? Assistant Principal Ms. Reba emphasizes, "Build relationships by not only getting to know students as people first and students second, but let students know you on a personal level too. Listen to students, no matter what the subject matter, to build that trust, and don't forget to take time to laugh with students."

Mr. David adds, “In order to make students self-motivated, you have to build relationships with them, having life conversations, finding their interests, and relating it to academic achievement.” Out of necessity, urban youths build walls to protect themselves and survive in their world, and educators must be able to reach through those walls without destroying them (Curwin, 2010). Ms. Valerie describes the administrators at North Texas Middle School as “gentle and respectful, but firm in disciplining.” Ms. Hayley, a third assistant principal, says that students know the expectations are not about discipline for the sake of discipline, but about building lifelong skills. Administrators work hard to earn that trust and respect from students so that students feel comfortable coming to them without concern for consequences. This keeps some issues from becoming bigger problems. Consequently, students learn that authority figures are readily available and always willing to help.

Shaunessy and McHatton (2008) found, “A student’s relationship with his or her teacher is one of the most critical facets of learning” (p. 486). Styron and Nyman (2008) affirm that when students develop “close, trusting relationships with adults and peers,” this creates “a climate that supports personal and academic growth” (p. 2). Ms. Gwen, a teacher, explains, “Kids just need someone to pay attention to them and care about what they have to say.” She accomplishes this goal from the beginning of the school year by giving each student a communication journal in which they can share anything they want with her; all information remains confidential unless it is life-threatening. She responds daily to students in their journals. She starts each semester with self-inventories that students share with the class and allows youth to ask her twenty questions, personal or professional, that she shares with the class. Ms. Valerie believes in knowing students’ interests from outside of school and incorporating them into daily instruction. She says she is herself with her students, as she is with her own daughter, and that she gives students her mobile number to show she is there to support them at all times. Mr. Bob, another teacher, mentions that the majority of the teachers allow students to eat lunch in their classrooms to build relationships and connect with students. He believes students need to know that you think they are smart and receive verbal praise. Teacher Ms. Brenda says that the majority of teachers at North Texas Middle School go out of their way for students by volunteering time to tutor or just visit with them. Mr. John requires teachers to be at their doors during passing periods, greeting students and conversing in a positive way to show they care.

Mike, a student at North Texas Middle School, says that teachers are always asking him how he is doing and if there is anything they can do to help him. Olicia, another student explains, “Teachers want the best for me and are always willing to stay and spend extra time with me to help me do anything I need.” She acknowledges how one of her teachers opens a portable classroom the Sunday before a state assessment for students who need study time, a place to relax, or reassurance that they can accomplish their goals. Ken calls his band director a “good friend” who is always willing to talk to him about anything. “Teachers pay attention to students, understand us, and they seem to know what we are going through,” adds another student, Ian. Student Mary says that most teachers will converse with you one-on-one about any problem in school or your life.

A Culture of Encouragement

At North Texas, strong relationships help create a culture in which administrators, teachers, and students encourage and support one another. Curwin (2010) explains, “One way to express hope in students is to believe in them. If teachers tell their students they believe in them, it will only be effective if it is true” (p. 38). He goes on to say that when students know that their teachers believe in them “they can succeed in school, and more importantly, in life” (p. 38). At North Texas, students begin each day by listening to positive announcements made by one of the administrators. Ian recalls, “The principal often makes announcements telling the students how he knows we can succeed in all we do.” Another example of the culture of encouragement is Ms. Gina’s explanation of how teachers can be a positive influence by modeling expectations for students. Students and teachers are on teams. Teachers on the team meet with struggling students individually to see what they can do to help.

College is another ongoing topic at North Texas. Students told us that teachers incorporate the importance of going to college into daily instruction. Olicia describes it like this: “Teachers motivate you and tell you that you can go to college as long as you put out the effort. They help us set goals for ourselves.” Jada, another North Texas student, comments, “My Spanish teacher tells us how hard life is without an education, that we need to have a high goal of going to college, and that we all can do it.” Many students talk about how teachers tell the students to stay in school, hang out with the right crowd, and remember how important an education is in their lives. Ian thinks his experience at North Texas has taught him to believe in himself. In fact, the principal has taken time to talk to Ian and his mother about making the right scheduling choices. The principal continued to follow up with Ian to ensure that Ian is comfortable with his choice. Ian states, “When I wasn’t doing well in a class, the principal and teachers helped me by listening to me, encouraging me, and putting me where I needed to be, which allowed me to be successful and believe in myself.”

The encouragement does not stop with administrators and teachers. Students at North Texas Middle School also encourage one another. The assistant principals observe students to determine who the leaders are of various groups. They talk to these student-leaders behind the scenes to encourage them and coach them to be positive examples for their peers. Ms. Reba explains how the counseling department has started a student leadership group of eighth graders. First, during the summer, the counselors study the records of seventh graders who are at risk or have low achievement scores, many absences, or discipline issues. Next, from the start of the school year, counselors work with the eighth-grade student leadership group to train them to be mentors and positive leaders for incoming at-risk seventh graders. These student mentors have turned around their own behavior by taking on new responsibility and believing in themselves.

Teachers encourage students who are exceeding in classes to peer-coach struggling students. Stancato (2003) explained, “. . . the implementation of small-group learning activities facilitates positive meaning and a sense of identity for all adolescents by providing increased opportunities for active student involvement, status, and personal recognition” (p. 21). Believing this, Mr. John trains all teachers on a cooperative learning strategy that incorporates teaching students the proper way to coach and encourage one another. Hence, Ms. Gina describes students automatically and willingly assisting fellow students. The relaxed, but well-managed atmosphere

in classrooms establishes a comfort level that allows students to take risks. Students explain their thought processes while the teacher facilitates. As Mary reveals, “Students will tell you ‘good job’ when you do things right in class and in school sports.” Jada summarizes that “it feels like home when you are here with friends and teachers to help you.”

North Texas’s administration defines the philosophy at their school: teachers are there for the kids, not the check. In order to realize this philosophy, Mr. John illuminates, “You can’t be scared to make changes if it is for the kids. What people think about you has to take a backseat to what’s best for students.” As a leader of change, he knows you cannot rely on the funding, but you can depend on a “can-do” attitude coupled with passion.

Guiding and Shaping a Team

“Passion is the most important thing to have, even to the extent that you come into the school and say hello with passion to colleagues and students,” expresses Mr. John. This is a philosophy he lives by and expects his teachers to abide by. His multi-tiered plan, which he feels every administrator should follow, includes: (1) Teachers possessing a positive mindset and being excited to come to work every day, (2) principals talking about data with teachers and celebrating successes, and (3) principals being cordial with the staff but having critical conversations when needed. He believes, “Anyone can walk into a school and teach a child who wants to learn, but I need teachers who can walk in here and teach the child who doesn’t want to learn. You must have passion to do that and be happy to be here. As the principal, it is my responsibility to get and keep people like that.”

Styron and Nyman (2008) state, “The principal is not rigid and controlling, but supportive of teachers acting independently to improve instruction” (p. 12). Mr. John listens to teachers and ensures that professional development sessions include time to talk through concerns as a team of administrators and teachers. Ms. Reba reveals, “We allow teachers to vent their frustrations and feel comfortable sharing their solutions and new ideas, but we must also be ready to explain to teachers why we make the decisions we ultimately make.”

Nor and Roslan (2009) state that principals must be “willing to reach out and help everyone discover and realize their potential” (p. 24). Mr. David points out that the key is to put people in situations in which they can be successful. He illustrates, “Giving each teacher a role on their team and changing those roles often allows teachers to share their strengths, stay motivated, and stay challenged.” Teachers reiterate that administration is open to their ideas and always willing to listen. Ms. Gina adds, “Administration not only will listen to new ideas, but if it is in the best interest of students, they will help make it happen.”

Students know that adults believe in them and care at North Texas. Nor and Roslan (2009) write, “The role of the principal in shaping a caring school culture is pivotal in pursuing a sense of belonging amongst students in schools as well as confidence in their self-worth” (p. 23-24). At North Texas, Mr. John works to know all students by name and to know them in and out of the school setting. He attends and discusses extracurricular activities with players and spectators. Ms. Gina emphasizes, “Mr. John is always in the hallway, talking to students, getting to know

them personally, and then pulling in academic issues through personal issues.” Mr. John dedicates time on his personal calendar to ensure that he meets with students, often one-on-one. Olicia stresses, “Mr. John meets with students at the beginning of the year to discuss your grades from last year, what you want to improve on, and helps you set up a plan to achieve those goals. He meets again later on in the year to see how you are doing, and he will encourage you to keep up the good work or help you make a new plan of action. I know he really cares about my grades and all students’ grades.” Another student Mike explains, “The principal comes into classes and asks us what we are doing regularly; he will review with us or just sit and have us explain to him what we are learning. If we don’t understand it, he will explain it to us.” Mr. John also celebrates accomplishments with the students. In fact, he makes a point to know the individual student data so he can make comments highlighting their achievements. “Students are always surprised at first when I comment on how he or she went up so many points on their last test. Then they just expect me to know and come to me to tell me how they are doing,” Mr. John muses.

A Motivational and Safe Environment

At a successful school, “Meaningful messages and slogans grace the school walls, staircases, and spaces under the staircases . . . to remind students and teachers constantly of the school’s vision and mission” (Nor & Roslan, 2009, p. 27-28). At North Texas, the environment reflects this. Many of the students can quote the motivating posters displayed in the halls and classrooms. Jada recalls one of her favorites, “Your mind controls your body.” Students express that these posters and slogans are important to them and serve as reminders of what they should be doing. Ian offers, “The posters in class are not just motivating, but also relate to what is being taught and are reminders for us. They also will post good work to praise students, which makes our work feel important.” Mr. David points out that “making the environment structured and organized brings a sense of safety and security for students.” Ms. Reba adds, “Students feel safe here and know teachers and administrators are here to monitor them. We provide them places to be themselves here.” Mary expresses, “Teachers look out for you even if they don’t know you.”

Final Thoughts

We are sharing our story of a single school. Our interpretation is one of many that are possible. However, what we learned at North Texas correlates with existing research on school turnaround. MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) remark, “School principals seeking to improve student performance should focus on improving the school’s culture by getting relationships right between themselves, their teachers, students, and parents” (p. 77-78). This school exemplifies how organizational structures, starting with relationship building, lead to student motivation and potentially increases student achievement. By shifting mindsets and changing a culture, this administrator has succeeded in empowering teachers and students. Furthermore, he focuses on a clear vision while understanding the challenges: tough decisions have to be made and turnaround requires time. Also, the establishment of clear and collaborative goals, both short-term and long-term; transparent communication among all members of the school community; and ongoing celebrations are necessary to increase motivation.

Mr. John is the first to say the work is not complete. The administrators and staff constantly consider new ways to handle situations. As Mr. David concludes, “We analyze what happened. Did it happen the way we envisioned it? . . . We look through the lens of all stakeholders and get everyone’s input. We don’t always try to just add new things, but make things we are doing the best they can be.” One example North Texas expanded on is the district’s initiative with lead teachers coaching colleagues. Consistent with his ongoing goals, Mr. John is developing a more structured way to utilize lead teachers on his campus in the coming year by sending them to more intensive instructional coaching training. To help the lead teachers set goals, every teacher identified a challenge they faced, allowing the lead teacher to be better prepared to coach teachers throughout the year. Finally, Mr. John is working on creating an Advisory Program to better prepare students for their futures, and he concludes, “I am always working on my personal inner growth, how I can grow myself to be more equipped to grow others.”

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