



Strategies for Improving Adult Culture

Effective educational leadership, positive adult culture in schools, and strong teacher morale are critical in achieving excellent results for children. Teacher morale is a by-product of being treated with respect and is the "end product of empowering teachers to make decisions that affect their lives." (Dina Strasser, An Open Letter on Teacher Morale, Ed Leadership Feb 2014. p. 13). In our work with school districts to address what is often "the elephant in the room", the relationships and interactions of the adults in the system, we have recommended the following strategies to help improve adult culture in a safe, respectful, engaging, and fun way that will make everyone happier and schools more effective for everybody.

1. Replace a Tone of Accountability with One of Innovation and Creativity

Schools, especially low-performing schools, often seek relief from pressure through alignment, adherence and compliance with a certain program, curriculum, set of standards, and so on. While there is nothing wrong with having standards and expecting teachers to stick to them, when this is done wrong it can create a climate of "accountability" and "non-negotiables" that requires all teachers to prove they are in compliance on a daily basis. And this is *not* an atmosphere of innovation or creativity.

2. "Brand" Content, Classrooms and Teachers -- Not Districts, Curriculum and Schools

Today, it is generally the district, a selected curriculum or the school itself that gets the "branding," and is what parents and students discuss. To increase teacher morale, why not put the content areas (or unique classes based on those content areas), classrooms and teachers at the center of attention? This goes against tradition, where teachers shy away from acclaim and spotlight, but maybe that -- in one way or another -- can change...

3. Replace Forced Collaboration with Reasons for Collaboration

Teacher collaboration, in person or in professional learning communities and networks online, is a huge catalyst for teacher improvement. But forcing teachers to collaborate works about as well as forcing students to learn. Just as project-based learning works best under the duress of an authentic need-to-know, teacher collaboration works best under a similar need-to-collaborate, not through forced and externally driven "data teams."

4. Use Project-Based Learning to Embed within Local Communities

This would help with the branding mentioned above, but more importantly, it would put teachers in contact with the stakeholders they are most accountable to: the local community.

5. Replace Teacher of the Year with a Teacher Awards Ceremony

Teacher of the Year ceremonies celebrate teaching by celebrating one teacher.

Why not celebrate all teachers -- and do so in some merit-based way rather than the "everybody gets a ribbon" model?

6. Replace "Non-Negotiables" with Evidence of Success

What if we replaced the goals of 'academic success' with something else?

Let's try evidence of success with a focus on the persistent visibility of student work, and let's train those who do "walk-throughs" to more efficiently navigate that work.