

Creating a Culture of Achievement Through Shared Leadership:
A Collaborative Team Approach

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Shared Leadership: A Collaborative Team Approach

Creating a culture of achievement can transform a school and benefit students. A positive school climate will increase employee and student satisfaction while boosting achievement. “Improvements in student achievement will happen in schools with positive and professional cultures that reflect a positive school climate. Strong school cultures have better motivated teachers. Highly motivated teachers have greater success in terms of student performance and student outcomes” (MacNeil A. 2009, p3). Our school has benefited from a culture of achievement.

Delta Learning Center is an alternative high school that serves students with social emotional needs. It is a high school district located on the southwest side of Chicago, we serve a diverse population with many students living in poverty. Our school is committed to creating a culture of achievement. In order to create this culture, we have collaboratively created a mission/vision statement that defines our purpose, values and goals. Furthermore, we have created a strategic plan that aligns with the mission. This plan outlines the initiatives and research based strategies being used to create a culture of achievement. In implementing these strategies we use data as performance measures to determine their effectiveness. Adjustments are made when needed. This approach helps maintain a culture of achievement.

Collaborative committees have been formed to implement the strategic plan. Leadership is distributed throughout the committees, tapping into perspectives and contributions from all members. Leadership goes beyond a handful of administrators. Committees are formed to address each component of the strategic plan. The committees in each building meet weekly and then share out with the entire staff. This collaborative approach shares leadership and encourages all stakeholders to take a leadership role. It creates a sense of pride and

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accomplishment. Shared leadership increases accountability, empowerment, and alleviates burnout by distributing responsibility. This team approach profoundly impacts the school culture. Instead of pointing fingers and complaining about decisions being made, people are empowered by being included in the decision making process. Committees are made up of faculty, administrators, teacher aides, and support staff. It is really a collaborative approach. Another component is that student feedback and input is used when making decisions. Surveys and other forms of qualitative data are used to drive decisions. The initiatives addressed by the committees include equity/opportunity, meaningful engagement, technology and trauma informed/social emotional needs.

Our school is an alternative school that serves students with social emotional needs. The cultural factors in our district include violence/trauma, socioeconomic factors, and cultural differences. Our community experiences high levels of gang violence and trauma. Trauma is a major factor influencing student success. “Research from across disciplines underscores the impact of trauma on all aspects of a child's development. Neuroscientists studying the impact of trauma on brain development have determined that these experiences actually alter brain structure” (Walkley M.; Cox A. 2016, p1). In order to help our students cope, we have implemented a trauma informed approach. To deal with socioeconomic factors are district has implemented several programs to provide equity and opportunity. We are dedicated to being aware of cultural differences impacting achievement and are implementing programs to address student’s needs.

The trauma informed approach is very beneficial in our school. Although there is a committee dedicated to being trauma informed, this a school wide initiative. The entire staff

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collaborates to develop social emotional learning activities. The initiative goes beyond the classroom and provides support services, alternative activities and positive outlets such as a meditation room and fitness center. A major component of this initiative is to provide a sense of safety, security and acceptance. Adequate support such as counseling is provided. Students are taught how to regulate their emotions and interact with staff and peers. Our school is a “safe place” where students know people care about them and will help them achieve their goals.

The trauma informed approach has made significant impacts on our school. It gives students needed support and skills as well as empowering staff with tools to help our students. Data indicates that this approach has been beneficial. Since becoming trauma informed attendance, grades and student behavior have improved. Discipline referrals have decreased and there are less physical management situations. The trauma informed approach has transformed the culture of achievement in our school.

In order to maintain a culture of achievement, our district has developed a shared vision and mission by using a collaborative approach. “The ability to work collaboratively with others is becoming an essential component of contemporary school reform.” (Slater L. 2002, p1). Several strategies are being used to reach our goals. A collaborative approach using committees is used to develop and implement the mission and vision. Our district uses several leadership strategies to achieve the mission/vision. Delta High School has created a mission and vision that defines student success. Student success is measured by student’s graduating and achieving post-secondary success. Adjustments are made to the mission when needed. “A mission statement should never get written in stone, and, much less, stashed in a drawer. Use it or lose it. Review and revise as necessary, because change is constant” (Berry T. 2017, p6). The mission

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will have a lasting impact when it is a living document that is embedded into the organization's culture and continues to evolve. The main goals of the mission are enabling our students to graduate high school and successfully enter a career or post-secondary program after high school.

A major component of our leadership model uses data driven decision making. “ The recent demand for schools to respond to accountability measures challenges school leaders to use data to guide the practices of teaching and learning. Data driven decision making helps leaders and teachers access data, reflect on what the data mean, plan and determine what needs to be done, and assess the results of the plan” (Halverson R. 2006, p4). Attendance / discipline data, surveys, common standard based assessments, and standardized tests are used by committees to make informed decisions.

Staff and students are recognized for accomplishments through weekly announcements over the intercom, bulletin boards and on social media. Students are rewarded with certificate of achievement and gift cards. An important component is recognizing students is to provide encouragement and provide reinforcement for showing growth. Improvements and incremental gains are recognized along with major accomplishments. Accomplishments of faculty, staff and students are recognized and celebrated frequently . “Implementation of recognition programs to boost awareness of the organization, build employee pride, raise morale, and increase productivity” (Magnus M. 1981, p3). Our district uses weekly staff meetings, incentive programs, social media, local newspapers and newsletters to recognize achievement and accomplishments.

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Many of our students struggled at traditional schools and our behind in credits. Therefore it's critical to provide a sense of hope by providing a pathway to success. This is achieved by providing academic support, online credit recovery classes and providing a work program. The credit recovery classes allow students to make up credits and fulfill graduation requirements. The work program gives students work opportunities in the community throughout the school day. Students learn valuable work skills, life skills, gain employment opportunities and form meaningful relationships with community leaders. This shows students that they can graduate and they have a pathway to achieve success. When students realize that success is attainable, motivation skyrockets. Delta High School has created a mission and vision that defines student success based on student input. Student success is measured by student's graduating and achieving post-secondary success. A component of achieving our schools mission is creating a rigorous academic curriculum that helps prepare students for post-secondary success. "Academic rigor is needed both to stimulate the students intellectually and enhance their academic growth" (McCollister K. 2012, p.2). Students graduate with skills needed to achieve their post-secondary goals.

Effective communication is another component of school leadership. Effective communication is critical in maintaining school achievement and creating a positive school climate. "Being able to communicate is vital to being an effective educator. Communication not only conveys information, but it encourages effort, modifies attitudes, and stimulates thinking" (Davies L. 2001, p3). Email, phone, formal communication, newsletters and social media are used to keep all stakeholders informed. Teachers are held accountable for communicating with parents. Each teacher must submit a quarterly communication log. The vision and mission are

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visually displayed throughout the building and is reviewed frequently with all stakeholders. The mission is ingrained and embedded in all that we do.

We have established several strategic partners. First, we formed a partnership with college admissions and counselors. Admission counselors and financial aid reps meet with every senior to guide them through the process. Next, we have formed partnerships with local businesses to create a job program. This helps our students learn career competencies and prepares for life after high school. Research indicates that in order for students to reach academic potential, that social emotional needs must be addressed. A collaborative approach is used to teach social emotional learning and coping skills.

Creating a culture of achievement through collaboration and shared leadership can increase achievement. This approach creates a positive climate that creates a productive learning environment. Creating a positive culture is important at any school but is even more critical at an alternative school. Addressing social emotional issues through a trauma informed approach enables students to succeed and reach their goals. Our program is mission driven and relies on feedback, data and research to guide decisions. Our school uses a collaborative team approach to increase accountability and to maintain a culture of achievement. Delta Learning Center will provide students with a high quality education by creating a culture of achievement. This culture will be maintained by implementing a collaborative team approach. Together, we will continue to help our students graduate high school and prepare them for continued success.

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