

Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Battling Teacher Burnout and Promoting Peer Based Professional Development

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Abstract:

While working at my dream school, more and more of my colleagues were suffering from very low morale and bordering on teacher burn out. As much as we valued our beloved and continual professional development opportunities, I often heard from colleagues how overwhelmed they are and that they don't feel their work is good enough. I started studying and working on interventions that might build their sense of efficacy and celebrate the amazing skills I know they have. My interventions focused on supporting colleagues' congenial and collegial relationships to allow them to be willing to take on learning and share their work via peer-based professional development. My major findings centered around the need for personal and professional times together for planning, processing, and professional development opportunities, structures to support communication, transparency, teacher voice, and avenues for distributed leadership throughout the staff. These findings push me to continue to advocate and research ways to create and support structures in place that will help balance the hard work that is done, and what is needed to be done to ensure teacher stability and student growth.

Why The Heart of the Matter?

This topic pulled especially hard on my heart this last year because it was worrisome to see my colleagues getting closer to burnout and/or not enjoying their day-to-day job as much as they once had. For teachers to be able to help their students reach their highest potential, teachers also need to be supported to their highest potential. Teacher burnout is real and possible even at a school full of passionate and hardworking teachers who have high levels of support and growth opportunities from their school and district. It continues to bring me the most joy, and be my ultimate calling to support as many students and classrooms as possible, by reaching out and finding ways to lift up and support my colleagues and other educators.

Research Questions:

- What impact does increasing the consistency of in-house PD and peer based instructional rounds throughout the year have on teacher efficacy and morale?
- Will giving teachers consistent times, places, and scaffolded support in strengthening congenial and collegial relationship building increase their sense of efficacy, morale, and instructional practices and use of school structures for teacher learning?
- Does involving teachers in the work of evaluating our school structures, systems, and culture of professional development increase: teachers' sense of efficacy, our school's level of distributed leadership, teachers' willingness to learn (i.e., their growth mindset)?

Action Research Timeline			
Event/Intervention	Description	Rationale	Dates
Staff Meeting Community Builder	-Staff led community building activity -Approximately 5 minutes at the start of staff meetings	-Relationship building -safe opportunity for peer facilitation -increase sense of efficacy	Started end of September and continued through end of year
Peer Based Instructional Rounds	-Volunteer, peer based observational rounds based on feedback	-Promote collegial relationships and conversation. -Foster consistent in house PD and teacher reflection	-First round in December -Second round in late March
In House Peer-led PD	-Use formal and informal feedback to plan PD supports (Math DMI & Teacher consultations)	- Respond to immediate/current teacher and student needs - Build teacher sense of efficacy and celebration of in school knowledge and skill	-Instructional Team Afterschool bimonthly November through April -Early Release meeting teacher consultation sharing
Peer Based Book Study	Study mindfulness in the classroom: <i>Breath, Teach, Learn.</i>	Teacher requested study of texts to support morale and work-life balance.	Monthly December - February
Getting To Know You...	Community Builder game where a person gives hints to their secret person each day	Strengthen relationships and help strengthen community across classified and certificated staff	Feb 2 – Feb 14
Friday Socials	Monthly open invite for coffee, tea, and snacks before school	During contract hours as another way to connect with classified and certificated staff	Monthly December – End of Year

Making it Work - Methods:

Collecting Data:

- Interviewed a sample group in Oct/Nov
- Pre and Post Surveys for whole certificated staff, volunteer based from about 40 teachers via Google Forms in Oct/Nov and late Mar
- Ongoing informal observations

Procedures and Interventions:

- Sought feedback and voice on current morale and professional development needs
 - Ongoing morale boosting interventions starting in the fall: Friday Socials, Community Builders, Getting to Know You activities
 - Increased Peer-based Professional Development Opportunities: Mindfulness Book Study, Non-evaluative Instructional Rounds/Walk Throughs such as “Popcorn Peer Party” (Cinema Crawl style walk through to observe and reflect on each other’s practice via videos) and “Pineapple Peer Day” (walk throughs across the day during teacher prep times)
 - Advocated and encouraged teacher led consultancies during staff meetings and afterschool instructional team meetings
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Getting to The Heart of it - Findings

- Slight increase in morale and sense of voice/input for professional development
 - Essence of Time to: build congenial and collegial relationships, plan and process learning from PD, and when to have PD opportunities
 - Clear structures and options for teacher feedback and voice on what supports are needed for both staff congenial and collegial relationships and professional development opportunities are welcomed and valued by teachers
 - Teachers valued and appreciated being part of the decision making for what kind of PD, what focus, and when it took place
 - Teachers were already doing many informal activities with teams and colleagues to build morale and have informal PD together – helping them create structures for it made those efforts stronger and less of a burden/load for many of those teachers
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Sample Survey and Interview Questions:

- How happy and content are you right now at work?
 - What do you feel you need to be happier and more content in your job?
 - What do you feel you need to be happier and more content in your job?
 - What are things you have done, or are doing, to help your morale or the morale of your colleagues (or to strengthen relationships)?
 - What types of professional development makes you feel most supported?
 - If you wanted to share your input on professional development focuses, do you feel like you have a way to do that?
 - How would you change current structures to make them more supportive? Are there any structures you would like to add or take away?
 - If you have ever participated in Peer-based PD such as instructional rounds/walk throughs (like Popcorn Peer Party or Pineapple Peer Day), observations, etc. what was your overall experience of them?
 - Going forward, what would you like to see in our overall school culture and professional development?
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Going Forward:

- Collaborate with administration and instructional coaches to create more and clear avenues for teacher leaderships in various capacities to help lessen the load and create a variety of social and professional supports throughout the year
 - Research and look for various structures and routines that can be brought into schools to support regular communication between administration and staff, feedback/teacher voice and input, and PD opportunities (both peer-based and outsourced)
 - Collaborate with Coaches Team and Administration to be more cognizant of timing of seeking feedback for focuses and when planning time of day and school year for PD opportunities
 - Support individuals in balancing their mindfulness and work-life balance, to help positive mindsets transfer to others in the building
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