

Voices from Principals at Rural Schools under Chronic Academic Stress

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Increased Pressures...

- Accountability & higher standards
- School turnaround efforts; school district identification of “problem” schools
- Importance of school culture to attain desired goals; a college-going culture

Nevada State GEAR UP



- Goal for each of its middle school principals is to establish a college-going culture at the school
 - First two years of the grant: 2012-2013 & 2013-2014

How do principals and core teachers at rural middle schools under chronic academic stress work to create a college-going culture?

School Contexts

- Rural, isolated communities; away from services 25-90 minutes
 - Two combined, K-12 schools
 - Two combined, K-8 schools
 - One stand-alone middle school, 6-8
- Student populations: mostly 20-60 students
 - The stand-alone had approximately 170 students
 - Stable during two years of the study

School Contexts Cont.

- **Racial/ethnic student composition**
 - Three schools on/near an Indian Reservation
 - Native American student population
 - One school in an agricultural community
 - Latino student population
 - Two schools served as county seats
 - Caucasian student population
- **Free and/or Reduced Lunch (FRL)**
 - All Title I schools
 - Three had 60-75% FRL
 - Three had 92-100% FRL

School Performance Framework

- Four Performance Indicators
 - Student Growth over time (SGP)
 - Performance on single administration of state assessment (meet or exceed standards)
 - Achievement Gap reductions (AGP)
 - Another indicator (usually attendance)
- Academic Classifications
 - $\leq 32 \rightarrow$ One Star
 - 32-49 \rightarrow Two Stars
 - 50-67 \rightarrow Three Stars
 - 68-76 \rightarrow Four Stars
 - 77 + \rightarrow Five Stars

School Academic Classifications

- Three schools
 - 1-star rating for FY 2012-2013
- One school
 - 2-star rating for both years
- One school
 - 3-star rating for both years
- One school
 - 1-star to 3-star increase

Participants (Leaders)

- 12 middle school leaders
 - Two self-identified as lead teachers
 - One was an assistant principal
 - 10 male, 2 female
 - All Caucasian, one Native American
 - Only 5 veteran school leaders, all others were first-time principals

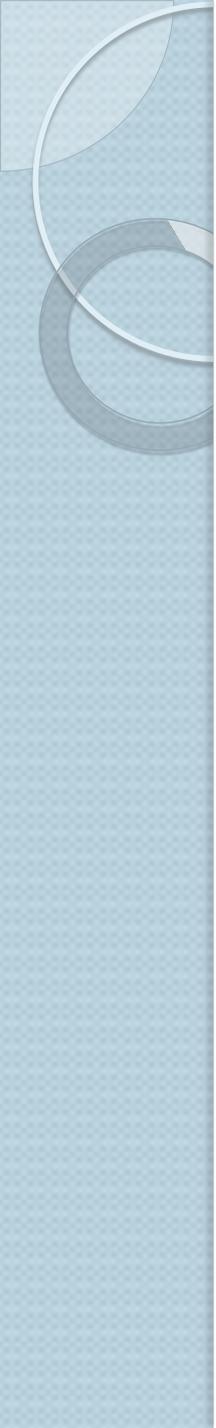
Middle School	Principal 2012-2013	Principal 2013-2014
School 1	Principal A & Assistant Principal A	Principal A & Assistant Principal A
School 2	Principal B	Principal C
School 3	Principal D	Principal D/Principal E
School 4	Principal F	Principal G
School 5	Principal H	Principal F
School 6	Principal I/Principal J	Principal J

Participants (Teachers)

- Core teachers invited to participate
 - English, math, science
- 12 teachers participated
 - For three middle schools – all three core teachers
 - For one middle school – two core teachers
 - For one middle school – one core teacher
 - Remaining school – no participation (leadership transition)
- All but one were veteran teachers
- 7 of the 12 teachers were new to their school

General Findings

- Principals & teachers expressed an understanding for school improvement and a college-going culture
- College-going messages & events were fostered
- Schools had Student-Parent Involvement Facilitator (grant-funded position):
 - College-events
 - College pennants & posters
 - Campus visits, STEM activities, family nights, etc.
- Professional Learning Community *time*



Three Themes

I. School leaders are optimistic; teachers are demoralized

- School leaders

- Appreciative of increased resources
- Believed in capacity of teachers
- Recognized need for some professional development (PD)
- Expressed that many pieces were in the right place

- Teachers

- Believed they were uniquely qualified
- Expressed desire to just do the job – teach
- Overwhelmed with external PD requirements

2. A focus on the “wrong”

- A clear focus on the “wrong” or symptoms of failure
 - Seemingly the only option
 - External messages
 - Attempts to support school improvement
 - Constant PD initiatives
 - External identification of deficits
- Nearly impossible to identify forms of celebration
 - Clear lack of celebration/recognition of any form of success



“...so you know, to a certain extent, we’re kind of paying the time. We’re doing the time for the crime that was committed before [us].”

3. Feeling alone with a heavy weight

- School leaders seemed to feel alone in the entire process
 - Worked endlessly but saw few positive outcomes
 - Arrived at 5am and left after midnight
 - Piles of paperwork, meeting requirements, presence at PD with teachers
- Collaborated with teachers, built a rapport with students & families, fostered external partnerships...still a sense of isolation
 - Heavy weight on their shoulders

Discussion

- School leaders & teachers worked to turn around their schools and create a college-going culture
 - Fostered components reflective of one
 - Appeared isolated in nature, rather than reflection of school culture
- Leadership optimism was dichotomous with teacher sense of demoralization
 - Mandates could not be controlled, loss of autonomy; experiences of isolation
- High turnover & limited time for change

Voices from Principals

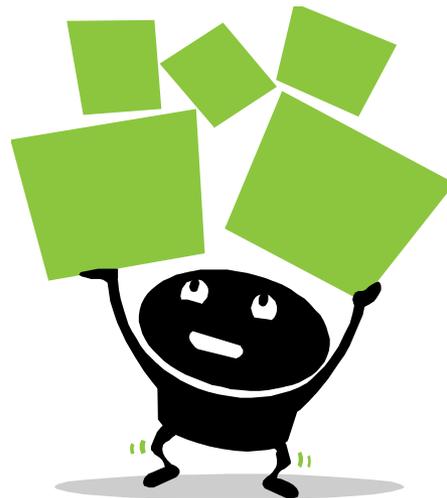
How do you *deal* with having demoralized teachers?

How do you maintain an optimism?



Voices from Principals

How do you balance celebrating success and continually pushing for higher achievement?



Voices from Principals

What was your experience with having weight on your shoulders?

What do you do? Do you have a mentor?



Voices from Principals

What are your current goals?

How are you bringing teachers into the process of creating and sustaining a college-going culture?

Questions from the audience?



Thank you!



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