The Outstanding School: Building a Positive School Culture

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Outstanding schools are different in their contexts, histories and designs. That said, research and inspection evidence suggest they have many qualities in common. Importantly they all have competent and effective leaders. Effective leaders have a plan. A vision for learning. They know where they want to go. Effective teachers have a plan. A vision for learning in their classroom. They know what their students need to know and do. Outstanding schools are full of effective leaders and teachers, and have positive learning cultures. This article examines key themes in the literature that underpin a positive school culture.

What do Outstanding Schools Have in Common?
Outstanding schools are different in their contexts, histories and designs (Lynch, et al, 2015; Hargreaves, et al, 2014). That said, research and inspection evidence suggest they have many qualities in common. Research on schools that have made the shift to outstanding identifies key aspects of the process of metamorphosing into outstanding institutions (see Madden et5 al, 2015; Hargreaves, Boyle & Harris, 2014; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2007). Coupled with this research and my own experience in fostering school improvement I suggest there are four overlapping themes:

1. Consistency of and creativity in teaching
Outstanding schools have systems and approaches which guarantee that the overwhelming majority of teaching in classrooms is at least good, and usually excellent. These systems and approaches are evidence-based; they avoid opinions or guess work. Senior leaders between them have a monitoring role which enables them to be confident in their knowledge of the professional qualities of all the teachers in the school. Once consistency has been reliably attained, the emphasis is on increasing the frequency with which lessons are truly memorable experiences of learning for teacher and students alike. Using formative assessments of students' work and moderated across the school a sound picture of students' progress is provided. The artefacts of students' learning are celebrated (Lynch, et al, 2015).

2. A Personalised Curriculum
Outstanding schools provide a curriculum that is adapted for students so that every student has an individual pathway that is guided by the teacher and in collaboration with parents. Continuous assessment allows ongoing modification of learning tasks. Such data gathering allows the teachers to constantly review student learning and provide the necessary instructional strategies to help build the next phase of the students' learning plan .

3. Engagement of students

Students in outstanding schools see themselves as active partners in the school's life and work, not as passive consumers of a pre-planned product. This sense of partnership is realised through students' participation in regular reviews of their work and progress, and through the sincere attention that staff pay to their opinions on all aspects of the school's activity and organisation. Students' voices may be heard through the school council, through the influence of their representatives in the appointment of staff, or through a system by which students appraise the effectiveness of their teachers.

4. Relationship with the Outside World

Outstanding schools maintain mutually productive relationships with parents and the wider local community. Their communication systems are excellent. Parents have a genuine influence on the school's policies and procedures. Governing bodies of outstanding schools understand their strategic role in influencing or affirming the school's overall direction, while allowing senior leaders their space to execute the strategic plan. Outstanding schools often provide guidance and mentor other schools which are looking to improve.

Great staff cultures don't just happen or are conjured up by a dynamic and charismatic leader; they come from a consistent number of tiny actions that gel together and create a strong foundation. From recruiting new staff to daily interactions and quick chats when passing in corridors, exceptional leaders keep their ear to the ground to ensure a positive, engaged, strong staff community. They encourage teachers to reflect on their practice and to challenge their ideas. In short, building outstanding schools begins with having outstanding teachers.

A key mechanism to nurturing the outstanding teacher is the formation of teacher action research cycle (Lynch, et al, 2015). As pointed out in the introduction to this special edition, this process engages teacher in the assessment and improvement of their own practice. In doing so it helps the school assess problems, enact changes, and reassess planning and while teacher action research looks different in every school setting, there are some common characteristics of teacher action research. It is:

- focused on school improvement;
- undertaken by teachers within the school as opposed to academics outside the school;
- not only focused on improving a teacher's teaching, but also the various in class and out of class factors that affect the impact of the process of teaching;
- a cyclic process of evaluation, designing an action, putting the action into practice, and then re-evaluation; and
- focused on solving problems and introducing change action.

Inspirational Leadership: Building Staff Culture

Principals of outstanding schools have had an overall, long-term vision of what their school could be and have translated that vision into practical and successful initiatives in consultation with staff and senior leaders (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). They know how to appoint excellent people to other leadership positions in the school, and then trust them to do their jobs; distribution of leadership is normal. While encouraging innovation and measured risk-taking on the part of staff, they are uncompromising in addressing poor teaching performance. They promote an atmosphere of confident pride in the school's culture. They fulfil their role as the

principal representative of the school in its relations with the community it serves (Hattie, 2012; 2008; Robinson et al, 2008; Park et al, 2016).

Once the principal has the staff in place, the next point of order is to build a positive staff culture with the view to harnessing the collective talents and focus on the business of the school: teaching and learning .

The Four Pillars for Nurturing a Positive Staff Culture
Building and fostering a staff culture can be centred on the following four pillars as depicted in figure 1.
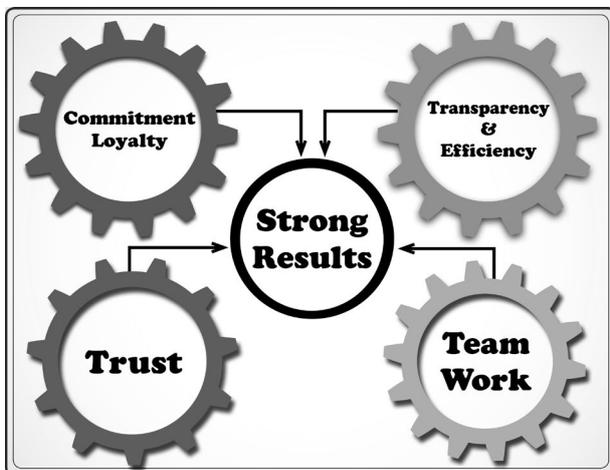

Figure 1: Four Pillars for Nurturing a Positive Staff Culture

Let's briefly unpack each of the pillars.

Pillar 1: Loyalty and Commitment:
Positive relationships underpin the success of an organisation and it is through the relationships that staff bond and connect to each other. Building the environment where highly qualified staff are attracted and retained generally indicates a highly committed, and loyal workforce. Committed and loyal teachers reinforce teachers' motivation to act in the best interest of the school they work for.

Pillar 2: Transparency & Efficiency:
Increasingly teachers are encouraged to work in professional learning communities, data teams, and other structures intended to encourage teachers to work together to unpack curricula, plan instruction, assess learning, analyze data, revise instruction, re-analyze data, and then evaluate the impact of individual teaching strategies. As we collaborate more we become more transparent in our actions and decision making. This enables parents and other stakeholders greater opportunities to see what's happening in the classroom.

Being more transparent in the work educators do in schools, the data they collect and the results of their actions assists in increasing school efficiency.

Pillar 3: Trust

Research highlights that the lack of trust within the school environment leads to staff disengagement in their work (teaching and learning) (Park, Lim & Ju, 2016). This in turn fosters low morale which often decreases one's commitment to the organisation. Ultimately, the product of a lack of commitment is a decrease in productivity. Without a purposeful and consistent effort to foster trust and build strong relationships at every step of the way, even the best-designed and thoughtful engagement processes will almost certainly either fail or fall far short of the success school leaders seek to achieve.

When you have trusting relationships between your team members and their leaders, you have the foundation to create an engaged, committed, and high-performing workforce—a successful school where everyone works together effectively toward the school's goals.

The key is that for trust to exist, others must choose to make themselves vulnerable to their leaders by taking risks at their request.

Pillar 4: Teamwork
"Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success"
Henry Ford

The above maxim by Henry Ford can very well highlight the importance of working together in teams. Teams are formed when individuals with a common taste, preference, liking, and attitude come and work together for a common goal. Teams play a very important role in schools as well as our personal lives. Every staff member is dependent on his or her colleague to work together and contribute efficiently to the school. No staff member can work alone; he or she should take the help of their colleagues to accomplish the tasks efficiently.

Given the four pillars, the heart of the effective leader is in fostering school improvement.

Developing Instructional Leaders

How does facilitating and promoting the four pillars outlined above support instruction? Without outstanding teaching, nothing else matters. The inter-relatedness of the four pillars drives every teacher to continually improve and excel.

Teams don't win championships with only one star player. We need to develop other leaders to help implement the school vision, raise the quality of teaching and learning and then hold them accountable for the school improvement initiatives. This sets up a culture where everyone is focused on improving their performance. This will lead to making sure teaching and learning is of an outstanding quality, and consequently, improvement in other areas of school life will follow. When school leaders embed the four pillars in the school then the following four foci centres the outstanding leader in driving school improvement:

1. *Data-Driven Instruction:* If you teach and students do not learn, is it really teaching? You cannot know if students are learning at the highest levels if you don't assess that learning.

Data-driven instruction, then, becomes the roadmap for rigor. (But this is not a mandated for excessive standardised testing!)

    2. *Observation and Feedback:* An elite sportsman never improved by only a couple of observations & review of their performance. The best coaching happens on-the-spot: in repeated, consistent, small chunks. Outstanding school leaders don't leave this to chance: they construct a program that allows teachers to engage regularly with a job embedded professional learning plan.

    3. *Planning:* You wouldn't go on a road trip without a map. Thoughtful lesson and unit planning does the same thing for teaching. Leaders can make that planning even more effective by supporting teachers directly in the planning process, preventing problems before they occur.

    4. *Professional Development:* What keeps professional development from being a series of isolated workshops that have little impact on instruction? Great leaders connect it to the other instructional levers, creating an avenue for giving teachers multiple chances to practice before implementing in the classroom.

In Summary

As crucial as teachers are to the success of student learning, principals are a vital cog in nurturing teacher professional learning. The role of leaders in fostering positive learning communities is undoubtedly one of the most important functions for supporting school improvement. Strong positive learning cultures are places with a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn. To help staff build upon their professional knowledge, principals need to put in structures that lead to create an environment that supports creativity and innovation. Focusing on the four pillars as identified in this article, principals and school leaders can begin the journey to developing outstanding schools.

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