

# For principals' professional learning, overlap and modeling count

*As told to Anthony Armstrong*

**F**or principals, their own professional learning is in a constant time crunch. Fortunately, a lot of my own professional learning overlaps with teacher professional learning, such as when we recently sought ways to create a positive and focused start to the students' day.

When I arrived as principal at Diven Elementary School (Elmira, N.Y.), the school had experienced four principals in three years. Because of the changing leadership, the building lacked routines and procedures as well as systems for positive recognition. Diven comprises more than 91% of kids living at poverty levels and a 50% student mobility rate. Students often came to school severely stressed and had a hard time forgetting what was happening at home or what happened in the neighborhood over the weekend. We needed to create a secure, safe, and positive learning environment for students, so we chose to focus on beginning the school day with an intentional, positive social interaction for every learner.

We have leadership teams that meet in the summer and bimonthly throughout the school year. They review data and put a plan together for moving forward. Our leadership team researched best practices that would assist students in becoming confident in social settings and establish predictable routines and procedures to begin the day—no matter who happened to

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be the adult in charge.

When staff are used to school leaders coming and going, it is easy for them to try to “wait out” changes because they assume that the new leader will be leaving soon. In these situations it is important to shift focus away from compliance behavior and towards learning. People tend to want to tighten structures and tighten consequences in an attempt to gain control of changes. The key, though, is to keep the focus on learning while supporting behaviors.

When I'm learning something new, I try to model and share snippets of things I'm reading so people see that I'm learning as well. When staff see the principal doing something, they get a sense of what it looks like. When they see you putting in extra time studying something, and you can articulate the “why” as well as the “what,” they know what you bring them is well thought-out.

Our leadership team learned about morning meetings, which are structured social interactions in the mornings to help create healthy learning environments. Volunteers tried the meetings in their classrooms. Someone from our leadership team is on every team in the building, so our leadership team members modeled for their colleagues, and the entire staff learned

about the concept together using a book study format. Teachers were paired with support staff to share in the planning and delivery of morning meetings.

Everyone experienced success, shared ideas, and supported colleagues each step of the way. Students as well as their parents responded to morning greetings with eye contact, a greeting, and a smile. Students who were hesitant to speak during the day became contributors to their classroom. Morning meetings created a sense of routine and belonging and resulted in greater learning when substitutes were in the building. Notably, morning meetings cut our discipline referrals in half during the first year and have taken our yearly discipline referrals from 697 in 2009 to 160 in 2012.

When people saw how we took the morning meetings concept and made it our own, it inspired the learning community and got people excited. We were ready to learn and grow as professionals together. As Andrew Carnegie is reputed to have said, “Teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.”

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