

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

CELEBRATE

professional
transitions
and successes
to drive and sustain
implementation



By Anthony Armstrong

The teachers at Hogg Middle School (Houston, Texas) are accustomed to celebrating each other's professional learning. "Celebrations are a non-negotiable collaborative compact, or norm, for us," said Mina Schnitta, the school's principal. "Adults need to support each other in their learning. We need to focus on each other's strengths and celebrate them."

A large bulletin board, their "Honk Board," sits prominently in their staff lounge. The board provides a place for teachers and staff to post compliments about each other. "The compliments are on things we see in improving instruction," explained Schnitta. "They are not the usual 'I

saw someone doing something nice' type of compliments. Instead, they have a more instructional focus."

Schnitta's teachers can also earn PRIDE tickets. "The instructional leadership team passes these out to teachers who are exhibiting politeness, intelligence, discipline, and engaged behaviors," said Schnitta. "The teachers can accrue these and trade them in for things like new supplies or 30 minutes where I teach their class."

According to Kent Peterson, celebrations are an important component for high-quality learning communities. "Celebrations are critical to effective change. Celebrations bring people together at important times during the life of a

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school and reinforce the social fabric,” said Peterson, emeritus professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis for the University of Wisconsin-Madison and co-author with Terrence Deal of *Shaping School Culture* (2009).

BUILD A SENSE OF PURPOSE

“To ensure success, short-term wins must be both visible and unambiguous Such wins provide evidence that the sacrifices that people are making are paying off. This increases the sense of urgency and the optimism of those who are making the effort to change.” (John Kotter)

Too much of a focus on following procedures, said Peterson, turns change efforts into mechanical procedures and often misses opportunities to connect the change to core values. “Some leaders focus so much on the structural aspects or technical skills within a change effort that they forget there is a human side to making it work. Celebrations bring people together with the mission and values of the institution and remind them why they became educators, effectively moving them from being ‘employed’ to being a teacher again.”

To help sustain staff commitment and motivation during change efforts, Peterson explained, school and teacher leaders can use ceremonies, informal or formal, to connect school improvement to core values. “They can tell stories of how a program has served kids or talk about the history of innovation in the school, connecting the core values to a school’s history and change efforts,” said Peterson.

Connecting professional learning to core values, hopes, and dreams, is an easy step to overlook when overwhelmed with new procedures or techniques, said Peterson. “It is easy to get caught in the mundane and administrative side of getting the work done, such as the structural part of implementation, developing skills, and finding time to work together, and to forget the broader calling of education and what you are trying to accomplish.”

PLAN AHEAD

Short-term wins rarely simply happen. They are usually the result of careful planning and effort. (Kotter)

According to Schnitta, educators are so overwhelmed with things to do, slowing down and making time to acknowledge small successes can be a significant challenge. “For me, the key is to plan it or it won’t happen. I try to be very conscious of how we are celebrating. Once our teachers

learn something new and practice it in a nonthreatening environment, they need to see the success and celebrate that success. When planning our learning community work, we make sure to include time where they can share and see others’ successes.”

Schnitta believes there is always something to celebrate. “We are always learning, studying data, and modeling. Little things like snapping fingers or high fives are quick and easy ways to celebrate the little steps we make forward. We might observe a teacher using academic vocabulary and give him or her a certificate acknowledging that change in practice.”

Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh shares how the organization’s staff agreements emphasize celebrating contributions. “We set aside time at each meeting to invite celebrations large and small and we build in structures to acknowledge great work,” Hirsh said. “When the rituals of an organization emphasize its values, the culture shifts in ways that support both gratitude and collaboration.”

The first step to planning celebrations, said Peterson, is to look for natural transitions within the change efforts. “It could be the beginning, middle, end, or other significant milestone, depending on what is happening.”

MARK TRANSITIONS

“(Short-term) wins also serve to reward the change agents by providing positive feedback that boosts morale and motivation. The wins also serve the practical purpose of helping to fine-tune the vision and the strategies.” (Kotter)

Any effort to bring in new skills or techniques inherently has critical transition points that should be recognized and celebrated, said Peterson. “If you don’t mark the beginning of a major change effort, such as using data for decision making, people won’t see it as important,” explained Peterson. “It doesn’t have to be a big ceremony. Even the smallest success, such as a teacher realizing how to use a technique successfully, could be cause for a small celebration, such as telling a story or sending out a tweet.”

Schnitta makes sure that even the daily, short teacher collaboration meetings contain regular celebrations. “Sometimes we just check in on how we are feeling at the beginning of meetings, and sometimes we celebrate a huge success. Everyone shares something positive about their growth. We also end our meetings on a similar positive note.”

Celebrations can also help teams transition through times of anxiety, uncertainty, or loss, such as when a member of the team leaves the group. According to Joellen Killion (2011), celebrating past contributions or successes

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Successful leaders create and sustain a culture of learning.

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shows how the past has contributed to moving forward. Finding positives to celebrate in these moments helps document transitions, encourages awareness and openness regarding the change, and acts as a catalyst for moving forward in a positive manner.

BRING EVERYONE ON BOARD

“Short-term wins also tend to undermine the credibility of cynics and self-serving resisters. Clear improvements in performance make it difficult for people to block the needed change. Likewise, these wins will garner critical support from those higher than the folks leading the change (bosses, board, and shareholders).

Finally, short-term wins have a way of building momentum that turns neutral people into supporters, and reluctant supporters into active helpers. (Kotter)

For Schnitta, making sure her teams are comfortable with celebrations starts with consciously planning time during their daily activities to take a moment and focus on their strengths. “When learning something new and changing behavior, it is important to pay attention to the needs of their emotional side just as much as their logical side.”

Change is often a large group or team effort, which can often cause hesitancy in celebrating individuals. In these situations, Peterson suggests celebrating the team instead of an individual team member, while being as specific as possible in acknowledging the actions that brought success without naming teachers or people.

“If 5th grade implemented a well-designed writing program for kids,” explained Peterson, “some staff probably researched ideas, others came in as coaches, others may have brought great food to the meetings so everyone stayed energized and weren’t distracted, etc. Teachers will know who was the cook or who was the funny person that kept the mood up, and they will feel it was a group effort.”

There will be times, though, when it is important to recognize the individuals who are exemplars of a school’s desired culture. “Sometimes, you need to identify the



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Learning Forward executive director

exemplars,” said Peterson. “By talking about the heroes and heroines of the change effort, you show people what’s possible. Often these people may not want to be recognized, but if you don’t talk about things that are truly exceptional or unique that a teacher has done, it can lower the expectations or hopes of teachers that may think they are just average.”

Celebrating individual contributions, Peterson cautions, should also include showing how those contributions couldn’t have been accomplished without the support of the team.

Peterson recommends avoiding wildly energetic or long celebrations in schools that have dysfunctional dynamics, and instead he recommends easing into celebrations by telling stories. “There will always be naysayers and saboteurs. Bring them along in small steps — tell stories in staff meetings of what people saw in classrooms, bring in alumni who are successful, and pay attention to the history of the school. The past is the prologue to present and future. Show them their goals are possible.”

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