A Former Principal's Reflection: A Plan for Enhancing School Improvement and Culture by Getting Connected

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Abstract

This article focuses on a process for enhancing school improvement and culture by using connected school ideals and *My Voice* surveys attained from Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations. The proposed plan described by the author shows how getting the school connected, and then enhancing those connections through the use of *My Voice* surveys, a school may attain an improved, positive, school culture which bolsters school improvement and may raise graduation rates. Sustaining the connectedness within the school is important, and perceptions are, ultimately, what matters when it comes to behavior control. In order to keep positive connections between students and teachers, the author suggests using the *iKnow My Class* surveys to garner a better understanding of students' perceptions about classroom culture as well. The areas where students' perceptions weigh-in low on a survey's scale mean educators must affect change in those areas to positively influence a perceptual shift.

Keywords: Culture, Connected School, School Improvement

During the last few years of my administrative tenure, our school district was once again working on school improvement. The theme was "Continual School Improvement" and for some school districts that might mean garnering federal funds for "Race to the Top." Although our school district could not join the "Race" (not enough qualifiers), we still needed to focus on school improvement without the added funds a federal program might have brought into the district.

So our district purchased a highly researched school improvement program and brought in their professional team for two days of workshops.

From the workshop information and materials our funds afforded us, the administrators sat down to come up with a strategic plan for school improvement based on current district data aligned with the correlates propagated by the purchased program. Once the trustees adopted our district outline for improvement, a year of meeting with community members, teachers and students was spent to focus on aspects of the plan the "team" felt our school needed most. We were "off and improving" by the second year! Well, sort of.

Although the improvement plan had a component for school culture, in my opinion its focus was rather weak. Maybe it was because five years earlier I had been asked to move to the high school to "change the negative culture" and raise the graduation rate that was at 85% before I took over. That had been my focus going in, and the culture was shifting in a positive direction.

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At the high school level we were doing well by meeting NCLB guidelines, and our graduation rate had improved to 94% by 2010, but I felt like something was needed to invigorate the culture even more. Luckily (or not so luckily when one thinks about it), our school was on the second year of the Grant to Reduce Alcohol Addiction. The grant funds accorded us the privilege to attend the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools national conferences. It was at one of the conferences in Washington D.C. where I found the boost I felt our high school culture needed.

I was looking for a plenary workshop to attend, and even though one about "Behavior Control" seemed to focus on elementary school children, I decided to participate. The presenter, Jane C. Williams, was a wonderful speaker and very passionate about behavior control programs put to use in schools for classroom management. She was touting a "connected school" vision.

After the session, I saw Ms. Williams sitting at a table in the conference hotel and asked if I could speak with her. She said "certainly" and we were soon conversing about behaviors and behavior control, and soon after that about "Perceptual Control Theory" (PTC) as it relates to addressing behaviors. I was enamored by the discussion and, in parting, Ms. Williams *gave* me two books: *A Connected School*, by E. Perry Good, Jeff Grumley, and Shelley Roy (2003), and *Who2Bee: The Inside Story*, a book Jane Williams wrote with fellow authors Sandra Gilmer and Mina Cook (2010). (Later on I purchased the seminal work on Perceptual Control Theory, *Behavior: the Control of Perceptions*, by William T. Powers (1973), even though Ms. Williams warned me it was tough reading – she was right!)

Although Ms. Williams' presentation was focused on elementary education, I felt like everything she said about control theory would work at the high school level as well. The bottom line for me was simple; this was the piece missing from the improvement plan to further move our culture in a positive direction. I also felt if our school adopted a "connected school" vision we could *improve* the improvement process naturally without added programs or expenditures.

So imagine a principal standing in front of the faculty at the beginning of the school year saying something like this: "What we are missing from the school improvement process is a way to improve on the improvement process though culture-building! What we need to do is operate on a theory!" One faculty member in his characteristic caustic, but loving way, said, "Okay, Doc Weis, let me guess. You went to a conference, right?"

"Right!" I said, "And here's the thing. How we will improve and enhance all we do in our school is by becoming a connected school. We will communicate and *collaborate* better with students! You, me, us, and all students just need to get connected!" One of my teachers well known for *coming from the 60s* chimed in, "Yeah, groovy, man!" (Laughter noted.)

After letting the staff know about my meeting with Jane Williams and learning about Perceptual Control Theory, I said, "When it comes right down to it, it's all about perceptions." I told them that when I became a principal I finally realized why one of my educational leadership professors had always said, "Remember, perceptions are rock solid, the truth is debatable." I continued, "Look, students' perceptions are the truth for them. Students will operate from their perceptions, or their parents' perceptions. I know we love them and care about them, but they need to *perceive* that we really do love them and care about them! Once perceptions change about their educators and their school, students will start behaving better. Positive behaviors will mean more focus on academic performance. There will be a cultural shift."

After some discussion around the room, listening to doubts about how "just being nice to kids" will make a difference in academics, and answering questions about behavior because we may be "getting too close to students," I told the staff there is absolutely no harm that will come from being connected.

Everything at a connected school is a "plus," including having parents feel more trusting of school faculty and personnel. I asked, "Even if academics and test scores don't improve from where they are now, what have we *lost* by becoming more connected?"

Once school was in session and we were operating under our connected school vision, there were some "look for" and "listen for" things I wanted to happen:

- Teachers in hallways saying "hello" and talking to students.
- Teachers taking some class time to talk about weekends, ask students what they did, or simply discuss non-academic topics.
- Laughter coming from classrooms.
- Teachers taking time before, during, and after class to speak with students one-on-one about anything other than academics. (I told educators that by mid-way through the first quarter they should know something about each student's life outside school time and school walls.)
- The administrator (me) getting to know students before, during, and after school, and at events. When I saw students in the hallway during academic time, instead of asking to see a pass, I would converse with them briefly about things going on in their lives outside of school, and *then* shoo them along to their destinations.

Simple things we could do or say to become more connected with students became part of our improvement plan!

I can't quantify the cultural shift we began to sense at the high school, but there were hints of evidence that made me feel like being a connected school was working. For example, at a special education meeting I will never forget a mother starting the conversation by saying, "First off, I don't know what you people are doing around here, but last year my son wanted to quit school. He hated it. I kept telling him he had to go, he just had to finish. Now this year, he is a whole new kid! He actually likes to come to school and I don't have to literally push him out the door!" The student, a junior, was at the meeting and he was smiling while his mother spoke. He added, "Yeah, I don't know why, but the teachers are so much nicer this year. They actually say 'hi' to me and ask me how I am doing. They ask me about things that interest me. They want to know me."

Other hints at cultural shift were seeing and hearing more revelry and actually getting fewer negative phone calls from parents complaining about what the school "is doing to my kid." Discipline referrals were also down from previous years.

After one "connected" school year was behind us, I decided to use the Quaglia Institute's "My Voice" survey to start looking at student responses toward school culture. I wanted a baseline for the upcoming years. After collecting the data and sharing it with teachers as a "information only" item the first year of use, I asked them to look the responses over and find areas within school culture that looked like something we could work on during the school year. I also asked them to share the information with students and have conversations about survey responses that had low rankings. What could we do to change the students' perceptions about how we cared for them?

Once we were into the second "connected" school year, we administered the "My Voice" survey and once we received results of students' responses, I had two years of data from which I could focus cultural change. We were able to discuss our plans for attaining more positive perceptions in specific areas like feelings of belonging and trust. Through our second-year process of building a positive culture by becoming a connected school, and with the use of the "My Voice Surveys," I realized the important "next step" would be to keep using the surveys for longitudinal data, but to begin adding focus on individual classroom culture.

My intent was to ask for funding to implement the "iKnow My Class" surveys offered by the Quaglia Institute. We could really begin working on the connected school classroom-by-classroom and teacher-by-teacher. Would perceptions align with what the Quaglia Institute calls "conditions that inspire students?"

That was my plan to further improve culture, and for becoming a connected high school. I recommend for school administrators to take a look at the control of perceptions through a connected school mission, and to make good use of the Quaglia Institute's surveys to focus on school and classroom culture.

Although I retired from education in Montana without "seeing my plan" completely through, I felt like my *improvement* to the improvement process was working. Everyone was feeling the difference and our graduation rate had climbed to 96%!

As fate might have it, the former principal during the *dark times* (as they were called by teachers at our high school) was brought out of retirement to be the Dean of Students and assist the new principal because I had moved on to higher education. Mr. Fimmel sent me an email that I will share (with his permission) in this article:

Now that you have moved upward in the world of professional education… an opportunity presents itself to reflect upon your previous work as the principal of Frenchtown High School (from the prospective of one of your former colleagues – "me").

The professional "climate" at Frenchtown High School, in my opinion, has never been better! The overall faculty morale is enthusiastic and characterized by a spirit of "it's fun" and "we work well together!" Teachers are efficiently engaged in their assigned duties (those that are above and beyond their instructional services) and newer procedural elements are "in place." The "advisory" process works very well and is greatly valued by student and staff personnel alike. The "alternative school" and "digital academy" programs flourish with vigor, vitality, and a high profile "forward look."

The current "climates" (facilities, staff, etc.) are very nice indeed…"quality performance" is more tangible and is clearly a more visible vehicle on the part of students and staff alike. This is a huge change from my observations of previous years; and is clearly resultant from the excellent leadership and dedication that <u>you</u> had exhibited while "at the helm."

You will be missed. Thank you for the key role you played in making so many good things happen. J. Fimmel (personal communication, September 5, 2013)

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