The Supportive Leader

Teachers and administrators hear plenty of criticism. What they really need are school leaders who can inspire, motivate, and support them

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ith all the recent research and discussion about standardized test scores, differentiated instruction, school improvement efforts, value-added initiatives, and teacher evaluation measures, it is easy to forget about motivation and inspiration.

But we can't

In our roles as superintendent and board president for Connecticut's Meriden Public Schools, this has become most apparent as we work to create learning institutions that students, staff, and families want to attend.

Meriden, a diverse community of approximately 60,000 residents, has more than 700 teachers who serve approximately 8,400 students in 12 school settings. Our free and reduced-price lunch rate and minority population are both more than 65 percent, but despite continued increases in the cost of providing education services, the district has not received an increase in municipal funding across three budget cycles.

This funding pinch has resulted in significant reductions in staffing and resources. It has demoralized the staff at a time when the demands for increased student achievement are higher than ever.

How do we maintain our focus? How do we continue to inspire students and teachers during one of our nation's most difficult economic times? How do we continue to motivate when mandated assessment methods do not provide us the data that we need to show success? How do we keep a focus on the goals when mandated expectations are, at times, unrealistic?

It is essential that our administrators inspire and find methods that demonstrate the end results are worth the work. It is just as important that our school board is both knowledgeable and supportive. And that requires training.

Developing supportive leaders

Training for new board members and administrators typically includes professional development in budget management, policy review, effective teaching (curriculum, instruction, and assessment), and parent partnerships. To be successful, today's orientation programs must include a discussion about the importance of inspiration.

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New board members and administrators can benefit from an understanding of the political and financial contexts in which our schools operate. Once everyone is on the same page, boards and administrators must prioritize their resource allocation and build capacity with their most important resource—an inspired and motivated staff.

This only can be achieved if community challenges and student needs are acknowledged and teachers and students are supported. We need inspired teachers who allow our children to dream and encourage them to believe. By providing positive feelings through rewarding experiences, boards and administrators can keep the teachers' focus on district goals and initiatives.

Supportive leaders are aware of staff overload and know when to pull back or push forward. They give of their time and offer fair and honest feedback while exhibiting humility, tenacity, and grace. They are intelligent, articulate, and determined. They have to maintain emotional intelligence. By offering a simple thank you or token of appreciation, you can motivate and show that you value and respect your staff.

The most effective communication skill—the ability to listen and empathize—can be developed simply by giving staff members a voice. It's not always necessary to utilize prepared words or a pre-game pep talk to inspire a team. Sometimes it just takes being accessible, trustworthy, and approachable.

The true test of any leader is how you respond during the most challenging times. You need to keep focused, maintain your composure, and encourage the team to believe. Motivating the team to work hard and want more requires leaders to support and genuinely care about their employees. You must anticipate problems and provide proactive interventions.

Wins, not shortcomings

Board members and superintendents must ask if they can inspire by focusing only on a team member's shortcomings. Can we motivate if we lead with fear or are unrealistically demanding? Supportive, constructive feedback is much more effective than destructive criticism.

When students, parents, administrators, and teachers are asked about the qualities and skills they expect their teachers to possess, their responses are the same. Education professionals are expected to be smart, caring, dedicated, and cer-

tainly inspiring. Never do we hear responses that say teachers should get students to reach proficiency levels on federal- or state-mandated standardized tests.

High-achieving private schools do not even value these results enough to spend the time required to administer high-stakes testing measures. They are more concerned with a student's ability to be innovative, imaginative, and inspirational as they develop into productive members of the global society. They understand that today's students will need these skills to be effective, inspirational leaders and advocates for change.

Today, we see too many national legislative acts that use methods of criticism, competition, ranking, and threats in an attempt to motivate and inspire educational advancement and reform. Initiatives like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Race to the Top grants are failed federal movements that need to be either repealed or completely overhauled. NCLB sets schools up for failure and ignores increasingly significant issues—like familial poverty, unemployment rates, minimal resources, and nationally downward economic trends—that plague communities across our nation.

We are in a time when we need to accept that in education, particularly in urban districts, factors like poverty are not excuses but realities. Students who are hungry, homeless, in need of medical care, or living in crime-ridden neighborhoods need our support as well as the essential elements of motivation and inspiration. Increasing support and collaboration,

while decreasing criticism and competition, is a successful formula in individual student achievement. Why is it not as clear when we seek overall educational reform?

For public schools to be successful, it will be our dedicated teachers, with the collaboration of the board of education and administration, who will do the work and become the leaders who will guide our students through their hardships and successes. In Meriden, we believe capacity building is essential to our students' and district's success.

We pride ourselves on challenging and supporting all students. We take pride in offering a rigorous curriculum that is relevant to the career and college readiness skills that 21st century learners require. Our respectful environment has helped us create schools that students and staff want to attend.

It is time for us to say "no more." No more misstatements, no more misrepresentations, and no more breaking our promise to our youngest citizens. We need to stop leading the charge for reform by deflating, embarrassing, and criticizing those who we need most. We need to start promoting collaboration that includes both motivation and inspiration.

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Meriden's continuous improvement

Like any successful organization, Meriden Public Schools has embraced an innovative and progressive continuous improvement system that is founded on collaboration and staff development. This system guides our district's work, but it is how team members embrace these initiatives, implement them with fidelity, and believe in each other and in our students that matters most.

Our system includes the following initiatives:

- District and School Improvement Plans: We identify and organize improvement priorities, connect student achievement to adult behaviors, support creative district and school initiatives, increase class rigor, and promote higher student expectations.
- Meriden Assessment System: Developed and revised by our teachers and the Research and Evaluation Office, the sys-

tem consists of three online components the Meriden District Assessments, Critical Reading Exercises, and Key Concepts.

- PLC/Data Teams: We provide increased student instructional time and an additional hour for teacher collaboration and data sharing.
- Matched Vertical Score Growth Models: we calculate individual student growth over time, comparing data by class, grade, school, district, and state averages. In Meriden, we use the data to provide support and professional development for our staff.
- Peer Coaching/Learning Walks: We designed a collegial model for observing, collaborating, providing feedback, sharing classroom strategies, reflecting, and improving student outcomes.
- Meriden Public Schools' Leadership Academy: We build capacity at all levels of our organization by engaging teacher

leaders and aspiring administrators in a specialized training program. Conducted in collaboration with the Connecticut Association of Schools, we assemble a team that is prepared to meet our district's goals and initiatives.

- Teacher/Administrator Dashboard: It displays teacher/administrator attendance, classroom discipline referrals, and student assessment data. This personalized dashboard uses the same gauges we use to evaluate student performance, attendance, behavior, and academic performance.
- Family-School Liaison Team: Led by a liaison coordinator and four family-school liaison staffers, the team facilitates proactive family engagement; provides creative student and staff supports; fosters positive school, home, and community relationships; and plans creative student and family engagement events.