



Six Steps to Cultural Transformation

Romona School
Wilmette, Illinois

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Romona Fast Facts



- Elementary School serving 450 students PK-4th Grade
- Located in an affluent suburb 15 miles north of Chicago
- 1% low income; 6% mobility; 6% ELL; 18% Asian; 4% mixed race
- Approximately 12% IEP students; all take state assessment
- 44 teachers; 11 years average experience (zero to 38 years); 60% have advanced degrees

Fast Facts *continued*

- Assessments: Illinois Standards Achievement Test; Iowa Test of Basic Skills; Illinois Snapshot of Early Learning; DIBELS; Local Assessments in Writing, Reading and Math
- School is the “most affordable” neighborhood in New Trier Township and nearly all students attend New Trier High School
- Per pupil spending is 33% below Township average

Culture of Romona circa 2001

- Neglected Stepchild Syndrome
- “Victimitis” had reached epidemic proportions
- Well-loved principal departed
- Well-loved teacher did not get the principal’s job
- Individual random acts of improvement
- District culture:
 - Distrust, animosity between staff and administration
 - Open Board dissension
 - Majority of leaders on cruise control
 - 20% turnover district wide

"Theoretical Framework" for Transformation

- *Good to Great*

- Face the Brutal Facts
- The Hedgehog Principle



- *The Tipping Point*

- Broken Window Metaphor
- Connectors as leaders (Paul Revere model)



- *FISH*

- Make their day
- Be there

-- Have FUN

-- Choose your attitude

Step 1. Leadership for Learning

- Establishing a school identity based on diversity
- Creating and communicating a shared vision
- Urgency, presence and persistence
- School Improvement Planning tied to vision
 - Student centered goals
 - Planned activities and professional development inputs
 - Measures and deliverables as outputs
- Distributing leadership to staff



Step 2. Communication Plan

- Main message
 - Our school will be the best place for students to learn, teachers to teach and families to flourish
- Internal improvements first
 - Positive notes to staff
 - Dialogue, conversation and visibility
- External initiatives next
 - Home to school
 - School to community



Step 3. Parent and Community Outreach

- Restoring fun to Romona
- Empowering diversity
- Becoming good neighbors
- Establishing "Diplomatic Relations" with the village

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4. Continual Collaboration

- Giving new teachers a voice
- IEP reviews for all related arts teachers
- Collaborative problem solving
- “Crucial conversations” around student achievement
 - Weekly team meetings
 - Monthly cross grade collaborations
 - IEP reviews with all related arts teachers
 - Team approach to class placements



5. Collecting and Using Hard Data

- Sharing the “brutal facts”
- Reciprocal accountability
- Identifying struggling students, planning for their growth and monitoring their progress
- Having the fortitude to measure and report
- School goals aligned with district goals

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6. Neutralizing Negativity

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- Willing to participate in “Fierce Conversations” ... and we mean fierce and intense
- Addressed union and teacher concerns promptly, candidly and openly
- “~~Walked~~ Swam the talk” of FISH.
- Recognized and celebrated small victories
- Responded to parent and staff surveys and not to rumors, gossip and opinion
- Focused on the big picture and what matters most

Phenomenal Results

- Student Achievement moved from good to great and great to greater, surpassing more affluent schools
- Diversity unified and strengthened the school
- Independent measures of parent and staff satisfaction increased significantly
- “Problem teachers” got on the bus
(a few changed seats and are thriving)
- Measurable increase in home school communication (calls, cards, newsletters)
- Poster child for positive change
- District turnover reduced to 8% in three years



Summary Points

- Key Learnings
 - Cultural Transformation requires urgency and the ability and courage to hold “crucial, fierce” conversations
 - Distributed leadership works
 - Staff stepped up -- “We did it ourselves!”
- Challenges Ahead
 - Sustain the shared vision and cultural transformation with new personnel at all levels
 - Avoiding “death by 1000 cuts”
 - Outreach to the community and field