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
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
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
6. Neutralizing Negativity

- 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