

The Trifecta of School Improvement

A former superintendent once half-kiddingly told me that if it weren't for lunch, buses, and recess, schools would run just fine. Years later, I came to realize there may be a nugget of truth in that statement.

School improvement efforts usually center on academic achievement, teacher development, curriculum alignment, increased rigor, or more focused standards. These certainly are cornerstones to high-achieving schools and worthy endeavors to examine.

However, a closer look at where principals spend much of their daily efforts reveals that lunch, buses, and recess can take up a large chunk of the day. If your school is fortunate enough to have an assistant principal, these duties often fall into his or her job description. Even so, most aspiring assistant principals need to be seen as instructional leaders, so spending too much time in these areas can take away time spent on instructional leadership development.

Setting up processes and practices to make these areas run smoothly should be a goal of any school improvement plan. The time saved can be well spent in academic and instructional pursuits.

The Process

When looking at process thinking and an exemplar program, look no further than the University of Alabama Crimson Tide football team under the leadership of head coach Nick Saban. He is arguably one of the top coaches in college football today, having won three of the past five national championships. He uses process thinking to evaluate every area of his football program. This system is affectionately called "The Process."

All areas of the football program are examined and benchmarks are set to achieve maximum impact and efficiency. Staff are held accountable to reach those benchmarks and each process is continually evaluated.

Much the same can be said for school improvement efforts. For

example, at my school we examined our discipline referrals and where they originated. Nearly 70 percent came from the cafeteria, recess, or buses. The reasons for these referrals varied in severity, type, and frequency, but more common problems included student bullying, rough-housing, standing and moving around on the bus, throwing items out the windows, making noise in the cafeteria, and an overall lack of respect for lunch supervisor staff.

We then used this data as a starting point in setting a school improvement goal to lower the percentage of referrals coming in from these three areas. We had discussions with teachers, administrators, students, parents, lunch staff, bus drivers, and the bus company. Over the course of the spring, we met several times to identify problem areas and possible causes.

Receiving input from each of these groups was critical to devising a plan to move forward. For example, parents shared stories of kids being excluded, which caused anxiety and, subsequently, behavior issues. Additionally, our lunch and recess supervisors said they did not have the training in behavior management to handle the large number of children they had to supervise. Lastly, students told us they were not sure of all the recess and bus rules. These discussions were compelling and eye opening for everyone on our leadership team.

We then "writestormed" ideas and solutions that could address these

problem areas for the following school year. Writestorming involves staff writing their ideas instead of relying on everyone to speak up. We found this technique to generate many more ideas because more people felt free to express their ideas in written form instead of a few people dominating the discussion.

We realized that our list of solutions was too long to ever fully implement, so we started a process of prioritization. We decided to pick two solutions from each of the three areas that we thought would have the greatest impact in terms of effectiveness and ease of implementation. For example, our two priorities for lunchtime were implementing supervisor training and improving traffic flow in the cafeteria. Busing solutions involved better student-management training for drivers and developing a training program for student-led bus patrols.

Results

The following year, we reduced our referrals from the cafeteria, recess, and buses by nearly 30 percent. In the second year, the number of referrals continued to drop by another 10 percent. The leadership team continued to meet to discuss results, set benchmarks, and continue to generate high-impact solutions.

By achieving our benchmarks and significantly lowering our office referrals, school leaders gained valuable time to pursue other strategic goals relating to curriculum and instruction.

Lunchtime, buses, and recess will always present unique issues relating to school improvement. But our team-based approach that involved all stakeholders was a key factor in this turnaround effort. Their voices and ideas to move forward powered the entire school improvement process to success. 

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