Perhaps one of the more difficult administrative situations is dealing with a faculty member who is always stirring up colleagues. Even tougher is inheriting that situation as a new principal. Several years ago, I was tapped to head a middle school in a different district where I was unknown to the faculty despite 10 years of experience as a middle school principa.

After the announcement of my hire was made at my new school, I began to get e-mails from one of the teachers, Ms. X., who asked about my philosophy and wanted me to provide details about how I would “change things.” About this same time, I received a call from an associate superintendent. “By the way,” he said, “watch out for Ms. X. She likes to stir things up.” I was happy to have the heads-up.

As soon as I was settled, I began setting up individual meetings with the faculty, including Ms. X. I found her to be highly articulate, bold, outspoken, intelligent, and interested in the well-being of the school and its students—but a bit confrontational. I soon learned she was an informal spokesperson for her colleagues.

Facing the Challenge

I sensed that Ms. X expected opposition from me when she presented her ideas. Fortunately, my tendency is to hear out ideas and to collaboratively question and discuss their potential impacts on people and processes. As time went on, Ms. X. and I engaged in many conversations around issues, and I found her to be insightful and thoughtful. As outspoken as she was, she was also able to consider other perspectives.

For example, one of her big issues was monitoring students during lunch periods. She was armed with a chart of the number of duty minutes each teacher had served the previous school year and demanded that we seek parent volunteers to take care of this task. I explained that schools have liability regarding the monitoring of students and that our district did not provide funding for other employees to replace the teachers in the lunchroom. Ms. X. then volunteered to work with teachers from each grade to create a schedule that would minimize teachers’ time on duty. After a few days, she presented a schedule that provided full coverage, complete with each teacher’s annual time commitment.

On this occasion and others, I recognized many positive leadership qualities in Ms. X. Although she had been rumored to confrontationally challenge school leadership, I found that our discussions were taking a much more collegial tone.

When our school became a Professional Development School (PDS), Ms. X. was elected to lead the leadership team. As we formulated our PDS roles and processes, I noted that Ms. X.’s approach was positive, inclusive, and collaborative. Within a year, under her leadership, more than 90 percent of our teachers were engaged in PDS activities with student interns and field placements.

Seek Out Strengths

A key to working with difficult teachers is the art of listening. When approached confrontationally by a teacher, most principals tend to raise their defenses, making it difficult to see through to the underlying issues. By not responding to confrontation, a meeting can become a productive conversation aimed at gaining facts and resolving issues.

If there is a moral in this, it is that most teachers have talents and skills that often have no outlet. School leaders can benefit by seeking out strengths that lie beneath our teacher colleagues’ personalities, even when they seem irritating on the surface. Let’s face it, our teachers are generally well-trained, well-educated individuals, and many need only a good cause to positively channel their energies—and what principal doesn’t need all the help he or she can get?

Robert R. Heath
Assistant Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Appalachian State University
heathrr@appstate.edu
SPARK™  Research and Standards Based
- CURRICULUM
- TRAINING
- EQUIPMENT

WHAT ADMINISTRATORS SAY ABOUT SPARK STAFF DEVELOPMENT:

“SPARK is still being used (4 years after the original training) and is very popular with teachers. I even see them using some of the management and organizational techniques in the classroom. This was one of the best staff development decisions we have ever made. Thank you.”

Kathleen Kahn, Principal
Coalinga, CA

“Our staff has fallen in love with the philosophy and instructional strategies of SPARK… This is my 31st year in public education and I have never seen a program become accepted and embraced with so much enthusiasm and support.”

Rodney Green, Asst. Superintendent
Everett, PA

SPARK professional development programs have been proven to WORK and LAST. SPARK WORKS because research shows students improve their standardized test scores, activity levels, fitness, and sport skills. SPARK LASTS because research showed 80% of teachers trained in SPARK methodology reported using the program up to 8 years after their last workshop. Let SPARK motivate and inspire YOUR staff. Contact SPARK to discuss your professional development needs today.

SPARK offers evidence-based programs in the following areas:

- Physical Education
- Early Childhood
- After School
- Coordinated School Health

Contact SPARK Today!

spark@sparkpe.org • 800 SPARK PE • www.sparkpe.org