Trust Leads to Positive School Climate

All of us who work in schools know the levels of accountability school staffs are facing, “pedaling as fast as they can” to meet the high standards mandated through No Child Left Behind, to reach children where they are, and to address their emotional, social, and physical needs. When a new principal arrives, the anxiety level of those in the school often increases.

After being named principal of a middle school with a highly experienced and well-seasoned staff, I met with the superintendent to discuss the job and district initiatives. He frankly told me that the staff had been through a lot and my first task was to build trust with the entire school community. A beloved principal had passed away quite suddenly and her replacement had only remained in the job for less than a year. The staff was feeling uncomfortable with someone brand new coming in.

After discussing the situation with my own mentor and other trusted leaders in our school cluster and spending some time reading everything I could on school culture and building trust, it became clear to me that in order to build a school culture of trust, I had to focus on four tasks:

- Open myself up to the community and build my reputation. This could only be accomplished by being visible throughout the school and being open about my background, life, and expectations.
- Get to know my community, find out who they are personally and professionally, and find out what they value in a leader.
- Demonstrate honesty, consistency, and fairness in everything I do. Show I value staff and the work they do.
- Be courageous, have difficult conversations when situations arise, and always put the best interests of our students first.

Working with my protégé this year as she was working on building trust with her new staff, I encouraged her to consider what a culture of trust meant to her, how she could convey this to her staff, and what steps she needed to take to achieve her goals.

—Debra Hamilton

Our beliefs lead directly to the results we produce. Results improve when we allow ourselves the time to reflect on the world we encounter and open ourselves to the new possibilities that emerge. As a new principal at a school that was undergoing significant change, I quickly began to understand the importance of building trust. To fulfill this goal, it became my mission to provide teachers time to reflect and to recognize instances when our own personal beliefs have kept us from discovering a new way of viewing our work.

Woodrow Wilson famously said, “I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow.” Nowhere is this attitude more profoundly necessary than in education settings, where a collective effort produces our best work. It was necessary for me to develop within our staff a willingness to work together toward a common purpose and follow an aligned strategy, which I accomplished by placing teachers into professional learning communities. Teachers are grouped by content and grade level, and each of these teams shares a common pre period and meets at least once a week to collaborate.

Teachers use this professional development time to discuss curriculum, individual students, and school initiatives. Administrators meet with the groups to share and discuss the vision of the school and team development. In these small groups, we develop trusting professional relationships in which we can hold each other accountable to the goals of the school and team.

Leading through trust is sometimes a treacherous road filled with the potholes and ruts of miscommunication, misinformation, suspicion, and apathy. I have learned that we must be on the watch for these potential dangers yet never lose our belief in the foundation of trust and the power it gives us to break through to success.

In this journey, I have found successes in unexpected places—in quiet discussions with veteran staff, in disagreements that pushed me to grow, in developing a common vision that spoke to our commitments, and in the faces of children who believed and trusted in the adults who said, “I will deliver.” At the end of a day, I need to be able to look into the mirror and say, “Today, a child trusted the adults in this building.” Then, I know my work has been rewarded.

—Theresa Baca

Debra Hamilton, a former principal, is the district mentor principal for Albuquerque Public Schools in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her e-mail address is hamilton_deb@aps.edu.

Theresa Baca is principal of John Adams Middle School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her e-mail address is baca_tp@aps.edu.

Debra Hamilton and Theresa Baca are mentor and protégé in the NAESP Mentor Program, where experienced school leaders mentor new and aspiring principals. For more information, visit www.naesp.org.