

A Message to School Leaders About Managing Change

Feed the Teachers and Never Mind the Calories

By Theodora Schiro

Leading change requires a certain talent. If you stand up in front of your staff and announce the new changes that will be taking place, resistance is guaranteed. If you want people to accept change, the key is to make them part of the process. How do you do that? Mind control, intimidation, authoritarian declarations, cajoling? Nope. Just feed them, and never mind the calories.

Early in my career as an elementary school principal, I read the book, “ If You Don't Feed the Teachers They Eat the Students!: Guide to Success for Administrators and Teachers ” by Neila A. Connors. I didn't always remember all the useful advice provided by the author about how to be an effective school leader, but I did think of the title as a guiding mantra. I learned that the most valuable resources we have in any organization are not the instructional materials, the most current textbooks, or the latest technology. It is the people who work in a school, the children who depend on us, and the families of those children who are the most important. As leaders, we must nurture and care for them every day.

I often thought about creative ways to feed the teachers. I provided anything from a few boxes of fresh donuts in the staff lounge to a catered feast. It's true that sharing food is the

key to building a sense of community, belonging, and resiliency. But not just the kind of food you can eat. We also need to feed the teachers emotionally and socially by showing that we care about them, value them, celebrate their successes, and support them. It is up to the principal to set the tone and make sure it spreads from the classroom teachers to the support staff, students, and their families.

I am not alone in believing that teachers are some of the hardest working and most underappreciated professionals in this country. Teacher burn-out is an all too common job hazard. High expectations for academic achievement, frequent changes in initiatives handed down by state and district officials, demanding parents, and struggling students all take their toll on classroom teachers. Few other professionals routinely use money out of their own pockets to provide materials for their customers or even food for those who come to school hungry and spend an extra 10-20 hours a week working at home or in their classrooms off the clock. For those reasons, feeding the teachers is necessary administrative skill.

Normalizing Change

An important part of a school leader's job is to implement new policies and instructional requirements. Understanding that change is normal and being able to see the effects from the perspectives of others is crucial for success.



The shift to common core standards was one of the most monumental changes I have seen in recent years. At first, it seemed kind of exciting to try a new approach, although somewhat daunting to implement. Then came the political drama that threw education into the spotlight and adoption of the new standards became a battle against control and free will.

Concerned about public demands that common core standards should be thrown out, I attended an education committee hearing at the state capitol. Listening to both sides of the argument really opened my eyes and helped me understand some of the reasons for the common core debate. After hearing speakers present their opinions, it was surprising to me that the testimony of professional educators ranging from superintendents to a teacher of the year was largely disregarded by the committee. Most of the representatives seemed to agree with parents and community members who felt that the new standards were so far removed from their own experiences as students that they could not be considered beneficial for their own children.

As a principal, I had often noticed the same concerns expressed by parents. They firmly believed that the role of the classroom teacher was to stand in front of the rows of students, write on the chalkboard, and lecture to the students. That was the kind of education they were familiar with and felt was best for their children. Clearly, change is difficult for parents too.

What eventually happened is that common core standards didn't go away, and teachers and administrators buckled down and figured out what they needed to do to make the new

benchmarks work. Principals provided support for teachers as they learned how to adapt their teaching to meet expectations, and their students benefited from their renewed efforts to improve instruction. At my school, we invited and encouraged parents to spend time in classrooms as volunteers or observers. They could watch their children interact with teachers and peers, work in small groups, learn to solve problems in different ways and become immersed in hands-on projects to help them understand math and science concepts. Parents began to realize that learning how to learn rather than memorizing information was important in an era where the amount of information available to students was so far beyond what they had learned in school, it would be impossible to absorb it all.

Discomfort is Part of Change

Every time there is a change in leadership, whether at the local level or national, the school community is always a little shaken, concerned about what changes are ahead and how they will be affected. I remember a controversy about Obama's first address to school children and the stir that it caused. Parents were encouraged to call their schools and refuse to allow their children to watch the president's speech on TV. School leaders offered parents the opportunity to opt out and accommodations were made at schools for the watchers and non-watchers. In the days that followed the airing of the speech, the general consensus was that the content included topics that parents themselves taught their children about working hard, getting good grades, and doing well in school. The controversy blew over, and teachers went on teaching kids.

Now, as we enter the first year of the Trump presidency, we can expect to see more political mud-slinging from both sides. History repeats itself. We should know by now that as each administration changes, day to day life for the rest of us continues pretty much the same. Disagreements occur, tragedies and celebrations happen. From the big picture perspective, changes can seem alarming and even catastrophic. But from the smaller microcosm of a school, life just goes on. We know that this too shall pass. We must always try to make the best of it and do the job we are there to do.



Facing Change: Keep Your Chin Up

An understanding of first and second order change is an important skill for school leaders to have. A first order change does not require a massive shift - it is more about making adjustments to the way things are already being done. Second order change requires doing something entirely different and must include new learning to succeed. It often takes longer

and requires a period of discomfort as people change their practice. With that knowledge, leaders can prepare others for the changes ahead.

Keeping staff morale up in the face of change requires effort, and relies on a strong sense of community within the school. Relationships are the foundation of any successful group of people, and schools are no different. School leaders who try to slap something together with a feel-good rally when it is time to initiate new policies or instructional practices will struggle to succeed. Those who take the time to get to know each person on their campus build relationships on a daily basis, and will accomplish changes more smoothly.

I learned that lesson when, as a new principal, I found much to my surprise that teachers did not necessarily see me the same way I saw myself – as friendly, fair-minded, and easy to get along with. It was my secretary who revealed the truth –they really did not know me. So, I began building relationships by starting an annual tradition of ‘bond building’ lunches at the beginning of each school year. I met with every grade level and specialists’ team several times throughout the year during their lunch periods. I sat in their classrooms while the students were outside at lunch or recess, and we learned about each other’s backgrounds, kids, spouses, passions, hobbies, and pets. During those meetings, we did not discuss pedagogy, standards, parents, or students. We just got to know each other. As a leader, I learned the importance of listening and valuing the point of view of others even if you don’t agree with them.

Building a sense of community within a school helps provide a strong support system for teachers and staff. The morale of a school is directly influenced by leaders who have the

power to create an environment of encouragement, nurturing and caring for each other or one of competition, isolationism, and every man for himself. Treat teachers with kindness and understanding – they'll appreciate the zero calorie treats.

Holding on During Times of Change: Identify a Touchstone

Having a touchstone is a great starting place for building a sense of belonging. If faculty and students participate in determining what that will be, they gain ownership. It might be a familiar phrase like TEAM; Together Everyone Achieves More, or something that is unique to the school and its mascot – like Pride in the PACK; Positive attitude, Achievement, Character, and Knowledge. As the touchstone is woven through all communication within the school community, it provides a common language that everyone shares.

As adults, we know that change is normal, but it is healthy to keep some things constant so people feel they have control of their situations. By using the touchstone, the one thing that stays the same is the positive school climate and a sense that everyone is valued and important, making changes are much easier to deal with.

Adapting to Change Starts at the Top

The principal who sets the tone and shows a positive attitude in the face of adversity makes teachers feel like they are not facing the changes on their own. Feed the teachers by listening to the concerns of each staff member as if they were the most important person in the world. You may not agree with them, but people feel valued if they are heard.

It is important to build relationships not only with staff, but also with students, parents, and community members outside of the school. Have lunches with students to get to know

them individually, and listen to what they say. Schedule events that involve parents and teach them how to understand what their kids are doing in school so they are not left behind. Invite guest speakers into the school to talk to students on relevant topics. Making people feel like they belong strengthens the community.

Accepting and Adopting Changes in Technology



Changes in technology are an inevitable consequence of progress. There are always some teachers who are reluctant to adjust their procedures, but fortunately, there are early adopters too - people who are

excited about the prospect of new technology and eager to learn how to implement it in their classrooms. With encouragement and support from their principals, they can become the leaders and the experts on their campuses.

Although teachers will naturally network with each other and learn how to use new technology, more effort is required to maintain the momentum. Training and planning for the most productive uses of the resources are essential.

Great leaders are always looking for strengths in each of their staff members and must guide or even push them into stretching and taking risks. Find teachers who have a firm grasp of the new technology and ask them to present training to the entire faculty.

Although some teachers are reluctant to show themselves as more knowledgeable than their peers, given the right encouragement they will rise to your expectations.

Continuous Improvement Fosters Change

Planning for next year starts shortly after the current year gets rolling. Although we never know what the future has in store, there will always be some new programs or instructional models to try out. The truth is that improvement doesn't necessarily have to cost money or take a lot of time. However, there must be a significant reason to change beyond an expectation that newer is better.

It is our natural tendency to want to jump on the bandwagon of the next best program, hire a presenter and forge ahead. We often skip over the determination about whether we really need it or just want it. To be effective, changes must be dependent on the requirements of the school and are best implemented after analyzing the results of a comprehensive needs assessment. We must evaluate student data and determine the areas of greatest need before creating a plan of action for next year.

Change is Constant

Inevitably the next thing in education is more change. To get ready, we must remain open-minded, be willing to examine our own practices, and openly decide what we are doing well and what we need to do better. There is no doubt that each new administration, whether it is federal or local, is going to bring about some changes and we probably won't agree with all of them. But we are going to continue to teach and keep trying to do what's best for kids. That's why we chose to be educators.

Experiencing Change

As I reflect on my career as an educator, I remember being thrilled with the idea of having my first job. I was excited about becoming a teacher and having my own classroom, and I loved my new school. I looked forward to going to work every day.

Almost 40 years later I'm still passionate about education. Although I am much older and wiser now, and over time progressed from the classroom into administration, my love for children, their families, and the people I have worked with has never waned. I still think it's important to feed the teachers, and never mind the calories.

I recently traded in my position as a school leader to become a professional writer of education related topics and continue to be intrigued by teaching and learning. The emerging science about how children learn, the exciting innovations being implemented in schools across the country, and the acceptance of hands-on STEM and project based learning as a model of effective instruction keep me riveted. I look forward to seeing the positive changes that will keep education moving into the future.

What's next in education is really what is the same in education – it just depends on how we deal with it. If we go into the future together, feed the teachers, share our love of children and make it a priority to always choose what is best for them, we will succeed.

If you happen to need a writer to help you with a project, you can find me at <http://www.flo-kelvinfreelance.com/>.

