

building resilient leaders

Many universities and school districts are creating support mechanisms that increase administrator resiliency and lead to greater retention.

“Capable, creative, positive, thoughtful people are the fundamental building blocks of strong, surviving organizations. This people infrastructure enables structures and organizations to survive tough and turbulent times.”
— Harvey and Drolet (1994)

Many California school districts are experiencing difficulty in finding, training and retaining administrators at all levels of the organization. The reasons for this are numerous, but probably include the following elements:

- Increased accountability expectations.
- Diminished or static levels of resources to support reform efforts.
- Greater administrator vulnerability to sanctions.
- The complex demands of government and the community.

- The sometimes slight or negligible difference between teacher and administrator compensation when viewed on a per diem basis.

- The necessity for leaders to spend a great deal of time meeting the demands of the job.

- Media coverage of public education’s occasional errors; little coverage of our frequent successes.

- Chronic stress.

Taking care of the leadership team

Given the increasingly demanding environment, universities that prepare administrators and the school districts that employ administrators are striving to create support mechanisms designed to increase administrator resiliency.

For example, the Nuvew Union School District in Riverside County has established structures and norms de-

signed to build resiliency and optimism in the face of today’s challenges. The first structure is the establishment and maintenance of an effective Leadership Team.

Weekly Leadership Team meetings include all cabinet members, principals, program managers and the presidents of both employee associations. The rationale for this is a belief that we’re “in the soup together.” To emphasize this, Leadership Team meetings include time for sharing the successes and challenges in each of the sites and departments of the school district.

The meeting agendas include humor, icebreakers, successes to celebrate, challenges to face and a time for small groups to develop their thoughts about possible solutions to pressing problems. One

By Jay N. Hoffman

of the norms for our Leadership Team meetings is that all members will actively contribute to the success of team members and the team as a whole.

A review of the characteristics of effective teams, as described by Harvey and Drolet (2004), provides the Leadership Team with the opportunity to self-assess its effectiveness.

The lead principal

A veteran principal was recently designated as the school district's lead principal, responsible for mentoring each of his less-senior colleagues. The result: frequent opportunities for colleagues to meet and visit in a non-evaluative setting, discussing challenges and sharing triumphs. The lead principal employs multiple coaching/mentoring strategies, including those mentioned in Hargrove's "Masterful Coaching" (1995) and Kinlaw's "Coaching for Commitment" (1999). In a sometimes subtle manner, all conversations present the opportunity for supportive coaching.

Professional growth: Keep the fire burning

To be most effective, professional growth decisions should be consistent with the mission, vision and goals of the school district. Ongoing professional growth is an explicit norm for leaders in the Nuvview Union School District.

The stimulus of continuous, high quality professional growth may help to increase the resiliency of school leaders. All members of the district's Leadership Team, and all members of the governing board, were given copies of Jim Collins' highly successful book, "Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't" (2001). The gift was followed by an ongoing dialogue incorporating the concepts and vocabulary introduced within the book.

From the superintendent's perspective, the book has provided a common understanding of the personal characteristics necessary for great leadership and the organizational characteristics necessary for sustained greatness. The ongoing dialogue has helped to sustain the school

district's determination to be a truly outstanding place for students, staff and members of the community.

The sharing of professional growth through the establishment of a professional learning community as suggested by DuFour (2002) leverages that growth through a broader population. In addition, professional learning communities operate with the understanding that the ongoing conversation will be enriched through the contributions and continuous learning of all members. This high-level sharing opportunity enhances the professional skills of educational leaders and, in this author's opinion, does much to bolster their competency, which can enhance resiliency.

A culture of entrepreneurship

Another element in the district's quest to build strength and resiliency in its school leaders is the culture of the district. In the case of the Nuvview Union School District, a culture of entrepreneurship and excellence has emerged. One might

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think that the high performance expectations implicit in the terms "entrepreneurship" and "excellence" might serve to increase stress and lessen job satisfaction. Our experience contradicts this.

Our school leaders have been intimately involved in the entrepreneurial efforts that have resulted in the winning of a number of highly competitive grants. Even when the grant efforts have been unsuccessful, the positive experience of working closely together to accomplish something of great import has created a sense of potency that is enduring.

The excellence component of the district's culture is similarly contradictory. Though the achievement of genuine excellence is highly challenging, the satisfaction that comes as a result of the achievement more than compensates for the effort. School leaders report feelings of great pride in being able to provide excellence to the students and families of the school district.

The strength and resiliency of our school leaders appears to be closely linked to the quality of their involvement in the district's efforts, rather than the absolute success or failure of those efforts.

Administrator evaluations: A conversation about strengths, challenges and the future

In the Nuvview Union School District, a rigorous, respectful and insightful school leaders' evaluation process presents a wonderful opportunity to identify and acknowledge the challenges faced by our leaders. Following the school leader's submission of a self-evaluation based on 10 performance criteria, the superintendent writes a comprehensive, strength-based commentary on the school leader's performance.

The personal conversation that accompanies the presentation of the written summative evaluation document is generally rewarding to the both the evaluator and evaluatee. The conversation also allows the evaluator to share ideas about professional growth events or opportunities that might be of greatest benefit to the evaluatee.

In a broader sense, the evaluation process, its culminating summative evaluation document and the accompanying

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conversation serve to remind us that we're "in the soup together." This togetherness is a great asset during our work to confront today's challenges.

Implications for action

Though leaders in the field of education will continue to try to positively im-

pact the external environment, the reality is that challenging issues will continue to emerge. These issues, coupled with the sometimes negative perceptions they generate, may serve to debilitate even the most dedicated school leaders.

Resiliency among school leaders can be enhanced through the creation of

supportive structures and norms within school districts. Attention to team-building, effective coaching and the creation of a culture that challenges, energizes and rewards leaders appear to be helpful in enhancing the resiliency of school leaders.

Ongoing professional growth also appears to be a key factor in building resiliency. In addition to professional growth related to the nuts and bolts of school operations, further leadership study in the areas of organizational theory, organizational development and the politics of education might contribute to additional insights on the part of educational leaders.

Functioning at the highest possible level

The wonderful, capable, positive and caring people who fill the ranks of educational leaders are tremendous assets to their organizations. Support for and retention of these leaders is essential if organizations are to function at the highest possible level.

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