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April 14, 2012

Journal #6

School Culture

Principal Standard III: Principals Demonstrate School Cultural and Equity Leadership

1. Intentional and Collaborative School Culture: Principal’s articulate and model a clear vision of the school’s culture, and involve students, families and staff in creating a climate that supports it.
2. Commitment to the Whole Child: Principals value the cognitive, physical, mental, social, and emotional health and growth of every student.
3. Equity Pedagogy: Principals demonstrate a commitment to a diverse population of students by creating an inclusive and celebratory school culture, and provide the direction of meeting the needs of diverse student talents, experiences, and challenges.

What I Observed/Learned:

Tuesday I spent the day shadowing the principal of Palmer Ridge High School in District 38, Gary Gabel. I was advised by my current principal that it would be good to spend a day at each of our district’s high schools in order to get a feel for the high school “beast” as well as to compare the two buildings. I went in with no expectations, though certainly some pre-conceived ideas, as the opening of this high school in 2009 was met with much scrutiny. In addition to “being the reason” our district has needed to cut so much in other areas, the public views this high school as “prison-like” in its rules as well as the overall look and feel of the building. As Gary explained, the district chose to open the building “bare bones,” with very little painting, etc, to add to the atmosphere. Not only was there no budget for “decorating,” one week before the school opened its doors to students, Gary discovered there were no clocks in any of the classrooms! So, as we walked the building talking with and observing teachers, Gary took time to point out how “culture” was being created:

Parents have formed a “painting committee.” These parents raise money for paint, then work over the summer and on weekends to paint pillars blue and gold (the school’s colors), as well as to paint murals (academic- as well as spirit –oriented). They have also added “striping” and lettering to outside athletic buildings.

Parents are also in charge of a “photo committee.” Photographs taken by the yearbook and newspaper students are enlarged, framed, and hung gallery style through a long, once empty, corridor. These photographs have been carefully selected to represent every aspect of student life at PRHS including athletic teams, academic teams, clubs, extracurricular activities, etc. Additionally, an area was been selected to hang photos related to student council current officers, past presidents, etc.

Other areas have been designated in similar fashion for Foreign Exchange Students, Key Club, etc. Of course there is a trophy case for athletics, but Gary made sure to order banners (hung in the gym) for future state and league champions (some of these banners already have dates added!); a wall outside the gym displays a uniform for every sport, and a wall outside the weight room tracks school records. Trophy cases are also in place for performing arts honors; additionally the drama dept. has taken to painting a small mural for each of their plays/musicals down another long, empty hallway.

How this will impact my leadership practice:

On a short side note, I participated on my own school’s principal selection committee this past week as well. I only mention it because one of the questions was, “A school tends to take on its own personality, usually in direct relation to the administration’s personality. What will our school look like under your leadership?” I liked the way PRHS looked and felt. Standards were high, but were accepted by students and staff. Everybody knew the expectations, accepted them, were invested in them, and upheld them. Staff is not “out to get” anybody, but consistently remind students of the rules and give consequences consistently and fairly. Having tremendous pride in their accomplishments as well as their building, students rarely argue with authority saying such things as, “Yes, Mr. Gabel, I know there are no hats in school. I apologize for having my hat on – I thought it was ok to wear a hat in the corridor. It won’t happen again.” Also, one student approached saying, “Mr. Gabel, I don’t know if you’re aware of the graffiti in the parking lot, but a student used other kids’ cars to leave a message asking a girl to prom, and I just don’t think it was a good idea.” When it was discovered that a special needs boy had punched his special needs girlfriend in the stomach because “she needed to learn to be patient,” time was taken to explain to him not just the school’s policy, but also the laws concerning domestic violence and how it could apply even to teenagers. There is a mutual respect in this building among staff and students and parents, each working to create not just something meaningful, but also that kids can look back on for their entire lives and remember the lessons learned.

This is the kind of building I want to be a part of - a building in which all parties inspire each other to continually learn, improve, and grow.