

Implementing Change: How Can a Principal Know and Navigate Conflicting Interests Within a School Community?

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Abstract

An experienced principal transfers schools to rebuild trust in the school culture and community after a recent scandal and declining student achievement scores. A district level supervisor opens a way for Mr. Davie, the incoming principal, to offer middle students advanced classes. The principal believes this is an initiative that will boost school culture by reestablishing high-level learning, reengaging teachers, and renewing parents' confidence in the school. Adding new honors classes could be good for everyone, but what has this principal missed in planning for and implementing this change?

Keywords

principal leadership, change management, school culture, teacher retention

Dilemma

Kevin Davie is a mid-career principal who transfers to a district middle school to rebuild trust in the school culture and community after a recent scandal and declining student achievement scores. While he had some early successes, Mr. Davie is surprised to find so many resignations and requests to transfer at the end of his first year. When a district supervisor opens a way for Mr. Davie to make changes to course programming, the principal believes his plan will boost school culture by reestablishing high level learning, reengaging teachers, and renewing parents' confidence in the school. Adding new honors classes should be good for everyone, but as school is about to begin again, more teachers are planning their exit. What has this principal missed in planning for and implementing this change?

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Community Context

Located outside of a suburb of a city in the Southeastern US, Hillcrest is a growing community with a strong sense of pride and tradition. Its historic “old town” area is meticulously cared for, celebrated, and promoted even while progress is embraced, and new construction has added many businesses, shops, and family homes into the area. Still holding onto its identity as a close-knit town, Hillcrest offers plenty of opportunities for residents and visitors to connect and get involved with their community. Local festivals, parades, the fun run each summer, and a Saturday Farmers’ Market are among the staples in Hillcrest. High school football games and the Miss Hillcrest pageant are big events that are always well-attended and heavily discussed among the residents. Churches, parks, and walking trails are in frequent use, and a general sense of safety and well-being saturate the area.

Hillcrest has a low crime index; it was last reported as 79% safer than other U.S. cities. Demographic data shows that community residents are comparatively well educated with 65% holding college degrees and 97% of adults holding high school diplomas. The majority of its 2,600 families are two-parent households, with a median household income of \$84,888, the third highest in the state. Much to the delight of local realtors, home ownership is at 94% and well above the national average. The local schools have been a great marketing tool, drawing professionals with children into the area, particularly those whose economic interests align with the area’s up and coming opportunities in finance, health care, and information. The recent expansion in population and development has only slightly altered Hillcrest’s ethnic and racial composition; however, it currently stands at 79% White, 12% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 2% Asian. Occasionally, the topic of diversity arises in the community’s awareness, and when it does, related conversations are documented at school board meetings.

The School

Hillcrest Middle School reflects the demographics of the community, and while it is the only middle school in the community, it is one of seven middle schools within a large suburban district that serves a total of 20,000 students and employs 1,558 professionals along with an additional 1,118 individuals in support staff roles. The district website declares its vision to be *A Model for Excellence in Education*, and Hillcrest Middle School had long considered itself to be in full alignment with that vision. The middle school currently provides for 1,100 students in a two-story building constructed in 2006 to serve sixth- to eighth-grade scholars. A recently approved construction project will update the reception area and add more space to the school so that the portable trailers, referred to as learning cottages, can be removed. Upon entering the school, one will see banners listing student accomplishments, school awards for band, choir, various sports and academic clubs, showcases of student art and artifacts, and a large plaque that reads: *Hillcrest Middle School will ensure that all students learn in an environment of academic excellence.*

Background

Unfortunately, the sting of scandal still touches Hillcrest Middle School even 9 months after the school bookkeeper was found to have embezzled over \$100,000 in school funds over several years, and the acting principal, though not directly involved, was asked to resign for his lack of oversight. The slow-moving school district had not yet pressed charges and rumor was that it might not. In this community, such a scandal not only generated unified outrage among the faculty and families, but it was also a deep embarrassment and mark of shame in a place that prided itself in its reputable and well-resourced schools. Perhaps because notable people call Hillcrest home, or because its businesses want their support to be known, or because of perceived competition with Chesterfield Middle, Hillcrest schools have been generously endowed and highly regarded. Then, when the news broke out of ongoing theft from inside the school, a sense of shock and betrayal gripped the community. Internal corrective actions were taken, of course, but the unexplained delay of charges and prosecution compounded the wounded community pride, and consequently, disdain and distrust set in on the faculty and families. People began to see the school differently. Seeds of suspicion took hold among community leaders, parents, teachers, and school staff as people began to question how and why such a thing could have happened in their school. Donations dramatically dropped off and more than a few Sunday church sermons happened to land on the lesson of Judas and his handling of the money bags.

In the effort to clean up the aftermath, the newly elected superintendent, Dr. Jake Holland, asked Kevin Davie, a mid-career principal with a reputation for handling his school budget meticulously, creating surpluses by applying for grants and careful spending, to transfer to Hillcrest Middle and begin the work of rebuilding transparency and trust. In addition, Mr. Davie was reminded that the school's state report card grade had fallen, and that was not acceptable in this community. Excellence was the expected standard, and so some changes needed to be put in place quickly to raise the rigor of instruction. Over the course of several meetings, Mr. David heard, "Hillcrest needs to be an 'A' school again," and with five highly successful years as a middle school principal, Mr. Davie knew exactly what his superintendent was saying, and he accepted the assignment without reservation. He was confident that he would implement some changes that would turn things around. Of course, it did not hurt that Mr. Davie also had a strong background in business, and he was good with school funds.

Case Narrative

The current faculty at Hillcrest Middle had more new faces than usual, but a core group of teachers was still intact. Overall, they were familiar with the prior principal's outspoken mannerisms and direct communication style, and despite the fact that he was often off-campus and disconnected from the daily management of the school, he was very well liked by teachers and staff. In many ways, Mr. Davie was the opposite of the former principal, and by means of comparison, Mr. Davie's quiet and reserved

demeanor was often misinterpreted during his first months at Hillcrest. He believed over-communicating was micromanaging, and by minimizing administrative updates, he believed he was extending professional respect and giving teachers more autonomy with their time and schedule. However, in an environment where a quiet leadership approach was novel, it made people uncomfortable. Generally, it was not interpreted as a positive affirmation of their competence, but instead, the faculty at Hillcrest worried about their jobs. They didn't understand why information was being withheld by their new administrator. Mr. Davie didn't notice this. It's a challenge to take over in the middle of a school year, and he was focused on his own adjustment; he assumed the staff would appreciate his approach. However, he found himself disillusioned to receive several resignations and several transfer requests during the summer after his first semester.

Reading down the list of names for transfer approval, Mr. Davie let out a deep sigh. These were all good teachers. He did not want to lose any of them. He knew how important the faculty was in creating school culture and while he wasn't sure he would find high level replacements for these positions; he also didn't want to hold people back who wanted to go. School would start again in less than a month, and Mr. Davie sat in the quietness of his office with a notepad and paper in front of him. He wanted to introduce an innovative program that would interest teachers, improve student learning, and perhaps even gain additional accolades from Dr. Holland.

During his first months at Hillcrest, Mr. Davie poured himself into building up the school's technology, revamping the athletic fields, and securing grant funding for an impressive addition to the building that would soon begin. He meticulously studied the school's expenses and cash flow and was able to save money on curriculum and offer stipends to teachers to support the new robotics and engineering clubs. To protect instructional time, he cut out pep assemblies and other whole-school events, such as carnival days and in-school dances. To respect teachers' time, he discontinued weekly faculty meetings, only calling for a Zoom meeting when necessary. Unlike his predecessor, Mr. Davie didn't flood the faculty email with updates and information. In fact, he rarely sent out emails, and he reminded the APs to be mindful of not burdening the teachers and staff.

Mr. Davie rocked back in his chair. How would he start this year? The only note he had on his paper read "School Culture Survey." Looking at the words, he drew a line through his writing. Tapping the pen on the desk, his thoughts were interrupted by the computer ping reminding him that a meeting with Abby Green, the district supervisor of honor programs, and the other district middle school principals was about to begin. Swinging his chair around to face the monitor, he clicked his Zoom invite. Within 30 min, the nearly blank notepad had transformed into a web of possibilities. Abby Green's information was gold, and Kevin Davie knew what to do.

By the next afternoon, Mr. Davie was ready to meet with his two assistant principals, Ms. Olivia Bentley, who had worked at the school since it opened, and Mr. Alan Mack, who had been hired to replace the assistant, Mrs. Ebony Write, who abruptly left in March. While it was assumed that Mrs. Write wanted to work closer to home, her exit interview notes suggested that she felt uncomfortable with the decisions Mr.

Davie was making. Perhaps it wasn't the decisions themselves, Mrs. Write tried to explain to HR, it was more about how he made them. He rarely explained what he was doing or why. Mr. Davie read the file and then thought about who he'd want to be his new AP.

Mr. Davie felt good about his admin team now. Ms. Bentley was an insider and knew the history of the school, and although she was socially well-connected to most of the faculty and many of the community families, Mr. Davie knew he could trust her. If she said something, it was important and needed to be shared. Mr. Mack, in contrast, was always eager to pass along whatever he heard. Yet, despite Mr. Mack's lapses in judgment and awkward gossip, Mr. Davie liked him and thought he was a great hire. Mr. Mack was an inexperienced administrator, having come into the position directly from a PE teacher role at the high school, but his work with the athletics department and football team made him quite a middle school asset:

"I know it's a little late in the summer to do this," Mr. Davie continued,

but we don't have a choice. Mrs. Green, at the district office, informed us that she wants some changes made to the gifted program. You know, for years, we've only had one gifted class in middle school. Now, we're going to dissolve gifted education and go to a pre-AP model and call it honors. These classes won't be limited to English the way gifted has been and they will be open to any student who wants to be in them. No more IQ testing or whatever it was they were doing. It's more equitable, and it will really raise the rigor for the kids. We can be an "A" school. The other district middle schools are going to offer Honors English and Honors math, but I want to offer honors in four content courses this year.

"Wow." Well, "Ms. Bentley began, "that's going to be a lot of work to figure out which students want to be in honors classes and get the message out to parents at this point." She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and pushed back her glasses. "School is about to start, and I am almost finished making the schedules." She glanced over at Mr. Mack who was smiling broadly. She continued, "We can do it. It's possible. We'll need to sort out the logistics of this fast though."

Mr. Mack cut in,

I never understood why only the smart kids get into gifted classes. And gifted English? My son, Joe, hates English, no offense, Olivia. I know you were an English teacher, but he'd love a cool science class. With STEM so big right now, I can see this being a real draw for the kids. The parents will love it. And honors—that's prestigious, you know.

"Yeah, Mrs. Green said the interest in STEM is the main reason to make the change," Mr. Davie replied,

And I agree. I want rigorous content open to all students. We really need to show parents all the good things we are doing for the kids. You know what's going on at Chesterfield Middle, right? That group of parents who are trying to get a charter school . . .

“Oh God,” Mr. Mack laughed, “that will never happen. Can you imagine?”
“It isn’t about English,” Ms. Bentley interjected:

Those teachers are our gifted specialists. They had to get additional certification under special education requirements. The district could have put gifted services in any content course, but the teachers would have had to go through a full credentialing program. As a school district, we required selected English teachers to do it. Those teachers had to go to Manford University for a year and pay the tuition themselves.

“Yes, so that’s the other thing,” Mr. Davie continued. “Now, we will have nine more teachers who get to teach high-level courses. No one needs any additional certification to teach middle school honors.”

“Those are the best classes,” Mr. Mack chuckled:

When I was at the high school, we never had behavior issues in the AP classes. Those kids come to school to learn. Heck! They can teach each other! That’s how I’d set it up. Those classes are a gift. Who are you giving them to?

“You’re right, Mack. Yeah, I’ll be making some phone calls soon. I’m starting with the transfer request list. This opportunity to teach honors is really going to energize some of our teachers who are losing interest in their work.”

“Oh yeah, gotta be strategic with this,” Mr. Mack nodded in amusement. “Gotta pick your favorites, right?”

Ms. Bentley shifted the discussion, “Are the honors teachers going to get any training on meeting the needs of gifted learners or in teaching pre-AP classes? Am I going to have to put that together?”

Mrs. Green is meeting with the gifted teachers soon, and they are going to talk about some professional development and micro-credentialing for the honors teachers. Green wants the gifted English teachers to provide all the training and support for the new honors teachers since they have certification. She’s letting them know. That’s all taken care of.

“Maybe I’ll call her and get some more information,” Ms. Bentley said mostly to herself.

“Our work,” Mr. Davie continued, “is to present this to parents and get the community excited about new honors classes at Hillcrest Middle.”

“Yeah, I’m with you, Davie,” Mr. Mack started.

A week before school was to begin, Caroline Edwards, a gifted English teacher at Hillcrest Middle School, sat at her dining room table and watched the rain fall into her front yard. She closed the laptop in front of her and picked up her phone. The group chat had been going off through the meeting with Abby Green and the 21 middle school gifted teachers in the county. Caroline knew the other two gifted teachers at Hillcrest were texting. She knew what they were saying. As she picked up the phone to scroll through the thread, Beth Taylor’s call came through.

“Can you believe that?” Beth started:

Didn’t Abby say she wanted to meet with us to get our ideas about ways to improve the gifted program? I thought we were going to share ideas. What in the world? She already made a decision and just told us what it was.

Beth was an outspoken co-worker and friend, was an energetic, middle-aged woman, a wife and mother who had taught 6th-grade gifted English at Hillcrest for 7 years:

Beth, I was thinking the same thing. And something else too. I just added my gifted certification last year because the district required it. Did I do that for nothing? That program at Manford cost me a year of Tuesday nights and a loan for \$10,000 plus interest.

“Oh, I know, Caroline. And Janie and I only got ours a few years before you. Janie didn’t even want to teach gifted English. And Sarah at Chesterfield is still in the program. What about that? It’s just wrong.”

Caroline scanned through the texts as they talked. “There wasn’t any pay increase for this. Not even a pitiful stipend.” Her voice lowered in frustration.

“So, suddenly now we are supposed to give PD to teachers who are going to teach gifted learners in other subjects--along with our own regular classes? And who’s teaching honors? Do they even want to do this?” Beth demanded. “Micro credentialing? Did she make that up?”

“Whatever it is, I honestly don’t have time for it. I don’t need another thing to do.”

“Yeah. I know. I feel it too, and the year hasn’t even started, and I’m overwhelmed. At least I have Frank’s income, I could walk away if I needed to. I know it would be harder for you.”

“Maybe I can transfer. Isn’t it crazy how many people have jumped ship this summer? Either way, when I finish my PhD, I’ll have more options. That’s my hope anyway.” Caroline paused. “Really, Beth, it feels like teachers have no options. We are just used by administrators who don’t really care. What about our wellbeing? What about having empathy for the adults at school?” Caroline stopped herself. There was probably no use in thinking about that. She deliberately changed directions, “Speaking of administrators, I haven’t heard anything from Mr. Davie, have you? What are we doing at Hillcrest?”

“Not a word. He probably doesn’t even know there’s been a change.”

“You’re probably right. It’s like he never knows what’s going on. Or maybe he does and just doesn’t tell us. How are we supposed to trust someone like that?”

“I’m going to call Olivia and see if I can get any information from her. If anyone will tell us the truth, it’s Olivia Bentley,” Beth sighed.

“Yeah, she’ll know. If I don’t talk to you before, I’ll see you at the back-to-school meeting next week. Tell Frank I said hi.”

The first faculty meeting of the school year started the Monday morning before students returned. As the clock inched toward 7:30 am, teachers and staff began to fill

the cafeteria, where a welcome back breakfast was served on Styrofoam trays by a few parent volunteers. Chatter filled the large, cinderblock room as friends, co-workers, and new hires meandered through a modest buffet line of breakfast sandwiches and found seats.

Mr. Davie slipped in to say a few hellos before stepping back out into the connecting hall to take a call from Dr. Holland:

“Yes, thank you,” Mr. Davie replied after a few moments.

Kevin, I feel good about our last meeting. I like your ideas. You’re putting Hillcrest back in the lane to be an “A” school, and you’re turning the culture around. My girls will be there next year, and I can tell you there isn’t a middle school in the district that I’d rather them attend. I’m happy to give you the stipends for all the honors classes. That isn’t going to come out of your budget. The district is going to support this. It’s the right thing to do.

“That is wonderful news. I appreciate it. It’s going to be good for the kids.”

“That’s what it’s all about, Kevin.”

“And the teachers are excited about this. I was able to chip that transfer list way down. All of the math and science teachers want to stay.”

“Good to hear. Hey, I need to cut this short, but I’ll be in touch later this week.”

“Yeah. Thanks again.” Mr. Davie smiled, slipped his phone in his back pocket, and strolled into the cafeteria.

Caroline found a seat across from Beth and set her folder on the long lunch table. “It’s sad that Janie isn’t here with us. I hope she likes her new position in Bryant County. They do the pull-out services for the gifted.”

“Good morning. Yeah, it’s a true gifted position, and they do a lot of good things for their teachers there. You know I heard over half of the district’s gifted middle school teachers are leaving over this,” Beth lowered her voice. “I want to tell you what Olivia said before things get started today. I talked with her yesterday.”

“What’s the real story?” Caroline asked.

“Olivia says Abby was pressured by a group of Chesterfield parents. Apparently, they demanded this. They were threatening to start a charter school and some donor gave them the property and promised to build a school for them.”

“What? Oh, good luck with that,” Caroline rolled her eyes.

“Olivia says Abby had to push for honors. But she also said district people are starting to worry that even more of us are going to quit once the school year starts,” Beth paused. “Not having contracts is to our advantage now. We can leave any time.”

“Those who can afford to leave. How many of us are stuck? How many of us have lost our sense of purpose here but don’t have any other option?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“What is Mr. Davie doing about this?” Caroline asked. “He hasn’t said anything about it to me. It’s ridiculous. School is about to start.”

“Olivia said she’s going to talk with him again after the meeting this morning. She’s going to explain our perspective.”

“Who is the real decision maker here? Do you think it’s Green?” Caroline could imagine Abby Green’s insistence. Rumor had it that she had been reassigned from her role as principal because her leadership style was too intense for an elementary school.

“Ugh. She hasn’t been in a classroom for years. Abby has no idea what teachers do. How are we supposed to trust people who make policies and mandates but don’t interact with any kids?”

“And what do Chesterfield parents have to do with Hillcrest gifted?” Caroline asked.

“It has to be equitable. We have to serve students the same way in all district schools,” Beth continued. “Remember that big lawsuit out at Grayfield?”

“Yeah. So, we lost our gifted program because seven parents threw a fit out at Chesterfield?” Caroline shook her head in disbelief.

“Who’s throwing a fit?” interrupted Jim Maddox, a social studies teacher with a tall stance and cheerful voice. Jim sat down beside Caroline and began unwrapping his sandwich. “Parents? Not happy? You know there is an easy way to keep parents happy, right? I mean, besides charging the bookkeeper, right?”

“You know that’s not going to happen,” Beth replied.

“Oh, I know. I just want to keep bringing it up.”

“Hey Jim, did you get your rosters yet?” Caroline asked.

“No, but I know I have some honors social studies classes this year. Fun. Fun.”

Beth looked across the table at him. “What do you think about that?”

Oh, it’s fine. I mean Mr. Davie basically told me I had to do it. It’s not really going to be any different. I mean, I’m going to do the exact same thing as my regular classes. That’s what Chris and Maddie are doing in math and science for sure.

“Well, if the gifted kids are not in a gifted class now, I don’t know how we’re serving them. They do have legal GEP’s, gifted education plans. And Jim, parents are going to expect honors level work,” Beth replied.

Yeah, right. Hillcrest parents just want their kids to get good grades. I could give them coloring sheets and give them ‘A’s’ and everyone would be happy. That’s how it is. But I do hope social studies gets a stipend, too.

“What stipend?” Beth asked.

Mr. Mack said honors math and honors science teachers are getting a big stipend. I think it comes from all that STEM grant money that Mr. Davie got for the school. You know that’s why Holland put him here. He’s great with money. Anyway, I hope they have enough left over to give something to social studies. And English too. You guys should get it, for sure. That’s only fair.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Caroline stated flatly. “Is that why the math and science teachers who were leaving are suddenly back?”

“Oh, come on now,” Jim laughed. “Did you think they were staying here because they wanted to teach some honors classes? Nobody cares about that.”

Mr. Davie didn’t hear the conversation as he approached the table where Caroline, Beth, and Jim were finishing their coffee.

“Ms. Edwards, Mrs. Taylor,” he began with a friendly smile. “Ms. Bentley would like the four of us to meet after the full staff meeting this morning. Are you available?”

The women glanced at each other in surprise. “Yes,” they each replied.

Mr. Davie turned his attention to Jim who was getting his things together and standing up. “Jim, what did you say was wrong with the basketball court?” Mr. Davie asked.

“Do you have a minute? Let me show you.”

The men walked away, and Caroline and Beth sat quietly for a moment.

Caroline, I want you to know that I interviewed at Bryant. I was offered the position last night, and I’m seriously thinking of accepting. Janie said they are hiring two more teachers. They really care about their teachers. You could come, too.

“Oh wow, Beth. I didn’t think you’d leave.”

“Well, I’ll see how this meeting goes. Maybe Mr. Davie will say something that will give me a good reason to stay.”

Dilemma Summary

The community of Hillcrest wants to be proud of their middle school again, and adding new honors classes should contribute to higher student achievement and the overall perception of a high-quality school. While the outward appearance may improve with the principal’s programming change, how has his approach to implementing the change impacted what is happening inside the organization? What unintended consequences have happened? What doesn’t he see?

Although opening honors classes to all students appears to be an equitable programming option for the children, doing so creates a situation that appears to be unfair to certain teachers. Because Mr. Davie does not want to burden his staff with excessive communication, which he considers to be an infringement on their time and autonomy, he does not share his plans with the teachers who are most impacted by the change. As a result, as school is about to start again, he does not realize that he has resentful teachers who are actively planning to leave. While Mr. Davie was brought to the school to build trust, a lack of transparency and lack of collaboration may be damaging the school climate and culture.

Also, Mr. Davie is under pressure from the superintendent to improve the school’s achievement grade, and while honors classes sound rigorous, the social studies teacher reveals that the teachers with the new classes are not planning to do anything different, and it is suggested that they are only staying for the additional stipend. Mr. Davie believes he has solved his teacher retention problem, but there is reason to believe he has not. Furthermore, these teachers do not have the training to serve gifted learners,

and the district is quickly losing those who would be qualified to provide local training. Are these classes for appearance only? What has gone wrong in his decision-making process?

Teaching Notes

Principal Influence

Principals impact student and teacher outcomes by establishing a positive school environment (Leithwood et al., 2020) with a culture of high expectations (Sebastian et al., 2016) and collaboration (Owen, 2016). They extend influence in schools by overseeing instruction and curriculum (Day et al., 2016), hiring and retaining qualified teachers (Burkhauser, 2017), building trust within faculty and staff (Sebastian et al., 2016), modeling practices of equity and justice (Khalifa et al., 2016), implementing policy (Louis & Robinson, 2012), and shaping organizational ethics (Pendola, 2019). While principals are not the only leaders in school, even when distributed and collective leadership practices are well established, the “. . . principals’ decision influence does not necessarily diminish when other stakeholders gain more influence” (Ni et al., 2018, p. 217). Because principal decision-making touches most areas in a learning environment, leadership approaches and strategies for implementing school improvements are critical to learn and develop.

Leadership Approaches

While there are numerous leadership styles that can be successful in a school environment, consider the common approaches briefly described below in connection to Mr. Davie’s decision-making and methods.

Adaptive Leadership is the process of helping followers to adapt to change and focuses on what is required for people to successfully navigate problems and challenges (Northouse, 2016). “Adaptive leaders prepare and encourage people to deal with change” (Northouse, 2016, p. 257).

Authentic Leadership is a reciprocal, interpersonal process that is relationally created by the efforts and responses between a leader and followers (Eagly, 2005). “Authentic leaders have the capacity to open themselves up and establish a connection with others. . . Through mutual disclosure, leaders and followers develop a sense of trust and closeness” (Northouse, 2016, p. 199)

Distributed Leadership is the process of informally sharing leadership within a group. In this practice, “team members step forward when situations warrant, providing the leadership necessary, and then step back to allow others to lead” (Northouse, 2016, p. 365).

Transformational Leadership is a process that changes and transforms followers, moving them to accomplish a greater goal or vision (Northouse, 2016). “It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. It includes assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings” (Northouse, 2016, p. 186)

Servant Leadership is a process that elevates followers and focuses on how they can reach their full potential (Northouse, 2016). It requires leaders to “be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them” (Northouse, 2016, p. 225).

Teacher Turnover and Well-Being

In this case, the principal has a serious problem with teacher retention, and he seems not to realize what is really motivating and discouraging his faculty. Research is clear that high teacher turnover creates negative outcomes for a school as it “disrupts curricular cohesiveness, interrupts teacher-student relationships, interferes with the adoption of a common school vision, and leads to an increase in the number of inexperienced teachers” (Fuller et al., 2018, p. 1). Understanding the real causes of teacher attrition in a local context is necessary in order for a principal to appropriately address the factors they influence. Fuller et al. (2018) explain that teacher working conditions, which includes school culture and leadership, have “a greater effect on teacher turnover than most other factors, including student achievement and student characteristics” (p. 1). Out of these working conditions, research shows that “principal effectiveness has the strongest influence on teachers’ decisions to stay at or leave a school” (Fuller et al., 2018).

In this case, the gifted English teachers question whether adult well-being matters when they learn they will have an added responsibility of providing PD to those who will not be required to receive certification to teach honors. The concept of teacher well-being can be understood as the place where educators feel “well, alive, engaged, connected, and whole in their work” (Cherkowski, 2018, p. 64). Well-being is “the combination of feeling good and functioning well” (Huppert & Johnson, 2010, p. 264); it is a state of being that combines “positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, interest and affection” (Huppert & Johnson, 2010, p. 264) with the perception of positive functioning that comes from autonomy, self-efficacy, and resilience (Huppert & Johnson, 2010). In this case, there is no sign that the faculty is thriving or that leaders are making efforts to promote well-being in teachers as a way to protect against turnover. Well-being is connected to human flourishing, and it has been linked to one’s ability to experience meaning and purpose in life (Morse et al., 2019), and in this narrative, teachers appear to be losing a sense of meaning and purpose in their work.

As school leaders attend to their leadership behaviors and to the school factors that contribute to well-being, principals can help mitigate the toll that educational environments take on teachers. Research finds that teachers thrive in schools that are viewed as living systems and that are structured as learning communities where teachers are connected in high-level functioning PLC’s and where innovative school cultures and the pursuit of meaning and purpose are valued (Morse et al., 2019). Teachers thrive when schools focus on well-being, human capacity, and strengths and where an abundant, unlimited potential mindset is the collective norm (Cherkowski & Walker, 2013). Furthermore, teacher well-being can be protected when principals are appreciative,

respectful, supportive, and promote distributed leadership, allowing for teacher autonomy, empowerment, and job variety (Lambersky, 2016; Owen, 2016). In this situation, there is no evidence that this school improvement initiative or the principal's way of addressing teacher retention takes these matters into account.

School Culture

Mr. Davie believes he is improving school culture by creating new classes that should be more rigorous; however, this may be only a surface-level change that does not deeply transform the culture. School culture is formed by the values, deeply held beliefs and attitudes, and the “long-standing historical precedence” present in an organization (Burke, 2018, p. 255). Deal and Peterson (1999) define school culture as the “unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and students” (pp. 2–3). It is culture that births climate, the manifestation of behavior that stems from what individuals feel and believe about their organization. In this case, the principal decides not to give the culture survey, and instead of learning how his faculty views the school and his leadership, he jumps to plan for change. He creates a solution without knowing anyone else's perspectives on the problem. In Schein's (2010) highly cited work on organizational culture, he argues that leaders are “architects of culture” and “if elements of the culture become dysfunctional, leaders can and must do something” (p. xi). Mr. Davie knows there needs to be a change, but he does not seem to know how to use his initiative to spark the kind of deep, positive change that would truly benefit the school.

A school culture of empathy can help foster an understanding, acceptance, and protection of those who find themselves teaching and learning together. As a personal and collective quality, empathy can do this because it awakens and alerts one to the needs and struggles of others. Empathy draws upon both the intellect and emotions (Brown et al., 2019) as it breaks down the detached insensitivity that so easily blinds people to the challenges others feel and face. “Empathy means taking the perspective of the other and feeling an emotional bond with that other” (Brown et al., 2019, p. 55). In this case, there is little indication that a culture of empathy exists among members, and yet, the ability to empathize with others builds a sense of authentic interconnection, which is necessary for a thriving school. When cultivated, empathy allows for authentic collaboration and for creating responsiveness in the setting of a school (Hartman et al., 2017).

Those who hold a genuine concern for the unique experiences of others are better able to build quality connections with them, which is highly valuable in a healthy school culture. As Rebores (2014) comments, “It is impossible to establish ethical relationships if a person has little or no idea how other people feel about concerns, problems, and issues” (p. 304). Empathy taps into one's sensitivities, and that enables people to make decisions based on the true needs and best interests of others. In action, it often manifests as compassion, and compassionate school cultures lend themselves

to the collective desire for just and fair practices that consider the perspectives and well-being of those involved.

Implementing Change

Finally, the central dilemma of this case is tied to the way in which the principal planned for and implemented change. As school leaders, principals are positioned to be change agents who are expected to disrupt the status quo for the purpose of improving student outcomes. While the vision for change may be highly desired, many school initiatives fail. “Leading change requires continuous analysis of the situation and mid-course corrections” (Spiro, 2019, p. 1) as well as buy-in from followers. As opposed to promoting a top-down approach to implementing change, Tyack and Cuban (1995) believe that implementing change cannot be controlled from a distance and that there is value in the adjustments practitioners make to mandates because they bring their “wisdom of practice” to improvement efforts (p. 83). In this case, the teachers are not consulted or sought for buy-in but rather indirectly learn of the mandates they will be expected to execute. Fowler’s (2013) asserts that contemporary American society considers “education to be a crisis” and so change initiatives come forth in a flood and often without educator input (p. 9). While practitioners do lament the ill-advised mandates of those far-removed from the classroom, it may be the local level power that actually pushes teachers into resentment, sabotage, or flight.

Experts note that change takes time, requires collective participation, and depends on more than a managerial mindset (Kotter, 2012). Change management is a process with steps that loop and cycle, and at the early stages, it usually requires starting with a vision that is clearly communicated to a team of supporters (Miller, 2021; Shakman et al., 2020). During the planning and early implementation stages, leaders must solicit feedback and gather data, reflect, and course correct to meet short-term goals and attain some early wins as they simultaneously create systems and develop capacity in people to make desirable changes permanent (Spiro, 2019). Thus, true change management is not simply the enforcement of leader-initiated mandates.

Case Discussion Questions

Individual Reflection Questions

1. *What is the most significant issue Mr. Davie faces?*
2. *What, if anything, did Mr. Davie miss in his decision-making process?*
3. *How is Mr. Davie’s approach to planning and implementing the gifted education change helping or hindering the situation?*
4. *Whose priorities are aligned and whose are contradictory?*
5. *Who is benefiting the most from this change? Who is hurt the most?*
6. *What responsibilities do the teachers have in this situation?*
7. *How does a district decision-maker complicate the situation?*

8. *Explain which leadership style Mr. Davie should express to course correct this situation--adaptive, authentic, distributed, servant, or transformational leadership?*
9. *What does Mr. Davie need to say to the teachers in the meeting at the end of the case?*

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. In *Tinkering with Utopia*, Tyack and Cuban (1995) comment that “Reforming public schools has long been a favorite way to improve not just education but society” (p. 1), yet extensive “overpromising has often led to disillusionment and to blaming the schools for not solving problems beyond their reach” (p. 3).
 - a. In this teaching case, how is Mr. Davie expected to improve the school? What problems is Mr. Davie expected to solve? Is he expected to solve problems beyond his reach? What is the likely outcome of his efforts?
 - b. How is this school being impacted and influenced by its community? Is the school being used in any way to improve the community? Could it be? Should it be?
2. Fowler (2013) points out the profound disconnect educational decision-makers can have with the actual practice and needs of those who learn and work in schools and acknowledges that it is easy to react to this reality “by withdrawing into resignation or fatalism” (p. 4).
 - a. Are the teachers’ reactions and responses justified? What other options do they have?
 - b. The school’s vision statement includes a reference to ensuring an empathetic learning culture. Are there indicators of empathy in any of these individuals or in the organization as a whole? What could be done to cultivate greater levels of empathy for and among members?

When leaders use democratic principles, trust strengthens the social system and helps protect organizational change efforts from failure (Kensler et al., 2009).

- c. How do the communication habits and expectations of these individuals undermine trust? Where is trust the weakest in this scenario?
- d. Which individuals are positioned and responsible for building organizational trust? How might this be accomplished?

Extended Discussion Questions/Written Response

1. DuFour and Fullan (2013) acknowledge the challenges that come from both top-down and bottom-change initiatives and state, “ordering people to change doesn’t work nor does leaving them alone. Effective change involves developing an engaging process that draws people into something that the vast majority of people find worthwhile” (p. 33). *If change does not happen as expected*

or desired, are school leaders more likely to blame the process or the people? How do leaders recognize what people find worthwhile?

2. Educational leaders are entrusted to support the well-being of learners as mandated in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (Murphy, 2016), but should efforts toward well-being extend to adults at school as well? Can students be engaged, energized, joyful, curious, and academically successful when they spend their days with teachers who are depleted, discouraged, disconnected, and perhaps looking for another career? Because student well-being is affected by teacher well-being (Graham et al., 2016) and because teachers model their emotional states to their classes (Andersen et al., 2012), *how can school leaders support the wellbeing of other adults at school? Should they? How much responsibility do principals have for the wellbeing of teachers? Are they equally responsible for the wellbeing of support staff?*
3. In Elmore's (1979) discussion of "backward mapping," he explains that those close to a problem's source have the greatest influence on it, and "the problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control but on maximizing discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate" (p. 605). *How can school principals use backward mapping to implement change and to improve their schools?*

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