



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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What is Your School’s Language?

In the past three years, since receiving a federal School Improvement Grant, Sunnyside High School has gone through a significant transformation. Through a mutually beneficial partnership with Gonzaga University, Dr. Chuck Salina was hired as the turnaround principal. With a laser like focus on improving attendance and graduation rates, we have charted a course that focuses on three areas; developing relational trust, providing social support, and increasing academic press. With these three foundational pieces we have increased our attendance rate from 92% in 2009 to 95% in 2012, and our graduation rate from 49.7% to 78.4% over that same time. The socioeconomic status of our students did not change, the teaching staff did not dramatically change, and as everyone knows the graduation requirements got more difficult over that time. Instead, we operated under a new way of doing business. The staff has become galvanized by the mission, and has worked intentionally to create a culture for learning within the high school. One of the nonnegotiable was changing the way that we talked about each other and the way that we talked about students. The importance of language and how we talk about each other is widely recognized as a factor in creating a culture for learning, but is typically mentioned and then quickly forget, passed over for additional attention to more concrete aspects such as instructional practices or assessment data. It is not enough to simply recognize that language is important in creating a culture for learning within a school house; it must be something that is intentionally developed and receives consistent attention.

Lao Tzu, writing over 2,600 years ago explains:

**Watch your thoughts; they become words.
Watch your words; they become actions.
Watch your actions; they become habits.
Watch your habits; they become character;
Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.**

With the argument that one’s thoughts are typically the source of their destiny, not only do ones words play a very early role in that process, it is the first point where others are directly impacted. Your words are where you first make your thinking visible to others, and therefore your first opportunity to influence others, either positively or negatively. A teacher who sits in their classroom thinking about how much they dislike going to the staff meetings isn’t going to benefit much from that meeting, but doesn’t do near the potential damage as someone who complains in the staff room about how much they hate those same meetings. What we say about each other and our school is the foundational blocks of creating a school culture, and that culture is so incredibly important.

Students make bad choices. Students are not bad people. Adults make bad choices. Adults are not bad people. While this may appear to be a poor lesson in semantics there is a world of difference between complaining about a bad kid and complaining about a kid who made a bad choice. Our language is the first opportunity other people have in determining what we value and expect. Carol Dweck(2006), in her book

Mindset, explains the importance of language in shaping student's mindsets. She argues that it is imperative that teachers consistently communicate that they hold growth mindsets and equally important that formal leaders communicate they have a growth mindset towards teachers. As informal or formal leaders it is critical that you model the importance of language and don't allow others to slip towards negative ranting. At Sunnyside High School we made the determination that we were not going to accept our teachers speaking negatively about our students and we were going to stop talking negatively about our teachers.

I was one of the guilty ones. I talked negatively about students due to their lack of effort, their poor attitudes, inconsistent attendance, and apparent apathy. At times my coworkers annoyed the heck out of me, and I enjoyed quick conversation with others or short e-mails complaining about what other teachers were doing. These conversations did little more than make me feel better about myself for a few minutes, but upon reflection impacted the quality of my conversations and actions with them later. It was very humbling for me to realize that I was one of the people who needed to change my language in order for our school to move forward. Dave Logan, John King, and Hilee Fischer-Wright (2011), in their book *Tribal Leadership*, succinctly explain the role that language plays not only in diagnosing the health of an organization, but in using language to improve the culture of a group. They argue that each culture has its own theme, "that appears whenever people talk, e-mail, joke around, or just pass one another in the hallway." (Pg. 18) They go on to state that the dual indicators of language and observable behavior towards others in the group almost always correlate perfectly, "we can predict the performance of the tribe by counting the number of people who speak the language of each stage and notice who is in a position of leadership." (Pg. 26) While assessment data and achievement scores help educators diagnosis the health of their schools, making a consistent effort to intentionally examine the language in the school will provide additional evidence in helping administrators evaluate the culture for learning within the school.

So I leave you with two questions

What is the language of your school?

What are you going to do tomorrow to improve it?

Joshua Eidson
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