Allen Himmelberger Takes Over as Superintendent in Oxford

When Allen Himmelberger, formerly the Business Manager, took over as Superintendent in Oxford MA in 2009, he was faced with high health insurance costs, an underfunded school district, a contentious relationship with the teachers union, and poor test results leading to a Level 3 designation for the district. Furthermore, the District had 35% of students classified as low income and a mobility rate over 10% making closing the achievement gap even more challenging with the number of high needs students increasing rapidly.

Soon after he took over, Allen changed the model of half day only to full day kindergarten for all students and changed the configuration of the two elementary schools from neighborhood to grade level, providing more educational balance throughout the district. He also worked hard to build an effective working relationship with the union leadership since he quickly realized that if the outcomes were going to improve it would have to be done through collaboration with all staff. Then in 2011, when the new Educator Evaluation System was announced, Allen saw an opportunity to change the tenor of the relationship between teachers and administrators in the district and to start to develop a common vision for student learning.

Implementing the Educator Evaluation System

As the district approached the state mandate to adapt or adopt the new framework, the school district leadership team and the union took an interest-based bargaining approach and opened up a dialog as to what was getting in the way of making progress. As a result, they were able to agree on a Memorandum of Agreement framing the approach to implementing the new Educator Evaluation System in May 2012, becoming one of the first 25 districts in the state to reach an agreement. The teacher union president invited a representative from the MTA to do the initial orientation for the district, once again reinforcing the desire to implement the new framework collaboratively between leadership and the union. In December 2012, when it came to actually training the district on the new framework and developing an implementation plan, Allen turned to Teachers21, a not-for-profit focused on developing and supporting skillful practice for educators at all levels, building a reflective culture among adults, strengthening strategic alignment and coherence throughout districts, and focusing on continuous improvement. Allen knew of Teachers21's reputation as a professional development company, and also valued its objectivity and commitment to making a substantive, measurable impact in the districts with which it partners. He also found out that Teachers21 had developed a team of about 15 consultants with a broad range of background knowledge and experience working and collaborating in this area.

Teachers21 Steps In

Initially, Teachers21 and the Oxford Public Schools planned for three full days of training for school teams. Teachers21 recommended creating school teams that consisted of building administrators and teacher representatives, as well as a district team that included the Superintendent and central office staff; the district agreed. The training covered

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the 6 modules developed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education but also focused on the cultural shifts and skills required to create dialog and build trust between evaluators and classroom teachers. Establishing a shared vision of what good teaching and learning should look like in Oxford, and the primary areas within the rubrics for the district to focus on in light of the district goals, was another important element of the workshops that Dave Castelline, the consultant assigned to work with the Oxford Public Schools, integrated during the spring of 2013.

Reducing Anxiety and Building Trust
Prior to the training, Allen had already tried to reduce his staff's anxiety level by picking up on Massachusetts Commissioner for Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell Chester’s comments that the first year of implementation would be difficult, but the second year would be less challenging and by the third year an even greater refinement would take place. Hard and fast deadlines were not part of the first year, in fact the focus was on the long term goal of improving professional practice to increase student outcomes and just getting the process started. Moreover, Allen reassured all professional staff that no one would lose their jobs implementing the new system in the first year and in fact, he made it clear to the educators in his district that during these startup years, he had the most to fear regarding job security.

During the training Dave Castelline took the teams through a series of exercises to further reduce anxiety and to bring the teachers and school leaders to realize that their interests were truly aligned on improved learning for all. Once the training with the school and district teams was complete, the participants decided they wanted to be sure the sense of shared learning and purpose carried over to the entire staff so they contracted with Teachers21 for Dave to work with school leaders as they brought the program back to their buildings. In particular, besides helping develop a roll out strategy for each building, Dave supported school leaders’ skill development as observers, evaluators and providers of feedback that lead to improved practice and educator growth. The ongoing, active dialog that now takes place among the union and district leadership is also helping to refine the MOA between the district leadership and the union so that it better reflects the shared goals of the educator community.

While it is still in the early stages, the changes in culture and practice taking place in the Oxford Public Schools are noticeable. There has been an increased level of trust to make this implementation successful; however the challenges and difficulties are real and cannot be minimized. It takes focus and open honest communication to make the changes necessary for successful implementation. The goal is to become a Level 1 district and if the successes of the first year of implementing the changes prescribed by the Educator Evaluation System are an indication, the goals of improved professional practice and increased student outcomes will be realized.

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