

Promising Practices and Implementation Tools

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- 3. Lever Addressed:** Professional Culture
- 4. Title of Promising Practice:** Building and Sustaining A Strong Professional Culture
- 5. District(s) Where Implemented:** Shrewsbury Public Schools
- 6. Applicable Grade Levels:** PreK-12

7. How This Practice Reflects District's Mission & Core Values:

The mission and core values of the Shrewsbury Public Schools are infused throughout its professional culture and are the guiding principles for all decisions that impact student learning as they pertain to: respect & responsibility, collaboration & communication, commitment to high standards & expectations, and equity.

8. Goals of This Practice:

- 1.) Continue to build and sustain a professional learning culture
- 2.) Prepare students for success in the 21st century while fostering respect for self and others
- 3.) Continue to build leadership capacity throughout the district

9. Description of This Practice and How it Addresses Criteria for Professional Culture:

Stability in leadership at the Superintendent level is what the current Superintendent identifies as a key contributor to the positive culture that has been perpetuated in Shrewsbury for many years. He is in his fifth year as Superintendent, his predecessor also spanned a fifteen year term as district leader, and his predecessor served for 17 years before him.

One of the hallmarks of this professional culture is articulated in Shrewsbury's personnel practice as it pertains to hiring and retaining staff. For instance, all stakeholders in the education of Shrewsbury students are empowered to share in the decision making process when it comes to hiring new teachers or administrators. A representative group of parents and teachers are required to serve on interview committees for all professional-level staff hires and student voices are also deemed critical in the hiring process. For instance, high school students serve on every high school teacher interview committee; every teaching candidate finalist must teach a demonstration lesson where students from the class taught give feedback on the candidates; and students at all levels, K-12, are consulted when hiring administrators.

Once a candidate has been through a thorough interview process and is recommended by a principal and/ or other program leader, the Superintendent and Director of Human Resources meet with each of the candidates prior to appointment. At this time, the Superintendent reviews the district's mission and core values, to make sure the candidate understands what their commitments are. He or she is then asked to discuss how these core values resonate with their own approach and philosophy. It is also explained that when it comes to attaining professional status, the difficult decision to release a small number of staff each year often has more to do with not demonstrating fidelity to Shrewsbury's mission and core values than lack of technical skills. In short, the clear expectation is that from the Superintendent on down, all professional staff will behave and live by the district's mission and core values on a daily basis.

Another cornerstone of the professional culture established in Shrewsbury is the belief in building leadership capacity as demonstrated in the over arching structure established at both the district and building levels. These leadership groups play a key role in sustaining a strong school culture and modeling collaboration and mutual respect:

- A fifteen member School Leadership Team, made up of principals and central office administrators, meet twice a month to collaborate around the myriad of district and building issues that need to be addressed. This group also has established a set of norms that they live by (an implementation tool) and routinely set aside time in the agenda to consult and support each other around timely challenges they've experienced. This group also convenes in the summer for a yearly leadership conference to reflect and set goals for the up-coming year.
- A District Leadership Team that includes approximately forty members who serve in a supervisory role; principals, assistant principals, directors, department chairs etc. who meet once a month to focus on district issues and best instructional practices. This past year the entire focus was on the new educator evaluation system, not only training the administrators but also having conversations and getting feedback on how it was going. For certain meetings, the district's Teacher Union officers were also invited in an effort to have full transparency.
- A Central Office Leadership Team made up of six central office members: Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, SPED Director, Director of Business and Director of Human Resources.
- The Superintendent has also established a District Faculty Advisory Committee that includes two teacher representatives from the each building, one chosen by the principal and the other by the Teacher Union leadership, to meet with him once a month. The purpose of this group is proactive vs. reactive; to hear the voices and concerns of teachers across the district and work together with administration to address them as needed. There is a faculty advisory council led by the principal at each building level as well.
- Culture in Shrewsbury is also framed by a Professional Learning Community approach that focuses on student learning, collaboration, using data to drive instruction, and setting measurable and attainable goals. At the K-8 level, teachers who teach the same grade/subject meet once a week at the elementary and lower middle school level and every other week at the upper middle school level during common planning time to set goals, analyze student work, plan lessons and share instructional strategies. Collaboration at the high school level occurs during monthly department meeting times and more frequently when there is a specific school-wide focus such as the recent NEASC accreditation process.
- Teacher leaders at the building level also continue to be instrumental in the implementation of the new Educator Evaluation System. Each building PD is co-led by the principal and a teacher "Educator Evaluation Facilitator" who has gone through the same training and receives a leadership stipend for this work. These teachers also offer informal assistance to their peers on an as-needed basis before or after school.

Aside from these formalized structures, when a new curriculum initiative surfaces within the district, teachers are intimately involved at the ground level. An example of this is the recent development of the K-12 writing curriculum. Teachers at all levels felt that because writing programs were more building

based, writing instruction was fragmented and absent of common expectations as students moved through grade levels. As a result, the district convened a team chaired by the Assistant Superintendent that included teacher representatives from each building and level, elementary instructional coaches, the middle level ELA coordinator, and the high school English Director. This group was successful in creating a K-12 framework of standards and best practices in writing that balances consistency with teacher innovation. This initiative is known as the “Shrewsbury Writing Project,” and it is being implemented successfully at the elementary and middle levels and moving towards implementation at the high school level.

The principal feedback/evaluation process is another practice that models open, honest communication. Many principals have conducted an end of the year survey to provide an opportunity for staff to give the principal honest feedback about all aspects of their particular school community. Principals review this data and share the responses at a faculty meeting in the fall, highlighting strengths, areas for improvement and suggested action plans. These surveys are not universally conducted in all buildings at this time, but the district is moving in that direction. The superintendent also conducted two anonymous surveys, one for parents, students and the general public and one for staff, and the results were published in their entirety on the district’s website.

The teacher evaluation process is also framed in a way that matches the culture in Shrewsbury. This year the "message map" that was relayed to teachers centered around the ideas that:

- We are all in this together
- Mistakes are a given, growth is the goal
- We can show how we make a difference for our students (PP tool)

Next year's work on identifying District Determined Measures will also be accompanied by the clear message that this process is about gathering formative data to help better teach students, not an accountability or "gotcha" tool.

Overall, this promising practice exemplifies the criteria necessary for successful school improvement in the area of Professional Culture as detailed below:

The superintendent at the district level and the principal at the school level ensure there is an articulated set of core values that drive behavior and decisions as well as an organizational culture that supports open and honest communication, continuous professional improvement, data-based decision-making, and joint responsibility for student learning and achievement.

- District and schools actively involve teachers, families, and other stakeholders (as appropriate) in decision-making.
- Teachers regularly engage in instructional conversations, peer observations, collaborative planning, and ongoing collegial support.
- District and schools are characterized by a climate of shared responsibility for continuous improvement.
- Data are continuously examined and analyzed to guide instructional decision-making.
- District and school culture is characterized by trust and willingness to discuss “undiscussable” issues.
- Superintendents and principals are evaluated on their ability to build a workplace culture of non-defensive examination of teaching practice and leadership practice in relation to student results.

- Superintendents and principals receive professional development to enhance this capacity.

10. How This Practice Was Implemented So It Was More Successful Than Others:

- Adopting the mantra of "Personnel is Job 1" as a building block for strong culture
- When a new principal is hired, the superintendent writes a "letter of charge" to this administrator highlighting the district's mission and core values and the critical role this person plays in modeling these beliefs
- As mentioned in the description, stability of leadership has contributed to sustaining a strong school culture
- The team approach and collaboration at all levels via district and school based structures
- Opportunity for teacher leadership and voice
- Collaborative relationship between Teachers Union and Administration

11. How This Practice Changed The District or School:

- Shrewsbury's strong collaborative culture has yielded great results from students
- Sustaining a strong culture has perpetuated success in many areas
- Students at all levels PreK -12, experience similar learning opportunities and benefit from the high quality instruction that emerges from teacher collaboration.
- While morale was lower due to a budget crisis that resulted in very high class sizes and caseloads over the past two years, district staff maintained a high level of professionalism and dedication to their practice that preserved the district's culture and was a key factor in the community recently supporting a multi-million dollar tax override.
- Building trust and relationships among all stakeholders has helped the district strengthen its resolve to establish a cultural norm that excludes "non-discussable" issues

12. Resources (time, money, materials etc.) Required For Successful Implementation:

- Time for building collaboration, new hire process, training and PD
- Budget allocations for PD, leadership stipends for teachers, curriculum materials
- Mind set of collaboration and building relationships

13. Tools You Used To Implement or Advance This Practice:

- Shrewsbury Mission and Core Values
- Shrewsbury Leadership Team Norms
- Educator Evaluation PD Day- Power Point