

## STEP I: Diagnosing a School's Culture

### Physical Setting

L.E. Berger Elementary is located at 631 4 Ave E in West Fargo. We have 17 classrooms of students in grades 1-5, enrolling approximately 400 students. We also house two Newcomers' classrooms in which students, new to this country, are provided a curriculum customized to their needs. The school is nestled between a police station, trailer court, apartment building, and single family homes. The school was built as an open-design middle school in 1966. In 1972, it became an elementary school and was renamed L.E. Berger Elementary School. Construction and remodeling was completed in 2002. The building is clean and safe. New playground equipment, purchased by PTA last year, brightens the grounds. We have minimal technology throughout the building compared with other elementary schools in the state and region. L.E. Berger has the highest percentage of educationally disadvantaged students in the district: 52% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch; 17% of students are on Special Education IEPs; 10% qualify as English Language Learners and represent fourteen different countries (this does not include the Newcomers' program). The school has a reputation throughout the district as a "tough school", however, our teacher turnover is literally non-existent beyond retirements. On the contrary, Berger Bear teachers, support staff, students, and parents are an exceptionally proud group!

### What the school says about itself:

Bimonthly school newsletters, flyers, a Family Literacy Night, a before school homework room, an after school extended day literacy program, a plethora of intramural sports and academic clubs support L.E. Berger's mission statement: *"Through the support of staff, parents, and community, L.E. Berger students will become self-respecting, life-long learners able to solve problems in a changing world."* Our building principal, having been at the school for 19 years, has established strong positive relationships with staff, parents, and students. We committed to going Title I Schoolwide next year, knowing it would mean a tremendous amount of work this year. Yet, 100% of our staff signed their

commitment in writing to the state. As a result, all of our paraprofessionals had to earn highly qualified status (through 48 college credits or a grueling 2 hour ParaPro Assessment) with no subsequent wage benefit. Our staff is committed and supportive of the school and one another. We have an annual holiday party, as well as an end of the year spring fling. In addition, much of the staff socializes off campus regularly throughout the year. Staff has three "pay \$1 to wear jeans" days per week. Monday's money is collected for the March of Dimes; Tuesday's money is sent to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation; Wednesday's money is collected and placed in the Berger Bear Honey Pot which is an account used to help Berger families in need. Fridays were designated as a "jeans day" by our principal as a thank you for the hard work we put in all week. Throughout the year many theme-clothing days are designated for students and staff such as hat day, jersey day, favorite team colors day, dress as your favorite literary character day, comfy-cozy day, etc.

The district website offers information about each school and the district as a whole. Because of staffing changes and a transition to a new superintendent, some of the information featured on the website has not been updated. However, our school's CORE Leadership Team requested to have Berger staff emails added to the site to improve communication efforts with our parents.

### **How does the school greet strangers?**

The school is cozy and inviting to visitors. Tasteful, child-friendly décor accent the cafeteria and front office. The administrative assistant and office paraprofessional are knowledgeable and accommodating to all. One improvement to the reception area that we will be adding next year, as part of our schoolwide efforts to expand parental and community involvement, is a parental kiosk just outside the office. The kiosk will provide internet access for parents wanting to check the parent portal or to look for educational opportunities for themselves. The kiosk will house community and school resource information in the form of pamphlets, announcements, upcoming events, etc. We are also planning a 14 country mini flag display representing the native countries of all Newcomers and ELL students and staff to be placed in the reception area. We use assemblies and

school programs to celebrate diversity, build character and good citizenship, and promote positive behavior. I believe our staff is very friendly and welcoming to visitors.

### **Interview to get history**

I visited with several staff members as well as our district human resources director to analyze this portion. West Fargo is a rapidly increasing city which offers perspective teachers high job security. In addition, the district provides competitive salary and an attractive benefits package. Over 50% of teachers in the district have their Master's degrees. Under the leadership of Dr. David Flowers, who joined West Fargo Public Schools in 2010, the district is going through a number of exciting transitions. A task force has provided the community with a long-range facilities plan and bond referendum which will be voted on May 24<sup>th</sup>. The plan calls for the building of two new elementary schools and an additional middle school and high school. Projected enrollments show continual increases over the next five years. In the meantime, growing pains in the form of large class sizes and building shortages are causing concern and discontent by parents and staff alike. All of the staff members I interviewed are hopeful the district will experience positive results on the other side of a passed referendum and leadership transition.

### **Internal communications**

Formal collaboration between classroom teachers and specialists (special education and Title I teachers) takes place during each grade level's *super block*. This is a weekly 90 minute timeframe when students rotate between music, physical education, and library skills. Teacher/specialist collaboration takes place during the first 45 minutes; grade level team and individual teacher prep time account for the last 45 minutes. Student concerns, upcoming curriculum lessons, data sharing and analysis are integral aspects of collaboration. To work more efficiently beginning this year, grade level teams operate with an agenda and teacher/specialist collaboration occurs every other week. Ongoing informal collaboration is ongoing daily. Once a month, on the off week from collaboration

with classroom teachers, special education and Title I teachers confer to ascertain the effectiveness of academic interventions using progress monitoring data on each student receiving services. This data driven collaboration follows a Response to Intervention (RtI) model. Grade level teams are as diverse as the teachers who comprise them. Some are extremely close and high functioning; others work more loosely as a group. Staff meetings traditionally take place once a month. Our building principal sends out an agenda a week prior to the meeting. Refreshments and an open pop machine are provided for every meeting. Staff members speak freely at these meetings and usually teacher leaders do most of the presenting. The lounge is another gathering area for teachers and support staff. It is not unlikely that treats from the principal or other staff members are out on the table for all to help themselves. Committees are numerous and provide teachers and staff with additional opportunities to move the school forward. Overall, I believe formal internal communication is student-centered and data driven. Informal communication is comfortable and diverse. The transitioning direction of the district, the upcoming bond referendum, Title I schoolwide initiatives, and the lack of technology are this year's hot topics.

### **Any signs of a culture in trouble?**

For the most part, the school's culture is healthy and vibrant. There are strong and outspoken personalities, yet most conflicts are addressed and resolved professionally. There is a very small group of discontented staff members who continually attempt to undermine and challenge the building principal and other staff members. Fortunately, two members of this toxic posse are retiring this year and a third is transferring within the district. Dissenting voices and multiple perspectives are important to any organization, but the dissolving of this unhealthy group will be a refreshing move forward next year. Another potential cultural red flag is the jostling for power/authority among building administrators and district coordinators. Under the last superintendent, a disconnect between building administrators and the district office (district coordinators) grew. District coordinators gained power as they galvanized in support of the superintendent's decision making, while building principals supporting the voices of their teachers

and staff were often at odds with the superintendent and district office. With a new superintendent in charge, district staff collectively awaits restructuring decisions. When I interviewed our new superintendent, Dr. David Flowers, he described the culture of our district best when he summed it up as "diverse and dynamic." Whether that plays out as turmoil or an asset is yet to be seen. Personally, I'm banking on the positive!

### **School Culture Inventory (completed by me)**

Completing the School Culture Inventory reinforced my sense that the climate of our school is alive and well. Under the leadership of our principal I believe there is a strong sense of *school purpose*. Staff solidly shares the belief that all students can learn and thus are driven to prove it. Increasingly, we are making data-driven decisions and thinking outside the traditional box to achieve our shared goal of moving all students forward. My consistent response to the *empowerment* questions on the School Culture Inventory was "Most of the time". Within our building, teachers feel, behave, and perform as empowered professionals. However, treatment from the district administrators has been belittling, out of touch, and in sharp contrast with our school's climate. This disconnect affects the marks I gave for *decision making*. Again, within our building participatory leadership is the norm. However, over the last few years decision making at the building level has diminished as district directives have increased. "Most of the time" was the unanimous rank I gave for *sense of community* and *trust* questions. There is a lot of pride and cohesiveness at my school. The eroding factors are the toxic posse and the district disconnect. To some extent, these influences actually galvanize our staff. And lastly, I gave the last category, *quality*, "All the time" marks across the board. Everyone believes and strives to achieve our mission and vision of "*Educating today's learners for tomorrow's world.*"

### **STEP II: Assessing Organizational Culture**

**Instrument used:** OCDQ—RE

**Number of Surveys completed:** 12

### **Survey Findings:**

Supportive Principal Behaviors (S) = 622 Very High

Directive Principal Behaviors (D) = 432 Low

Restrictive Principal Behaviors (R) = 136 Very Low

Collegial Teacher Behaviors (C) = 520 Slightly Above Average

Intimate Teacher Behaviors (I) = 567 Above Average

Disengaged Teacher Behaviors (Dis) = 506 Average

Principal Openness = 685 Very High

Teacher Openness = 524 Slightly Above Average

### **Discussion of Results Found:**

I gave the survey to a random cross section of staff including teachers, specialists, and support staff. Our principal scored in the very high range for both Supportive Principal Behaviors and Principal Openness categories. I believe the results accurately reflect our principal's respect and genuine concern for his staff. He is famous for celebrating school and staff successes with praise, and generally food. He grills lunch for all staff and students the last week of school every year as a thank you for being part of the school. His low and very low score ranges in directive and Restrictive and Directive Principal Behavior categories are not at all surprising. Though he is sometimes criticized for not observing enough in classrooms, I know from conversations with him (told to me in confidence as part of my administrative training) that he minimizes observations for teachers he knows are excelling. However, he frequently observes and works with less competent staff in an effort to help them improve. Just as he expects each of us to believe that every child can learn and grow, so too does *he* believe that every teacher is capable of improvement. We are fortunate to have a principal that respects our abilities and offers constructive feedback when necessary.

Teachers scored in the slightly above and above average range in Collegial and Intimate Teacher Behaviors categories, respectfully. An average range score for

Disengaged Teacher Behaviors and a slightly above average range for overall Teacher Openness accurately reflect our current status. As mentioned earlier in this culture and climate study, I mentioned a small group of disgruntled staff. As this group is dissolved next year (through retirements and transfers), I believe the results of this OCDQ—RE survey if given again would be quite different for the teacher categories.

**What I learned from this activity that strengthens me as an educational leader:**

I believe, despite having surveyed just a small, random sampling of staff, the results accurately reflect our current operation. I would like to use the OCDQ—RE as a climate and culture monitoring survey. Maybe because of the time I dedicate to school, I whole-heartedly believe in Theory Z. Most teachers that excel devote far more to their jobs than what is required by contract time. As a principal, I would like to explain to staff that I value the importance of a positive climate and culture at the school. I want to strive to make it as positive as possible because that has real ramifications for staff *and* students. Therefore, I would use the OCDQ—RE survey at the beginning and end of each year to monitor perceptions about my performance and that of the staff.

**How I will use this experience to enhance student learning:**

Everything I hope to accomplish in education must be guided and propelled by my own vision and moral compass of fostering learning and positive growth of the whole individual. For me, the "individual" includes staff and students alike. Every effort to promote a positive culture and climate for staff has the potential to trickle down into a positive environment for students. Conversely, a negative or toxic dynamic among staff most likely will adversely affect student growth. In addition, I believe that modeling and encouraging openness, respect, work ethic, and genuine concern for everyone in the building transcends whatever negativity exists and inspires others to embrace their own greatness. Disengagement and mediocrity are not acceptable. Therefore, awareness of fluctuations in the climate and culture of a school will serve as a compass for needed adjustments. This assignment has given me an awareness of the importance of school climate;

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awareness I'll share with my staff so that together through mutual leadership and commitment, we'll develop a culture we can continue to enhance.