

EAD 801 Assignment 4D

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“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

- Albert Einstein.

Being a truly superb educator is a challenge. There are papers to grade, lessons to plan, department meetings, school meetings, clubs to facilitate, students to help after school, and all kinds of other little details that have to fall into place at the end of the day. Being a great teacher also means that no student is left behind, or given up on. At Troy Athens High School we have had an issue with leaving some of our special needs students behind. We have attempted to push them along, just to get them to graduation. We have not communicated justly in order to catch failing students before they begin to fall. We have grown to be accepting of failure, rather than motivated to find success. It is our job as educators to come together to find a series of solutions that will allow these students, in the lowest academic strata of the school, to ultimately be successful. In doing so we have the power to gift these students with the ability to dream, create, express themselves, and even change the world.

After studying this challenge quite a bit, I have chosen to frame it much differently than I initially would have. While the challenges have primarily stayed the same (those centered on communication between parties, those about over simplifying material to get students through their schooling, and those that center on staff apathy of the problem) my view has shifted during the course of this academic adventure. I chose to reframe the problem in a way that presents it as being hopeful, and to contain a shared view of the future. I did this in order to bolster support for change if this were to be presented to my building. At first I was quick to place blame on other individuals and groups, but as I have reflected on my own teaching, I have realized it truly is a

shared fault that needs to be worked on together; both sides must be willing to change perspectives and give a little. I also chose to reframe this problem in this way to highlight the importance of slowly shifting loyalties from individuals and individual departments to being loyal to the school and most importantly the students we serve.

<b>Goal: Help students with special needs (IEPs) be more successful academically.</b>				
<b>Actions, Tasks Require</b>	<b>Time Horizon</b>	<b>Key Persons Responsible</b>	<b>Indicators of Success</b>	<b>Lookouts, Concerns (about readiness, conflicts, capacity, etc.)</b>
Create a unified method of information delivery.	2015-2016 school year	Administration, Special Education Department, technology advisor	Unified and easy to use method of communicating IEPs is created.  Proactive communication method established.	Legalities of storing student information in a database.  Lack of motivation to make changes.
Propose changes /formation of investigatory committee.	2016-2017 school year	Administration, select staff members	Staff is interested in making changes.  Exploratory committee formed.	Lack of staff motivation/readiness.  Tension amongst staff.
Development of an adaptive culture/ shift in loyalties.	2016- ?	All staff and administration	More open environment is established.  Student success increases.	Lack of staff motivation/readiness.  Tension amongst staff.

The first step that needs to be taken is to work on the communication deficits between all members of the school community. In particular, the way that IEP information is shared between different members of the school and how people communicate in regards to student performance in general education classes. This is a logical place to start because it is more of a technical

problem than an adaptive challenge, and it focuses in on the smallest group of individuals. I would propose the creation of a secure database of student IEP information that would be accessible to teachers in a way that would be password protected and only show each teacher's individual students. In order to do this there would need to be a meeting with special education teachers, administration, and the school technology coordinator. The choice of how to upload this sensitive material would have to be discussed (due to the tender legal nature of the situation) and the format for how to store the information would have to be developed by the technology department. While this change requires a certain skill in technological development and the import of all the files, in the long run this could vastly help all departments by providing solid information in an easy manner.

Another benefit to pursuing communication first is because it is a somewhat quick victory. This means that it will more likely increase staff buy-in for future work and the development of more adaptive solutions when they are needed. On a day to day basis, staff members are frustrated by the communication deficits and they see them as a major barrier to student success. In addition to the new method of IEP delivery, adapting our gradebook program to flag students when they get grades below certain marks on assessments (or in the class as a whole) and by setting up weekly status checks, can also improve communication easily. While the push for more constant upkeep of these students would be a difficult sell for already busy teachers, if an easy to use method of conveying the information was developed and implemented, it could easily be slipped into our routines. There would also need to be the guarantee that our concerns and comments on the students were read and utilized to their benefit for staff members to be willing to do this work.

The next step that would have to be taken would be to pitch some larger sweeping changes to the staff, and form an investigatory committee. I would choose to wait until the following school year to approach this problem due to the current climate within our school. Unready climate coupled with our school-year being half way to completion leads me to believe that it would be wise to begin anew in September. The challenge could then be a primary rather than secondary focus. The committee, as with any form of shared leadership, will need to be formed with clear expectations, roles, and objectives to be most successful. It will need to be understood that conflict can in fact lead to progress and that as leaders it is vital to communicate justly with the rest of our departments in order to keep all stakeholders abreast of decisions being made. Communication between administration and teachers has been a problem this year, and it cannot be one that continues forward or these connects will remain damaged.

Forming this committee serves a few purposes. First, because this is a widespread issue, I would want to ensure that every group that works with these students has a voice and can share their views. The committee would also allow for the development of a variety of different ideas that could be possible solutions to the problem. Some solutions could be technical, like creating a more effective after school tutoring program for at risk students. However, the truly effective solutions would need to be more adaptive. One of these solutions could be to look at the curricula and goals of the classes which are designed for low level students and align them into a more cohesive program. This could mean that math and reading could be used to supplement science, history and English could focus on similar topics at similar times, and science could be used to emphasize topics learned in math. Another thing that could be adjusted is the goals and outcomes for these classes. We as educators think all of our content is incredibly important,

however if we were to take the standards we must teach and thin out unnecessary material while shifting focusing to real life applications, we could make the class more manageable.

While these fixes are important, and could really be useful to this group of students, it is a long term change in thinking that will need to occur in order to actually do something for this group of students. This will be the hardest thing to remediate because it involves the entire staff shifting to a total focus on student success. When faced with several students who lack motivation, interest, and generally do absolutely no work in your class, it is a struggle to keep working on their success. Honestly, I am not sure that this is possible with 100% of teachers, or 100% of the time, but I would argue that if there was a leader or administrator (don't need to be the same person) who took the time to care and listen to teacher concerns and provide hands-on assistance, more individuals would at least try, and just trying a bit harder in small ways every day can have a huge impact on student success.

As previously stated I do not think the school is ready for big adaptive changes yet. For a staff that is swimming in an ocean of new proposals, the last thing they need is another thing to not focus on in the midst of the chaos. When the time does come, I think that many faculty members will be happy to hear that there will be changes made. Many people, despite being somewhat burnt-out by the way things are, want change and want to share opinions on how things can be improved. In order to get those that are hesitant on board there will need to be a focus on long term goals and proof that solutions will be effective. Even as a new teacher, I can tell there is frustration when we are approached with different focuses every year which make these feel like the flavor of the month (in the world of education). If there is a long term strategy that is solid and based on research which can be implemented slowly over time, there will be a larger buy-in from the staff.

One of the benefits to enacting policy through the perspective of shared leadership, is it produces leadership opportunities to staff members at our school who are deserving of these roles. Many of my co-workers are already motivated leaders in a variety of different outlets within the school, so getting them to take ownership of a problem that has been long standing would be an easy task. However, in order to support the growth of new leadership, I would heavily recommend that those involved in enacting solutions to this challenge are not selected by seniority or experience. The largest stakeholders, educators who teach lower level classes, should have a larger voice. By giving ownership to these individuals, the school will guarantee that the best interests of their students will be kept at the forefront. It will be important to me as a teacher leader to meet with a variety of my coworkers in order to listen to their thoughts, share ideas and experiences, and provide feedback on ideas. It is through spending time with each other in an environment of mutual respect that allies can be made and focus on the work can be maintained (Avolio, 2011).

As the problem solving process continues forward there is bound to be some opposition. However, I imagine there will be more hesitation and skepticism than outright rebuttal to the new ideas presented. One area of concern would be individuals placing blame on each other for the needed changes in the first place. Another could be staff members being opposed to adding extra work to their plates with the addition of more structured forms of communication. Both of these sources for tension are fair given the loyalties amongst departments and the exhaustion of our staff. It will be important for administrators to focus on individual groups sharing their viewpoints in order to get past these tensions. While one group may feel that they do too much or too little, other groups may feel differently, and by having everyone step out onto the balcony together, tensions could be more easily avoided. If tensions do get too high, I (or anyone leading

the meeting) could easily provide a temporary patch such as addressing easy parts of the problem, taking a break from the problem by using work avoidance, or slow things down a bit in order to move toward détente (Heifetz, 2009, p 160).

Success from our endeavors will eventually have to be measured. This will be a difficult task to accomplish given the sensitive nature of the goal. Most educators, myself included, would argue that standardized testing is not the way to measure student success (especially with low level learners). At first I would recommend staying away from this type of measure. In order to determine success, each subject area should be very careful in selecting outcomes and goals for its students. These goals should be ambitious but thoroughly supported. It will be the administration's task to see to it that teachers have the needed tools and skills to get their students to these goals, and that progress is occurring. As different solutions are presented and tested, student success will have to be carefully looked at by all instructors in order to decide what is or is not working. It should also be noted that because every student is different, each solution presented may only reach certain groups of students, and some students may make little to no gain at all. The actions that help the most students, and facilitate the greatest gains towards specific goals will be those that should be adapted further and kept.

As time passes it needs to be the goal of the school, and the district as a whole, to uphold these standards. Educators need to take an active role in their special needs students' educations. It is my hope that new teachers entering the district will be able to see our growth and be guided justly by solid mentors in their respective departments. If teachers are willing to shift loyalties to their students and new curricula and procedures are put into place, these changes can have long lasting impacts. It will be incredibly important for each individual to be willing to self-evaluate their progress. It will also be important for the administration and committee members to be



willing to adapt as new initiatives work or fail. Success, like many things in life, hinge on the desire of the organization to reflect and continue learning as changes are put into motion.

At the end of the day there is obviously a lot of work to be done. As previously stated, I would argue that a uniform method of communication needs to be established for all teachers in the school to deal with IEP documents and student progress. Although doing this may ruffle some feathers, it is vital all of the elephants in the room are finally named. Solving the technical problem of the communication dilemma can be followed up with a full scale investigation of how we teach our special needs students. The creation of a committee of teacher leaders, special education instructors, and administrators will be vital when the school is ready to handle the overhaul and share responsibility. This committee, which would allow for a wide variety of viewpoints, will be able to focus on long-term adaptive solutions to this problem. These solutions could be as simple as giving the special education department head fewer classes to teach, or as complicated as changing class orders/curricula. However, it will not be until teachers are willing to take more responsibility for their struggling students that lasting change will actually occur. I am unsure if or when an adaptive culture will be reached, but I know that as things begin to improve, people will regain their interest in teaching low level learners. It may take time, energy, effort, and some temporarily bruised feelings, but I feel that in the end our school can make the needed changes to help special needs students who are currently either failing or being pushed through the system. It is time for us to wake up and work together to give these amazing students the tools they need to be successful (Heifetz, 2009, p 101).

## References

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