



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The monthly columns cover a wide array of topics, including: improving achievement for all students, the importance of active learning, establishing and maintaining a collaborative culture, and looking at data beyond the numbers.

Recognition and Appreciation



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

This time of the year is the optimum opportunity for school leaders to recognize all those in their schools who help children learn and grow every day. As we all know what happens in the classroom each day is what is really important in a school.

During my years as both an assistant principal and principal, I did my best to let all those on the “front line” know just how valued they were. My job was to develop professional relationships with teachers so that they felt encouraged, recognized, and important. Feeling supported and validated, the teachers were able to come to work each day knowing that all of us in the school worked together as a team and the “we/they” mentality was just not a part of our school. Those teachers would in turn deliver a solid instructional program to their students, who would grow and learn, and be ready for their next steps in life.

I wanted to create the norm that the adults in our school would come together regularly to celebrate the successes we created. In my efforts to expand my repertoire of strategies for supporting the development of that norm, I read about an award that could be presented to faculty members in recognition of good teaching practices. A clear, glass apple on a tiny pedestal was purchased and christened the “Crystal Apple Award.” It was inscribed with the words, “Instructional Excellence.” The faculty member who received the award would keep it for a month and display it in his or her room. To initiate this tradition, I began my recognizing a faculty member who had recently demonstrated excellence in the classroom. I readily acknowledged that any numbers of faculty members were worthy recipients but that in order to get the tradition started, one particular teacher was selected. It was the responsibility of each recipient to pass on the award and recognize a fellow faculty member at the next monthly faculty meeting. In order to make a valid decision, it was necessary for the current holder of the apple to visit classrooms around the building. That tradition, which began so long ago, still continues today. At each meeting, the Crystal Apple presentation is the last item on the agenda. Faculty members always give this portion of the meeting their undivided attention, and when the new recipient’s name is announced, there are always cheers and an

enthusiastic round of applause. The award keeps a constant focus on the fact that teaching young people is our most important mission.

Throughout my years as an administrator, I purposefully implemented new strategies to ensure that teachers felt special and important. A favorite recent innovation was the addition of “Treasure Hunt” to the compendium of sharing ideas at our school. When the teachers arrived at the faculty meeting, I greeted them at the door and asked each one to draw the name of another faculty member from a container. Once everyone had drawn a name, it was explained that during the next month, each teacher was to visit the classroom of the person whose name they had drawn, to spend a period of time in that person’s classroom, and to complete a short piece of writing that depicted the “treasure” that he or she had found in a fellow teacher’s classroom. At the following month’s faculty meeting, everyone brought their completed “Treasure Hunt” form. I filled the two bulletin boards in the faculty lounge with the “Treasure Hunt” forms so the entire staff could see the expansive repertoire of ideas, the caring attitudes, and the place of learning we had all collectively created.

One much appreciated tradition was a birthday card for each staff member. In addition to wishing the recipient a happy birthday, I wrote a message to each person recognizing their strengths and the contributions they had made to our school. Whether it was a cafeteria worker, custodian, administrative assistant or teacher, I pointed out that individual’s importance in making our school a productive place for students. I learned that this practice made a big difference for each recipient because it represented a personal acknowledgement that he or she was a valuable member of the organization.

Another way to recognize staff members as individuals was the development of a master schedule that took into account the needs of adults as well as the instructional requirements of students. In the spring of the year, teachers were asked to submit any special requests, based on personal needs, to the administration. Such topics as chronic health problems or childcare needs were taken into account. In addition, the schedule was designed to allow teachers time during their work day to collaborate with other teachers who taught the same subject. Once again the message to the staff was that we were willing to address personal needs while at the same time focusing on the importance of professional collaboration.

Personal recognition of effort and excellence is so important. In the weekly staff newsletter, I made it a point to include the names of individuals who had made a special contribution during that week. Kind words after a classroom visit, personal greetings in the hallway each day, questions about spouses or children, and enjoying moments of laughter - all these are ways to say thanks and to celebrate with teachers. Many staff members save the personal notes and e-mails from their administrators that let them know they were appreciated and that they were making a difference with children. In her book *Leading the Learning*, Paula Rutherford provides the tools for principals to be able to establish and maintain a positive school climate. She sums up her beliefs in her Top Ten Tips for Leading the Learning in a Standards-Based Environment and her list concludes with two significant ideas: Recognize and celebrate growth and accomplishments; and lead with soul!

Giving thanks and planning special celebrations and recognitions should not be limited to the months at the end of the year. As school leaders, they should be the values we practice throughout the entire school year.

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