

Alternate Service Learning: Part Three

Since my Alternate Service Learning project consisted of viewing my recent time as Dean of Students through the lens of ED 632, I thought it fitting that my reflection on that service learning be tied to information presented in our final lecture/outline, specifically the characteristics of strong leadership. I am, after all, taking this course near the end of my Education Leadership program and as such want to immediately apply what I've come to understand about being the best principal I can be.

Our lecture notes suggest that principals should exhibit certain characteristics. I will attempt to address my service learning experience within the framework of each of the following five characteristics: articulate a clear school mission, be a visible presence in classrooms and hallways, hold high expectations for teachers and students, spend a major portion of the day working with teachers to improve instruction, and be actively involved in diagnosing instructional problems

Articulate a Clear School Mission

This first attribute proved difficult for me because our entire district was at a time of turmoil. Our principal had just left his position for another job locally and our superintendent resigned all amidst the chaos of a strategic planning process with the local school board. That "clear school mission" was a bit up in the air when I stepped into the role of Dean of Students. So, in the absence of a clear mission I met with my fellow teachers to discuss what we wanted to focus on for the remainder of the school year. It was agreed upon that we wanted to remain positive and maintain discipline school-wide. Not a school mission but more of a pact that we

were all in this together and that in order survive the upheaval and allow our students the greatest chance at academic success we'd all have to be on the same page.

Visible Presence in the Classrooms and the Hallways

I had always given my principal a hard time when I'd see him venture out of his office to "make an appearance" in the hallway. That was until I sat in his chair for a single day. If I didn't make a concerted effort, I mean block out time in my day to get out of the office, I could easily be consumed with behavior referrals, parent phone calls, teachers in crisis, and a litany of "I didn't know who else to ask" type questions.

When I did get into the hallways, and to a lesser extent the classrooms, the effect was palpable. I could see from the looks on the teachers' faces that they were happy to have someone, anyone, out in the trenches with them. It's not like the school was falling apart but by 4th quarter teachers get tired of the little battles over hats, and cell phones, and tardiness, etc. It's nice when an administrator can be present to "remind" students that the school year is not over and the rules haven't changed. If you can get compliance on all of those little things it is easier to get students to follow directions when it really counts in times of true crisis or emergency.

Hold High Expectations for Teachers and Students

While my quasi-administrative role as Dean leant itself to some tenuous moments with my fellow teachers, overall there was an amazing amount of professional respect that allowed me to deal with student issues and make suggestions to teachers about their role in behavior problems as a whole. From the start of my tenure as Dean I assured my fellow teachers that I was not looking to evaluate them or judge their practices. Rather, I offered myself as a

resource to which they could turn for advice, or to vent, or broker collaboration from other teachers. I told them all up front that I had high expectations because they had never given me any reason to expect less.

Most of the students I dealt with as Dean already knew what I expected of them because I had had many of them in class previously. Those whom I did not already know before they entered my office left with a clearer picture of the standards to which I held them and myself responsible. I treat students, and always have, as the young adults they are. I do not allow them to make excuses and I try to help them to believe they can do better than average in everything they put effort into.

Spend a Major Portion of the Day Working with Teachers to Improve Instruction

Here is a characteristic that as a Dean of Students was a bit outside my reach, but as a principal I hope to make a focal point of my job. Almost every Education Leadership class I have taken in the past few years has reinforced the importance of the principal as a mentor. Focusing on teacher development and retention, providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate and improve instruction, and putting teeth behind those opportunities by allotting time (and pay) to activities that benefit teacher growth are clearly on the short list of my goals as a new principal.

I saw opportunities missed during my service learning time as Dean that I hope I would not let slip by as a principal. Staff development in-service days have become a check-the-box, rote regurgitation of the same presentations year after year. Those days can and should be spent encouraging collaborative growth and sharing best practices amongst peers. And then

those discussions can be carried over and followed up on by an engaged principal in the days and weeks that follow.

Actively Involved in Diagnosing Instructional Problems

In my service learning time I walked a tightrope when it came to addressing instructional problems. I often had to wrap my critiques in terms of student behavior advice. As principal my approach will be less covert. I want my teacher to know that I am in the trenches with them and that our collective goal has to be student achievement. With that in mind I will make recommendations as I see fit using evidence-based assertions.

One way to combat some of the instructional problems I saw as Dean of Students is a stronger mentorship program. Many of the instructional pitfalls that affected our novice teachers may have been avoided had they been more actively engaged with a veteran teacher. And likewise, a veteran teacher may benefit from a more contemporary understanding of instructional techniques. The bottom line is that we are education professionals and should want to improve our craft. If the focus is student achievement and we constantly strive for improving our instruction to meet that end, then I think we all can better accept constructive criticism.

Final Thoughts

It's clear that my service learning experience did not answer all the questions I have going into my new career as a principal. If anything, I have more questions now than I did before. But it gave me an amazing opportunity to apply concepts from ED 632 and my other Education Leadership courses to real-world school events in real-time. After it was announced that I got the principal job for next year I had several teachers, parents, and students ask, "Are

you sure you want this job?”. I’m happy to say that, even amidst the chaos of administrative shifts, and end of the year stress, and graduate classes, and Army training, I am more excited than ever to take the next step. Armed with some understanding of not-so-new concepts like curriculum mapping, and RTI, and differentiation, and multiple intelligences, etc, I believe I’m in pretty good shape moving forward.