Building Collaboration and Trust Through Protocols

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

For at least a decade, Goshen Middle School has struggled to develop a relationship of collaboration and trust with teachers and leadership. Five years ago, despite a change in leadership, the urgency of GMS’s status of an “F” and the corporation’s status of a “D” prompted many systematic changes at the corporation level and particularly for the middle school. Due to the urgency of improved achievement, teachers had limited input into those decisions.

Although we have seen improvements in student achievement, data from the TELL survey, description, and the HRS culture survey through IPLI, as well as high turn-over in staff, show evidence of teachers not feeling valued professionally. Although at times turn-over in teachers can improve culture, and in our case it has to some extent (TELL survey data is showing gains), maintaining highly effective and collaborative teachers is best for student achievement.

To improve our work for students, and to improve teachers’ belief that they are valued change agents who are invested in our school, we would like to develop a more formalized process for decision-making at GMS. By formalizing a process, we will develop a culture where all stakeholders’ professional judgement is valued in the work we do to improve student achievement. Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to create a formal process for gaining input from teachers to see if they feel more valued, more invested in the collaboration process to improve student achievement.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, we wondered if a formalized process for decision-making improve our collaborative culture?

Sub-questions:
1. How will a decision-making protocol change teachers’ perceptions of how leadership values their professional judgement?
2. What decision-making protocol is best for allowing all teachers to be heard?
3. How will formalizing a decision-making protocol affect teacher turn-over?
4. How will a decision-making protocol improve support for risk-taking and innovation?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wondering, we shared both Tell and HRS data that identified indicators that suggested the need for improved trust and ownership in the decision-making process. We then identified decisions that are made at GMS and categorized them by whose responsibility it has been to make the decision (Teachers,
Teachers & Admin, Admin). We then had teachers do the same activity in a faculty meeting to provide a context for our action research.

We then researched protocols we already used and additional protocols to identify those that would best match the different decision-making topics we brainstormed to find ones that best fit each category for the needed outcome.

We also surveyed teachers to see what they already knew about the reason for using protocols and how they thought protocols could support decision-making at GMS.

From that data, we realized that teachers had varied understandings of protocols, and so we shared with them the article “The Case for Protocols” from Educational Leadership Journal to provide a common understanding for how we planned to increase the use of protocols in our work. We wanted teachers to see how protocols would give structure and focus to the decision-making process as well as keep all stakeholders safe and willing to share what they really think in regards to the decision.

After that, administrators use a protocol for a decision in grade-level and reflected on the process with Lori. Teachers responded well to the increased use of protocols because they were given time to process the why and empowered because of recognizing the leadership team's efforts to increase their ownership in the decision-making process.

**Stating Your Team’s Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing our data, three important things we learned include:

1. We needed a common understanding of the use of protocols for our work to improve teaching and learning through decision-making at GMS.
2. The use of protocols allows broader input into the decision-making process and trust in the process.
3. Teachers can use protocols in the classroom to increase student input and vulnerability in the learning process.

**Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

Tackling improvement of culture is not an easy task, but our data clearly indicated the need for improvement. Next year we will implement a New Tech (PBL) pathway, a school within a school model. At the foundation of their training is to focus on culture for both adults and students. Their frequent use of protocols connected with me and gave me the idea to bring this awareness to my leadership team and my teachers. Researching and implementing the use of protocols gave us a concrete strategy for making process in improved culture.

In the future, we need to have teachers reflect on our use of protocols and have them re-take the survey to see how they have deepened their understanding of what protocols are and why they are important. Our goal is that teachers will be able to list more protocols that are used at GMS than what they did in the present survey. As well, we hope their responses to why protocols are critical to the work we do for student achievement is more specific to improved input from teachers into the decision-making process. In the present survey, teachers see protocols as procedures in the classroom or in terms of discipline, etc.
Ultimately, we hope to see gains in our culture surveys and a feeling in general by teachers that they have authentic and positive influence in decision-making at GMS for improved teaching and learning.

Take the decisions generated from faculty and name protocols that can be used to help with those decisions.

Begin using these protocols to help with the decisions identified

Emphasize protocols being used: Why, How, Connection to the classroom

References:

http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol
Marzano’s work regarding Level #1 of High Reliability Schools