

## Increasing Teacher Morale

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### **Abstract**

*High teacher morale is important for the overall well-being of a school. Due to this importance, maintaining teaching-staff morale should be a key focus of administrators and teachers. The professional culture of a school is one area that can be addressed when looking to improve morale. As well, administrators can focus on concerns related to accountability and visibly support teachers in order to improve morale.*

Teacher morale is an issue that affects every stakeholder in education (Heick, 2020). Teachers with low morale feel stressed, are not satisfied with their job, develop burnout, and are emotionally exhausted (Will, 2021). The stress and exhaustion that comes from their workplace comes home with these teachers and affects their personal lives, as well. When teachers have low morale, they do not do their job to the best of their abilities and the quality of students' education is impacted. The professional culture of a school, teacher accountability concerns, and a lack of support from schools administrators are three issues that negatively influence teacher morale (Bradford & Braaten, 2018). There are many solutions to counteract these problems affecting teacher morale. Professional culture is positively influenced by a shared vision and set of goals, and an emphasis on professional development. Accountability concerns can be addressed by using accountability practices focused on improvement, making teachers accountable to their peers, and a focus on professional development. Support from administrators is improved by public recognition of teacher achievements, including teachers in decision making, and showing visible leadership within the school.

### **Issues Affecting Teacher Morale**

A strong professional culture in a school is something that can help teachers to overcome difficult situations that may arise in their job (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). A healthy school culture can be characterized as one in which staff and students are positive in their ability to set and achieve ambitious goals (Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). The staff in healthy cultures collaborate, trust one another, and share a vision of what success looks like; and the school has an atmosphere of lifelong learning. A poor professional culture is one that leads to teachers becoming demoralized. When teachers do not believe that those around them are doing their best to improve the education they provide to students, when they do not respect their colleagues, and when they do not agree with what others see as being important, poor cultures will develop (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Schools with poor cultures are often ones that have high teacher turnover rates (Noddings, 2014). When turnover rates are high, the culture often continues to suffer when new, less experienced teachers take the place of the more experienced ones. This often leads to a cycle of turnover that must be ended in order to correct the root cause of the culture issues. A poor professional culture can be extremely hard to fix and can drive the best teachers out of the occupation.

A second problem affecting teacher morale is the perception of unnecessary teacher accountability practices. Although these practices are intended to improve the level of education provided by schools, they are too often demoralizing for teachers who do not see them as valuable or accurate (Bosso, 2017). Many educators do not view these practices as useful to their classroom instruction and instead see them as data used by educational administrators for their own purposes (Bradford & Braaten, 2018). Some view teacher evaluations as being unfair

or biased due to their often subjective nature (Morris et al., 2020). Teachers who work in districts with greater accountability practices often see their working conditions more negatively than those who work in ones that enact less stringent accountability measures (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Poor accountability measures from schools are one of the major causes of teacher demoralization.

A lack of support from the leaders in an educational setting can cause a deterioration of staff morale (Morris et al., 2020). If teachers are not reassured that they will be supported if challenges arise, they will feel vulnerable and avoid innovative practices (Heick, 2020). Without innovation, educators will stick to the methods that have always been used and never evolve their practice. Administrators often believe that having an open-door to their office makes them approachable, but this is not always how it is seen by teachers in the school (Morris et al., 2020). As well, when teachers do not feel like they are trusted to help in decision-making, they may believe their expertise is not valued.

### **Developing Professional Culture**

One way schools can boost teacher morale by improving their professional culture is to create a professional vision of what teachers should be striving for with a shared set of goals. Creating this shared vision will help develop trust amongst the staff of a school, which is important to improving things within the school (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). The best way to get people involved in creating this vision is to engage staff in whole-school professional learning opportunities (Morris et al., 2020). These opportunities will ensure that everyone understands what good professional practice looks like. Once the vision and shared goals are created, staff treating others like they want to do what is right, even when they disagree with the other's opinion, positively contributes to the sense of trust (Whitaker et al., 2008). When people disagree on serious issues within a school, a trust that everyone is doing what is best for students' education brings people who disagree to respect the others' opinion and the solution that has been determined to be best even if it is not the one they proposed (Santoro, 2018). The end of the 2019-2020 school year and the entirety of the 2021-2021 school year were extremely difficult and stressful for many educators. The educational challenges that came with the Covid-19 pandemic were ones that few teachers were prepared for. Schools in which teachers trusted their colleagues' professional judgements were able to meet these challenges through teacher collaboration. Relying on the knowledge of trusted sources, even when given unfamiliar recommendations, empowered many educators to handle teaching through the pandemic. A shared vision and trust between colleagues are very valuable to individuals when teachers are going through difficult situations.

An emphasis on professional development is another important way to improve the professional culture within a school. When a staff has good chemistry, it is important to the morale of everyone that the staff stays together, if possible. Because of this, teachers that may be underperforming should be offered professional development to build their knowledge rather than be dismissed from their position (Noddings, 2014). Not only will this keep together a staff that works well together while improving lower-performing teachers, but it also reassures other teachers that they will have support if they need it (Morris et al., 2020). If these professional growth opportunities are supported by meaningful feedback and connect to the school's shared vision, teacher efficacy will increase (Bosso, 2017), which in turn will cause that teacher's colleagues to develop a deeper trust of that individual.

### **Maximizing Teacher Accountability**

One way school administrators could improve school morale through accountability practices is by using teacher assessment as a means of improvement rather than focusing solely on evaluation and accountability (Bosso, 2017). This will better align with what teachers

need from evaluation, which will create a process that teachers will see as more authentic to their improvement (Bradford & Braaten, 2018). A focus on professional development is something that teachers can see the benefit in and helps poorly performing teachers to improve their craft rather than simply recognizing their deficits. If teachers are included in the creation of their own evaluations, the act of performing the evaluation will itself help a teacher develop an understanding of how they can improve their teaching. When teachers are given opportunities to assess the quality of their teaching, they are likely to find ways to develop as professionals.

A second way schools can use accountability measures to improve the morale of teachers in their school is to make teachers more accountable to their peers. Morale is improved when all members of a school's staff believe that those around them are doing their equal share of the work. Using colleagues to help struggling teachers build an understanding of professional competence creates a culture of lateral accountability (Tucker, 2019). This means that teachers would be accountable not just to their administrators but also to their colleagues. This form of peer-pressure would help teachers feel the need to improve upon their weaknesses so that they would be better able to contribute to their "team." It would also enable teachers to help those around them who are struggling. Often, teachers do not help colleagues who are struggling simply because they do not notice the struggles. Within a culture of lateral accountability, these struggles would be highlighted for a colleague who would then help mentor the struggling teacher. Doing this will not just improve academics, but will also create a more caring culture where people look to help those around them who are having difficulties. As well, making teachers accountable to their peers would make it more likely for teachers to work on teaching with a cross-curricular aim (Noddings, 2014), which causes students to make connections between their subjects and have a deeper understanding of how the material is important to them.

Once teachers are more accountable to their colleagues and there is a greater focus on professional development to improve teachers' areas of relative weakness, administrators need to be willing to increase teachers' individual autonomy. A strong sense of purpose and passion exists in teachers who have the ability to teach according to their professional values and by using methods that they feel are most effective (Bosso, 2017). Policymakers need to be willing to trust teachers to know what works best and what is most important for their students to know. Many great teachers are unhappy with their jobs because they are not able to act like professionals and determine these things (Noddings, 2014). An example of how teachers are worried about policymakers overreaching and affecting teacher autonomy is in the Government of Manitoba's proposed Bill 64. This legislation, if passed and given Royal Assent, would give school community councils, consisting of local parents, the duty of assisting the school in assessing the effectiveness of educational programming. Teachers are concerned that this assessment will be short-sighted and based on what individual parents believe is best educational practice. Innovation might be abandoned in favour of the status-quo, because parents are more likely to assess what is familiar to them as being effective. Teaching in a way that one is not passionate about will lead to less effective teaching. Students are expected to use and improve their creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration skills, but current practices do not afford teachers these same opportunities.

### **Solidifying Administrative Support**

Recognizing the efforts and achievements of the members of a staff is an important way an administrator can support staff and improve morale. This recognition can come in many forms and can occur in both formal and informal settings (Bosso, 2017). Staff members who feel valued by the leaders in their school are more likely to go above the requirements of their job and positively contribute to the school community (Morris et al., 2020). Praise could be used in several different ways to improve the morale of individuals, including positive reinforcement for desirable outcomes (Buenvinida & Tamayo, 2020) or as a chance to show teachers the respect

their colleagues have for them (Bosso, 2017). Both of these cases will cause teachers to act in ways that are beneficial to the school culture. In addition to individual praise, administrators should also use whole-staff recognition opportunities to bring staff together and share in group successes. These events can be simple things like food in the staff room, but can be highly valued and remembered by those who are being recognized.

Another way administrators can show teachers they support them is to include teachers in the making of decisions within the school. Teachers who are included in the decision-making process are often more committed to their jobs (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). As well, teachers feel more supported, motivated, and have greater trust that administrators want what is best for them when they are included in making decisions (Bosso, 2017). Administrators should include teacher leaders in any decision making that involves change within the school (Whitaker et al., 2008). With the support of these leaders, administrators will have an easier time convincing other teachers that the decision was made with the best interest of educators in mind. When teacher input is not included in the decision-making process, administrators should use evidence to justify the changes that need to be made, in order for teachers to understand why the decision was made the way it was.

A third way administrators can positively influence staff morale by supporting teachers is to be visible and lead by example (Morris et al., 2020). Principals are the people who most influence the culture of a school, and they need to use their actions to set the tone of what is expected by the staff in the school (Buenvinida & Tamayo, 2020). A school administrator needs to be not only approachable but also visible within the school (Morris et al., 2020). Showing leadership around the school can lead to other members of the school community participating in leadership roles, as well. Being visible also causes the administrator to know the staff of the school better and to show the staff respect for what they do. When teachers feel respected, they are more committed to doing their job well (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). When issues arise and the principal needs to take disciplinary action with a student, teachers will be more likely to feel supported by an administrator that they trust to do what is best. If teachers feel supported by administrators, the disciplinary action itself becomes less important to the morale of teachers (Whitaker et al., 2008). When they show visible leadership, principals earn the trust and respect of the teachers that they are charged with leading.

## Conclusion

Professional culture, teacher accountability, and administrative support are all aspects of educator's lives that can affect their morale negatively. Because high teacher morale is important to the overall well-being of a school, administrators must do whatever they can to ensure morale stays high. In schools where morale is low, creating a shared vision or set of goals and emphasizing the importance of professional development can help educators form a better professional culture. Public recognition for teachers who are performing well, and lateral accountability with a focus on improvement for those who are underperforming, help teachers feel supported and valued. Finally, being a visible leader who includes teachers in decision making will help administrators improve and maintain teacher morale within their building.

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### **About the Author**

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