

Invitational Education at Cooper Elementary

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The Beginnings

In the summer of 1998, I was appointed Principal at Cooper Elementary, one of 21 elementary schools in the Livonia Public Schools' district, the 5th largest district in the state of Michigan. Like many first-year principals, I was full of fresh ideas, lofty goals and endless enthusiasm to inspire students, staff and parents. My mandate: increase student achievement scores at the lowest performing school in the district.

Having taught at another elementary building in the district, I had always heard stories about Cooper, a "tough school" as my colleagues put it, with a reputation of unmotivated kids, uninvolved parents, and consistently low test scores. Cooper's student achievement scores on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) exams were significantly below district and state averages, and had shown little improvement for years. The highest recipient of Title 1 funds in the district, Cooper was in danger of losing its interim accreditation status or facing possible federal sanctions for low achievement.

Staff morale was at an all-time low. Teachers were working diligently to improve student performance but were not seeing the desired results on district or state assessments. Parent involvement was virtually non-existent, creating even greater challenges for staff. Students were frequently late,

absent, or seemingly unaware of the personal benefits for being in school.

Everywhere I turned, someone was unhappy. Parents were unhappy that teachers were unreceptive to their concerns and that more classroom time was often spent on discipline rather than curriculum. Students were unhappy and felt teachers were mean, unfair, or gave too much meaningless homework. Teachers were unhappy that the district “just didn’t understand” the unique problems facing the Cooper community and that the district’s curriculum expectations were unrealistic and unreasonable. Cooper staff was stuck in the “there’s only so much we can do” mode for rationalizing low student achievement scores and poor student behavior. In short, there was an unspoken mantra that seemed to permeate the building: “Cooper Kids Can’t” – and it had developed into a deeply rooted belief system that quickly destroyed any attempts for constructive change.

Faced with these difficult circumstances, I made the mistake of many first year principals: I tried to put out all the fires, one at a time. I tried to appease the parents on the lousy hot lunches and changes in the lunchroom schedule. I tried to work with teachers on playground discipline issues that took up so much of their valuable classroom time each day. I tried to work with the district curriculum experts to introduce and implement new materials and strategies to improve student achievement, despite the cynicism and resistance from teachers. I tried to work with students to help them see that their poor decisions on the playground always resulted in consequences, and that doing well in school really was their best hope for the future. I put out these and countless other fires each and every day until January—with no real lasting benefits. No sooner was one situation resolved than two others surfaced—or resurfaced—and everyone was still unhappy, especially me.

Over the winter break, I gave serious consideration to resigning and returning to my comfort zone in a classroom in the north end of the district, miles away and far removed from the hectic, unhappy halls of Cooper Elementary. When I returned for my first principal's meeting in January, I received a flyer that would change everything.

Invitational Education Comes to Cooper

The flyer that was passed around the table that meeting in "School Can Be the Most Inviting Place in Town." There was a silly drawing of a goofy looking man with glasses (Dr. William Purkey) and I quickly passed the workshop flyer on to the next administrator without taking one for myself. I didn't have time for any workshops now—my school, students, staff and parents were a mess, and my escaping to a workshop for an entire day was not going to make things any better for me. Fortunately, one of my more experienced colleagues took the time to urge me to attend the workshop with her. She explained that she had heard Dr. Purkey's message years ago, and that he had an important message that might help me in my quest to improve things at Cooper. Reluctantly, I signed up to attend the workshop with my colleague. As it turned out, that decision marked the beginning of a cultural transformation at Cooper Elementary.

The message I heard from Dr. William Purkey, co-founder of the International Alliance for Invitational Education (IAIE), proved to be an effective model for organizational change that would profoundly impact everything we did and every decision we made as a community of learners working together on behalf of our common goal—student learning and achievement. Throughout the presentation, Dr. Purkey explained that schools that adopt invitational strategies could bring about significant improvements in all aspects of the school. Invitational theory is based on four primary principles: trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. These prin-

ciples, which serve as the foundation of the school's culture, are supported by the "5 Powerful P's"—people,

places, policies, programs and processes. By altering attitudes and action in these five areas, we could accomplish a systematic change in both the operations and the culture of Cooper.

The simplicity of Dr. Purkey's message intrigued me as I listened to the presentation. Nothing in his presentation was new or shocking to me; in fact, his message was steeped in common sense. We should all send caring, inviting message to students, parents, and staff to create a positive environment! We need to have an invigorating, bright, clean workplace where students want to learn and teachers want to teach. We should have programs and policies that promote student learning, reward progress, and achievement, and ensure that all were made to feel that they are able, valuable, and responsible.

I asked myself a more important question: "Are all these things really happening at Cooper Elementary?" The answer, once I probed past the surface, became shockingly clear to me: Cooper Elementary was becoming a failing school because we were failing ourselves. We were not summoning people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor. Instead, we were listening to the voices of our past that told us "Cooper kids can't" and kept that belief a reality through our self-defeating and negative attitudes.

By the time the 1999 school year began, I decided to implement Invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1988, 1996; Purkey & Schmidt, 1990; Purkey & Stanley, 1991) to change the culture of Cooper Elementary so that we, too, could begin to consider our school "the most inviting place in town."

Putting Theory Into Practice

Over the summer, I read every book and article on invitational education and theory that I could find, along with current research on implementing change effectively in

schools. Armed with a variety of research from IAIE as well as other experts on organizational change such as Steven Covey, Richard DuFour, Michael Fullan, and Philip Schlechty, I began to formulate a plan for reshaping the culture of Cooper Elementary to the invitational model.

On my first workday with staff, I gave an overview of the basic principles and premises of invitational education. I explained the “5 P’s” and reviewed the four cornerstones of trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. I told the staff that we were going to begin exploring invitational theory slowly, starting with only one “P,” the “place,” by sprucing up the physical environment of Cooper which, quite frankly, looked more like an institution than an elementary school. We organized a “beautification committee” and before long, teachers were busy turning the halls and walls of the school into a more friendly, warm, and playful environment. Student artwork was prominently displayed where blank, brown brick walls had previously stood. Trash cans were transformed to look like Crayola crayons, and fuse box covers were decorated to look like chalk boards with children’s scribbles painted on as decorations. Curtains were sewn and hung in the front lobby, and new bulletin boards were ordered and installed in the hallways. The lobby of the school was painted white, instantly transforming the depressing brown brick walls with a burst of optimism.

Within a few short weeks, people were talking about the changes. Parents commented how much brighter and lighter the school felt. Students beamed with pride at seeing more of their artwork hanging prominently in the halls and in the showcases. The staff started to smile just a little more and feel better about coming to work. This was accomplished with just a simple change in the place.

From that first step, we began to systematically look at the other four “Ps.” The next focus was on people. We talked about our feelings of hopelessness and pessimism, and be-

gan to understand that our attitudes were contagious. We talked about the invitational principles of trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. We began to have meaningful, tough dialog on how we treat each other as a staff and how we treat students and parents. We established an “Inviting Staff” box where staff could slip notes that recognizes and thanking individual members of the staff for their kindness and generosity. One lucky staff member would have his or her name drawn each month to win an exciting prize. We began to plan more social events together, celebrated weddings and births of babies together, and shared good news that was happening in our lives on a more regular basis.

Addressing the first two “Ps,” place and people, took up most of our time in the 1999-2000 year. I intentionally began with the two “Ps” that I thought would have the greatest and most immediate impact on staff and student morale. My thinking was to give staff some practical and non-controversial change mechanisms that would peak their interest in exploring Invitational Education in greater detail and depth the following school year. To cement their thinking, I arranged to bring Dr. Purkey to the district to speak to all elementary staffs and share the same dynamic presentation that had so energized me the previous year.

Once my staff heard Dr. Purkey’s presentation, convincing them to take on the remaining three “Ps” (programs, policies, and processes) was easy. For the past four years, the Cooper staff has worked together to turn our school into one of the most inviting places in town. Since that time, we have implemented new programs that encourage student learning and parent involvement. We have rejected policies that are demoralizing, demeaning, and destructive in nature in favor of policies that are clear, fair, and that promote a safe, orderly environment where all are treated with respect and dignity. Our processes are always grounded in invitational theory and practice.

In May, 2000, Cooper Elementary won the Golden Apple award by the State of Michigan as a result of our student achievement performances in the 4th and 5th MEAP exams. That year, student achievement in the subject areas of reading, writing, science and mathematics rose a combined 110 percentage points compared to our previous three-year performance rates. Since 2000, Cooper's MEAP scores have continued a slow but steady course of improvement. In the January 2004 MEAP reading exam, Cooper's reading score reached an all-time school high of 84% which was two percentage points above the state average and well over three times greater than our achievement rate five years ago.

While we cannot argue that Invitational Education singularly achieved these gains, we do believe Invitational Education enabled us to organize ourselves in ways that continue to promote the untapped potential of all our students as well as our staff. Our involvement and practice in invitational practices made a significant difference to the culture and climate of Cooper Elementary that continue to be crucial to student success.

Today, the Cooper staff uses the principles of Invitational Education as our framework for school improvement. We look at student data to see how well we have met our goals, and we gauge our goals against the fundamental principles of Invitational Education maintaining a steady path of continuous improvement. Schools must be held accountable for their performance, and we tend to measure school success by student achievement scores, such as the MEAP. Cooper's recent success, however, did not occur overnight, and was not the result of a "quick fix." Instead, Cooper's growth has been the result of a concerted, collaborative effort toward effective change that involved all stakeholders in our community.

School administrators who wish to improve their schools should realize that Invitational Education is not a simple, ready-made prescriptive program that can be implemented in

the same way and manner in every school. Rather, administrators can use the basic principles and premises of Invitational Education as a solid framework for effective and systemic school improvement initiatives. At Cooper Elementary, the staff understands that we are not “there” yet, and we still have much to do to improve as a truly invitational school. But we remain committed to using Invitational Education as our compass as we move forward toward continued growth and success for all members of our community.

References

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