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## **Improving School Culture Through Crucial Conversations Among Staff Members**

Melissa Tuzzio

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**Improving School Culture Through Crucial Conversations Among Staff Members**

Melissa Tuzzio

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

### **Abstract**

This school improvement plan aims to improve school culture through crucial conversations among staff. School culture is the set of norms, values, and beliefs that make up what a school believes in, which affects multiple areas of a school, including student success, teacher retention, and job satisfaction. Crucial conversations are discussions between two or more people who hold opposing opinions about a high-stakes issue and where emotions run strong. The plan addresses ways to strengthen a school's culture, beginning at the administrative and teacher leadership level, using book studies. In addition, a literature review was conducted to support the plan and examine the importance of the principal, communication, and interpersonal communication to improve a school's culture.

*Keywords* school improvement plan, school culture, crucial conversations

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### **Improving School Culture Through Crucial Conversations Among Staff Members**

The definition of school culture is “the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm of a school” (Muhammad, 2018. p. 20). Why is the culture of the school building so influential? The culture of a school affects many aspects of the school; these culture elements include teacher retention, staff's willingness to integrate new materials and take risks, work motivation, and maybe most importantly, student academic outcomes. The school's culture is how things are done, and the climate is how people feel around the school building. According to Kent D. Peterson, educational consultant and professor, “School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols, and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school” (as cited in Muhammad, 2018, p. 20).

Why do school districts need to take a closer look at the schools culture? According to the National Education Association (NEA), approximately half of the teachers within the United States leave the profession within the first five years. This turnover can be associated with teacher job dissatisfaction, particularly “low salaries, inadequate support from the school administration, student discipline problems, and limited faculty input into school decision-making” (Ingersoll, 2015). With this in mind, how can school administrators ensure that teachers stay within the education profession? According to Anthony Muhammad in his book *Transforming School Culture*, “Teachers are more likely to remain in their positions when they feel supported by administrators and have strong bonds of connection to colleagues” (Muhammad, 2018, p 67). The problem is that conflict between colleagues can affect the relationships between coworkers. If this conflict is not resolved by having crucial conversations, it can be detrimental to the school and its culture.

A school's culture can be labeled as positive or toxic. A positive school culture consists of a positive, caring atmosphere with a set of values that supports teachers and their growth professionally and gives them a sense of responsibility for student growth. On the other hand, toxic school culture is one in which teachers' attitude is generally negative, teacher relations are conflicted, and staff does not believe in the student's ability to succeed. The effects of the school's culture, positive or toxic, sets the tone for many aspects of a school and how it functions.

Existing research shows a link between teacher leaders and principals affecting school culture by fostering interpersonal relationships and trust among all teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this school improvement plan is to encourage leadership-facilitated crucial conversations among staff members to improve the culture and morale of the school. Specifically, this plan is to introduce what a crucial conversation is, how to have them, and how they will affect the school's culture. The knowledge gained from this project can increase communication and trust between school staff improving the school culture.

Peer-reviewed research for this project was primarily found online through Northwestern Colleges DeWitt Library using the ERIC and Education Database, along with a few articles reviewed from Google Scholar. The literature reviewed was not limited to any specific geological area and was published between 2012 and 2022. The research was intended to determine what constitutes a school's culture, which primarily affects this culture, how/if a school's culture can be changed, and how having crucial conversations can help improve interpersonal relationships, thus affecting the school's culture. Included within the literature were keywords including: school culture, communication, teacher leadership, trust, and conflict strategies.

The following literature review will look at essential parts of improving the culture of a school building. The review will include specific people who help create a positive school culture,

the importance of staff collaboration to improve school culture, and how interpersonal relationships affect culture. Through the review of these articles, it will be determined what will be written into the School Improvement Plan to meet the needs of this school best. Having a positive school culture increases teachers' retention and the willingness for teachers to step up when needed and ultimately improves student achievement. As stated in the book *Crucial Conversations*, "A growing body of research evidence shows that when leaders create a culture of intellectual and emotional honesty, workplaces become more inclusive, and organizations deliver better service" (Grenny et al., 2022 p.ix).

### **Review of the Literature**

In the past 20 years, there have been many significant shifts in educational policy, including No Child Left Behind (2002), the adoption of Common Core Standards (2010), and Every Student Succeeds Act (2017). With these structural changes or changes in policy, programs, schedules, and procedures in educational buildings, the need for staff collaboration and cohesion has become even more critical (Muhammad, 2018). Even though many things affect a school and its culture, three major themes that have emerged through reviewing the literature. These include 1) the impact of the school's principal, 2) the amount of collaboration happening within the school district, and 3) interpersonal communication between staff members.

#### **Principals' Impacts on School Culture**

According to Weinstein et al. (2020) "trust is built day by day among school community stakeholders, including teachers, principals, students, and parents. Building trust requires meeting the expectations each one has, in their capacity, on the action of others, in an organization where each person is mutually dependent upon one another towards reaching the goals set (Weinstein et al. 2020, p. 69)." In a two-phase quantitative and qualitative study by Weinstein et al. (2020) 205



principals and 1150 teachers were questioned about reciprocal trust. The quantitative phase used a Likert form survey based on the trust between a principal's trust in their teachers, and teachers' trust in their principal. After the initial survey was conducted, nine schools were selected for a case study, where two researchers spent three days visiting the selected schools. These schools showed high, intermediate, and low levels of relational trust from principal to teacher and teacher to principal.

Weinstein et al. (2020) survey showed that teachers report higher trust in their principal than the principal does in their teachers. Specifically, 27.3% of principals hold high levels of trust in their teachers, while 36.8% of teachers hold a high level of trust in their principals Weinstein et al. (2020). This data shows teachers have greater trust in their principal because they trust him/her in both personal and professional trust. On the other hand, the principals surveyed had less trust in their teachers on a professional level.

Evidence shows a direct connection between teacher perception of school principals and job satisfaction among teachers. Along with this teacher satisfaction has a direct effect on a schools culture. According to the onsite case study finding from Weinstein et al. (2020), the relationship of trust the teachers have with the school principal is determined by the level of trust received from the principal. Teachers within the study saw themselves as a subordinate party in the trust relationship, meaning the principal sets the relationship's tone, initiative, and dynamics.

Principals and teachers evaluate trust for one another in different ways. Weinstein et al. (2020) study showed that principals evaluate their trust for a teacher according to the commitment they show towards the school, along with how the teacher fulfilled their specific duties assigned to

them and their profession. The principals were not interested in maintaining a friendship with the school staff and preferred to keep the relationship with the teachers on a professional level.

There is a direct connection among the culture of the school and teacher job satisfaction. Abdul, G. K. A., & Anantha, R. A. A. (2016) conducted a study of 385 teachers in 22 secondary schools that examined the relationship between school principal cultural practices and teacher's job satisfaction. Within this quantitative study a 42-item School Culture Survey questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was used to determine school culture and job satisfaction. Abdul, G. K. A., & Anantha, R. A. A. (2016) conclude that the principal's primary task should "focus on analyzing and understanding the existing culture and begin to be aware of teacher's needs, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes" (Abdul, G. K. A., & Anantha, R. A. A., 2016, p. 1). The findings suggest ways to help positively respond to teacher's needs, feelings, perceptions and attitudes is by introducing collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnerships. Thus, "school principals and educational authorities should pay more attention to the school culture in order to increase job satisfaction of teachers and progress in performance of schools" (Abdul, G. K. A., & Anantha, R. A. A., 2016, p. 4).

There are many things that a principal alone can do to improve the culture within the building. During a three-year qualitative study by Hollingworth et al. (2018) deemed to find how principals engaged staff to create a positive learning environment. The participants in this study included four Midwestern school principals. The schools used in this research consisted of a 6-8 middle school, a PK-5 elementary school, a PK-6 elementary school, and a PK-5 Catholic school. Hollingworth et al. (2018) identified three practices all four of these principals used to lead their

staff through the change process. These include building trust with staff, knowing staff well, and engaging in effective conversations.

All four principals cultivated trust within their building by allowing teachers to have professional autonomy by encouraging their teachers to take risks and try new strategies within the classroom. They continued building this trust by allowing time for teachers to observe one another, deliberately showing appreciation and focusing on the positive, and understood change takes time. One way these principals cultivated building culture was to know their staff well: "Principals who have healthy interpersonal relationships with staff are likely to have employees who are committed and have high morals" (Hollingworth et al. 2018, p. 1025). The key to know each staff member well was to know each staff member's personalities, experiences, and needs on an individual level. Knowing the staff member as an individual was achieved by working directly and interacting "hand-on" with each staff member beginning with the hiring process. The final way the four principals cultivated a positive culture was by "engaging in explicit and purposefully communication" (Hollingworth et al. 2018, p. 1028). The principals had an open-door policy, were often seen outside their offices, ensured communication with staff by sending out weekly emails, and engaged in challenging conversations when they arose.

### **Collaboration, Communication, and School Culture**

Supportive, shared leadership structures and school-wide professional learning communities (PLCs) affect school culture. A PLC has three main ideas, "1) it is the fundamental purpose of the school to ensure that all students learn at high levels, 2) educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of learners, and 3) it is a results-oriented process" (Dufour et al., 2016, p. 11). In 2015, Carpenter (2015) conducted a qualitative study of three secondary schools in the Midwestern USA to determine to what extent supportive

and shared leadership structures were provided to schools. The study's objective was to "investigate the current state of school culture and professional learning community practices and to determine characteristics of shared and supportive leadership found at each school" (Carpenter, 2015, p. 2). The research was completed with a community of teachers consisting of twelve science teachers. The participating schools included Roosevelt High School, a relatively new school in the district with a student enrollment of over 1,800 students in grades 9-12. Washington High School, a school with a rich academic tradition that had been in the community for over 55 years and had an enrollment of over 2,000 students in grades 9-12. Jefferson High School, a school that had a tradition of being known as a working-class type of school that had been in the community for over 70 years and with student enrolment over 1,400 students in 9-12. The leadership structure of all three schools was the same, including a head principal and assistant principals assigned to each core department. The research by Carpenter (2015) focused on four components: 1) shared purpose and values, 2) a collaborative culture, 3) problem-solving and 4) collective inquiry, and continuous improvement.

The data from Carpenter (2015) revealed that even though all three secondary schools were run similarly, only one school had implemented a successful PLC resulting in the teachers at Roosevelt High School being the only school having shared values and vision and striving for continuous improvement. Another result of the shared leadership at Roosevelt was the staff wanting to engage in the collaborative culture that was greatly shaped by shared and supportive leadership based on trust and respect for the teachers who were viewed as professionals. The teachers at Roosevelt worked together to develop a continuous improvement process through training and follow-up work in their PLCs.

On the other hand, the teachers from Washington and Jefferson did not have a set of professional learning community processes and were not trained on how to begin a PLC. These teachers did not see the value of PLC time and did not see the value of collaborating. Washington High School "had a culture of distrust, a lack of openness to improve and a focus on teacher accountability. Carpenter (2015) states, "These two schools had a top-down management style that promoted a lack of trust resulting in a toxic culture resulting in teacher isolation, decreased staff morale, and decreased job satisfaction" (Carpenter 2015, p. 4)

The implementation of PLCs has multiple purposes within schools. They provide a supportive and shared leadership structure that promotes effective collaboration for teachers. Incorporating PLCs and promoting teachers as leaders will empower teachers to help leaders focus on increasing student achievement scores in high-stakes times. Implementing a successful PLC will improve school culture, increase teacher retention, and help all students achieve their educational goals. PLCs will also help school principals and teacher leaders identify specific skills and vital behaviors among staff members. They will help align structures and processes throughout the organization to support new collective study, new skills, and provide new support for everyone who is involved enhancing collaboration within specific departments within the school along with unifying this whole school.

Can schools learn from a supervisor's management style outside of a school building? In 2014, Way et al., (2014) conducted a qualitative study involving 3,000 employees across 17 organizational service areas in seven regions. These employees were asked to complete a questionnaire to determine if management style effects job satisfaction. The final sample size of this group was 420 employees within 61 workgroups. The sample size was 68% male and 32% female, with a mean age of 44 years and a tenure of 10.91 years. The purpose of this study was to

test the effects of supervisors' conflict management style and how it affected the help and work satisfaction of employees. Four main criteria were examined on a scale ranging from one to seven or strongly disagreed to strongly agree. The criteria used were collaboration or finding a solution that satisfied both parties, yielding or giving wishes to one party, forcing, or fighting to have the outcome benefit one party, and avoiding (Way et al., 2014). The findings show the workplace with high supervisor collaboration reported low job dissatisfaction and fewer stress-related problems at work.

Way et al.'s (2016) study suggests that organizations must improve systems to deal with conflict within the workplace. One practical way to reduce conflict within the workplace is by having supervisors be visible during the day and be aware of their response to conflict. Another way to reduce conflict is by developing shared perceptions about how things should be done within the building. Implementing a shared perception of expectation can lessen workgroup stress and increase group performance and satisfaction (Way et al., 2014).

### **Interpersonal Communication and School Culture**

Communication is vital in developing effective team collaboration including trust between teachers and principals. Sutherland & Yoshida (2015) examined the importance of communication using the Communication Skills and Trust in Leader Survey (CSRS) with 1,138 international schoolteachers. The CSRS Rating measures the competence skills of another person by assessing twenty-five skill-specific items rated using a five-point Likert-type scale. The CSRS score on three factors. Factor one consists of nine questions focusing on attentiveness-coordination, factor two consists of ten items focusing on composure, and factor three examines expressive items using six items.

Sutherland & Yoshida's (2015) findings confirm that communication is essential when developing trust showing that attentiveness-coordination was found to be the strongest predictor of trust with a variance of 59.17% (Sutherland & Yoshida, 2015, p. 1050). Compared to the other data within this study the other two factors showed 5.88% for composure, and 4.40% for expressive (Sutherland & Yoshida, 2015, p. 1050). The research shows when attentiveness-coordination is present within a conversation; the conversation becomes more significant because it requires participation from both parties engaging in the conversation. The two-way interaction between the parties allows for the formation of a stronger relationship resulting in deeper conversations. These deeper conversations occur because they involve relationship-building behaviors, which include forming connections and strengthening trust and relationships. By having conversations with attentiveness-coordination present it strengthens and helps determine mutual beliefs increasing basic relationship-forming behaviors.

Interpersonal communication functions under two aspects first, people communicate to share information, which is a critical element in decision making, and second human communication influences others (Sirait, 2016). The most central part of a school is the principal and is vital he/she is well diverse in achieving effective communication. In 2016, Jumaria Sirait examined the effect of interpersonal communication within schools and how it affects the school's culture. This qualitative study used a multiple-choice questionnaire for 376 people. The study examined interpersonal communication, school culture, job satisfaction, work motivation, and organizational commitment.

What do interpersonal communication, school culture, job satisfaction, work motivation, and organizational commitment consist of? According to Sirait (2016) organizational culture is:

"a set of values, norms, assumptions, beliefs, principles, and practices or regulations in the school. These organize and direct the behavior of the teachers in an effort to make a job in solving the problem, with indicators: taking risks, attention to detail, outcome orientation, people orientation, team orientation, aggressiveness, and stability." (p. 371)

Job satisfaction is a set of favorable or unfavorable feelings and emotions on how employees review their work. Indicators for job satisfaction include a chance of promotion, salary, supervision, and the type of work itself. Finally, work motivation increases when school culture improves; work motivation is described as motivation to achieve organizational objectives to do something to achieve success, complete a task that requires effort and skill, do something significant, and do something better than anyone else (Sirait, 2016).

The results from the Sirait (2016) study confirm that interpersonal communication positively affects job satisfaction. It also found that "the willingness of the employer to hear, understand, and acknowledge opinion or achievements of subordinates was instrumental in increasing a sense of satisfaction to work (Sirait, 2016, p 369)." Another finding from the study showed that school culture has a positive and direct effect on work motivation; thus "the school's culture has a positive direct effect on work motivation" (Sirait, 2016, p 370). In other words, the better the interpersonal communication the higher the job satisfaction. Job satisfactions is also attributed to a better work culture leading to higher work motivation and better organizational commitment.

Interpersonal communication is important with all staff but it is especially important for principals. "Principals spend approximately 70%-80% of their time in interpersonal communication" (Sezgin & Er 2016, p. 1). Quality communication is a leading factor attributed to quality relationships. The most effective way to communicate within schools is face-to-face. On



the other hand, nonverbal communication can also lead to effective communication. Nonverbal communication consists of facial expressions, eye contact, appearance, voice, gestures, and posture. Within a school, the principal tends to be at the center of most communication networks and is considered a crucial part of quality communication. In 2016, Sezgin & Er completed a study within a Turkish primary school. This qualitative study was performed to look at principals' communication skills.

Sezgin and Er's (2016) study examined teachers' perceptions of how principals communicated in four situations: 1) communication styles on instructional issues, 2) communication during decision-making, 3) communication during disagreements, and 4) the principal's listening styles. When discussing communication styles about instructional issues, the theme included sermonizing, communication overload, overfamiliarity, and inappropriate communication modes. For example, teachers within the study indicated sermonizing was when a principal turned every chance to speak into a lecture on rules and prohibitions within the school and talked more than needed or than the teachers wanted him/her to.

When the focus of the topic turned to the decision-making process, the majority of teachers felt patronized, and another smaller group felt the principal only got teachers' opinions through meetings. A third group felt the principal ignored teachers' opinions altogether. Another idea that emerged was the principal's communication style in disagreements. The teachers who were involved in this study felt the principal was aggressive, followed closely by formal discourse. The final two items that emerged from this were teachers feeling the principal was an authoritarian manager along with the principal imposing their own ideas. Finally, Sezgin and Er's (2016) research showed the importance of a principal's listening skills. Most participants complained about their principal's insufficient feedback and the lack of eye contact during the conversations.

Within the study, teachers stated that their principal tried to use expressive gestures, such as head nodding, while listening to them. (Sezgin, & Er, 2016).

This study revealed that when communication is not adequately conveyed, it may lead to a negative attitude towards the school and the principal. When there is a negative attitude towards the principal, the school's culture could be impacted negatively. Therefore, principals need to develop interpersonal communication skills to establish clear, meaningful, and two-way communication with teachers. This communication needs to happen during daily talks, disagreements, and during crucial conversations when the stakes are higher. By ensuring effective communication will lead to a positive climate within the school building resulting in happier teachers, job satisfaction, and greater teacher buy-in.

In summary, with the changes in the last 20 years within education, the need for communication, collaboration, and building trust within a school is more important than ever. Trust starts with the backbone of the school, the principal. Therefore, he/she must continue building trust among the school's teachers. Trust is built through interpersonal conversations and effective communication with all staff members. The critical element to having a positive school culture is building trust because "trust is a key element, considered as the glue that binds organizations that binds organizations together and the lubricant that keeps them moving faster" (Weinstein et al. 2020, p. 66). One way to improve communication and trust within a building is to implement PLCs. PLCs can help improve a school's culture by giving teachers a common goal to achieve, giving teachers support, and sharing leadership throughout the building.

### **School Profile**

#### **Student Performance**

In Northwest Iowa, Okoboji Community Schools serves students from the towns of Milford, Arnold Park, West Okoboji, Wahpeton, Okoboji, and Fostoria. In the 2021-2022 school

year, there were 1,192 students enrolled within the three schools contained within the district, which are all located in Milford, Iowa. Enrollment within the Elementary school (PK-4) is 496 students, the middle school (5-8) enrollment was 331 students, and the high school's (9-12) enrollment was 289 students. 88.8% of the students enrolled at Okoboji are white, 6% are Latino or Hispanic, 3.9% are two or more races, 0.8% are Black or African American, 0.3% are Asian or Asian Pacific Islander, and 0.2% are Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Male students comprised 52% of students, while females accounted for 48% (Okoboji CSD, 2022). Within Okoboji Middle School, students are offered various exploratory courses to help them find their pathway throughout their middle and high school careers. According to the Department of Education, in the 2020-2021 school year, Okoboji Middle School (5-8) averaged achievement mathematics score was 53.01/100, and the average school achievement in English Language Arts was 52.77/100. Okoboji Middle School's overall performance scored 62.03/100 in 2021, surpassing the state average of 57.04/100 (State of Iowa, 2021).

### **Student & Community Characteristics**

The Middle School was built in 2020 and is located in Milford, Iowa. According to the 2020 census, Milford had a population of 3,015 people and is increasing at 1.37%. Within the city 59.3% of this population is white, 18.9% are Hispanic or Latino, and 13.6% are African American or Black. In addition, 50.5% of the population is female, while 49.5% are male. The median age of the residence of Milford is 39.7 years. Milford's median income for is \$54,660 for single household and \$63,214 for married households. 70.4% of the residents in Milford have labor rate participation (US Census Bureau, 2022).

### **School Characteristics**

Okoboji Middle School strives to prepare students with the competencies and skills needed to thrive in the world beyond school. One way this is achieved is by using standards-based grading to focus on five key elements students will need to succeed beyond school doors. The five criteria used include: 1) critical thinking, 2) productivity and accountability, 3) complex communication, 4) collaboration, and 5) growth mindset. Another way Okoboji *Pioneers Pathways for Every Student* include the implementation of the Mid-Mester Academy. Students will spend over 120 days in their Middle School career engaging in 38 real-world, interdisciplinary, problem-based courses. Finally, at the culmination of a student's pathway through Middle School at Okoboji, they are able to showcase their growth within the five universal constructs through a Capstone presentation. This presentation is presented to a panel of educators, along with, peers, family, and friends.

### **Parent Involvement**

In the Okoboji Community School District, parents stay informed by using Infinite Campus, a student information system and Google Classroom. In addition, parents are encouraged to participate in parent-teacher conferences twice a year to discuss grades, social relations, student behavior, and other school-related topics. Other involvement opportunities include MidMester showcase days, Capstone presentations, sports boosters, Friends of the Fine Arts, and Music Boosters. Every four years, parent can be elected onto the school board. The school also updates parents using social media posts, emails, and the district website.

### **School Mission & Vision**

Okoboji focuses on *Pioneering Pathways for Every Student*, by creating learning opportunities to prepare each and every student to solve the problems of tomorrow. We focus on providing students with the competencies and skills needed to thrive beyond their years at Okoboji

schools. By building on the outstanding foundation and diverse learning opportunities available, we are able to construct pathways of success that allow our students to excel in communicating, collaborating, critical thinking, and fostering community-whenever their paths take them.

Okoboji's Mission statement is "We will prepare each learner with the knowledge and skills necessary for a productive life in a changing world. (Okoboji CSD)" The education is based on giving every student access to a world-class education in small-town Iowa. Okoboji promotes high academic standards, strong athletic and fine arts programs (Okoboji CSD).

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

Students are assessed through formal, informal, and summative testing. The FAST Bridge testing is done in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) three times a year, along with ISASP (Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress), which is completed yearly in the Spring to assess students' academic knowledge growth in the areas of English Language Arts (5-8), Math (5-8), and Science (5 & 8). For the FAST assessment data Okoboji strives for all students to be 80% proficient in ELA and Math. When looking at ISASP the goal is for each student to make growth from year to year with the hope for all students to be proficient or higher in each area. Pre-assessments are done at the start of every math curriculum unit to determine the need for math intervention, which happens daily for forty minutes in the seventh and eighth grades. Math and reading interventions happen for forty minutes daily in the fifth and sixth grades.

In the seventh and eighth grades students are provided with a forty-minute block for WIN (what I need). There are three goals for educators during this time and they include: 1) to build healthy academic habits for all students by focusing on their productivity and accountability skill development, 2) to ensure high quality implementation and learning through specially designed instruction for our students with IEPs. For our students with Level 1 IEP goals, the focus of their

WIN time will be on high quality math specially designed instruction and learning. For out students with Level II or III academic or behavior goals, the focus of their WIN time will be on high quality specially designed instruction on their individualized goals, and 3) to provide a daily, high-quality, supportive, and structured experience for every seventh and eighth grade students to ensure no student slips through the cracks as they develop their healthy academic skills and work habits.

### **Curriculum and Assessment Practices**

Teachers intentionally set specific goals yearly using a Teacher Learning Plan (TLP). These goals directly associate with Iowa Teaching Standards and help teachers closely examine areas he/she would like to grow professionally. These goals can be completed within a small group or individually. The goals are updated, and progress is documented three times a year. In 2017, Okoboji adopted two new math curriculums; K-5 implemented Eureka Math, and 6-12 implemented Illustrative math. In 2021, the Middle and High schools also implemented Study Sync as the new ELA curriculum, and in 2023 there will be a new Science curriculum implemented for grades 5-12.

### **Professional Development**

Teachers within Okoboji Community Schools are able to grow professionally monthly with a full-day professional development day. These days are focused on building culture within the school building and giving teachers time to collaborate with their teams. Teachers are encouraged to participate in at least one book club throughout the year lead by the teacher leaders on a variety of topics. In April 2022, teachers participated in a full day of training on youth mental health first aid. In August of 2022, all staff will complete Top 20 Training. This training focuses on social and emotional wellbeing: for schools, individuals, and builds workplace culture.

### **Needs Assessment**

Okoboji Schools are working towards improving the culture throughout the district over the past two years and are continuing to move forward with this plan in the 2022-2023 school year.

One reason this is being done is to ensure retention of quality teachers. According to Anthony Muhammad (2018), 41% of teachers leave the profession before their fifth year in the educational field. One main reason this is happening is due to working conditions. Working conditions can be broken down into three main areas, including 1) collegial relationships, 2) instructional leadership, and 3) school culture. With an understanding of the importance of the culture and climate of a school building, the teacher leader team at OCS, consisting of 19 teachers from all three buildings, unanimously decided in the spring of 2021 that the team needed to add a focus shift to improve the culture throughout the district. The team used their professional development training days to brainstorm and map out the vision for each school building to improve the culture. The implementation of culture-building activities would be done monthly during professional development within each building and discussed bi-weekly during teacher team meetings on Friday.

Over the past three years, Okoboji Community Schools has seen significant student enrollment growth over the past three years affecting all three school buildings, most notably the middle school. The completion of the middle school in 2020 allowed OMS students to be split into four sections verse the previous three class sections. With the addition of a new section of students for core classes, new staff was hired to fill the openings. Within the middle school, there are approximately forty certified teachers, eleven associates, four cooks, three janitorial staff, an administrative assistant, a school nurse, and the principal daily. Within this community of school employees ten staff have less than five years of experience within OCS, and five staff are expected

to retire within the next five years. After looking at the expected and unexpected staff turnover, OMS needs to ensure a positive school climate for new teachers for the current 2022-20223 school year and beyond.

Considering the number of staff employed within the Middle School, the approximately 353 students, and outside agencies that help the students, we need to ensure everyone feels as though they are welcomed into the school. For the climate within the school to be safe, all children and adults need to feel safe, supported, engaged, and accepted when they walk through the front doors of the school. This sense of belonging begins with a strong foundation and by ensuring staff feels safe, supported, accepted, and heard. New staff will begin strengthening this sense of belonging by completing a two-year mentor program. This program will be completed for all new certified staff, whether new to the profession or the district. In addition, the mentoring program will establish a strong foundation for collaboration between new teachers and veteran teachers within the building.

Over the past year, the teacher leaders have established a foundation to improve the climate within the middle school. The foundation has been established by incorporating book studies for teachers to find a similar passion, adding a culture anchor to each professional development day, and adding “shout-outs” to specific teachers randomly to show appreciation and to let that specific teacher know they are helping create a positive climate within the school.

The next step in improving the culture and climate within Okoboji schools is ensuring hard, and crucial conversations are happening in a timely manner. These conversations will eliminate the elephant within the room and hopefully decrease hallway talk when people are unsatisfied with their position.

### **Data Analysis**



The Learning Policy Institute (2018) completed a study to understand why teachers were leaving the profession at both state and national levels. The study looked at four criteria which included 1) compensation, 2) teacher turnover, 3) working conditions, and 4) qualifications. For the sake of this paper, the four subcategories of teacher turnover will be examined further. These subcategories include 1) classroom autonomy, 2) collegiality within schools, 3) testing-related job insecurity, and 4) administrative support. The data within the Learning Policy Institute's study (2018) shows that classroom autonomy is higher than the national average while collegially within schools, testing-related job insecurity, and administrative support all fall lower than the national average, as seen in Figure 1 below.

### Figure 1

#### *Understanding Teacher Shortages in 2018*

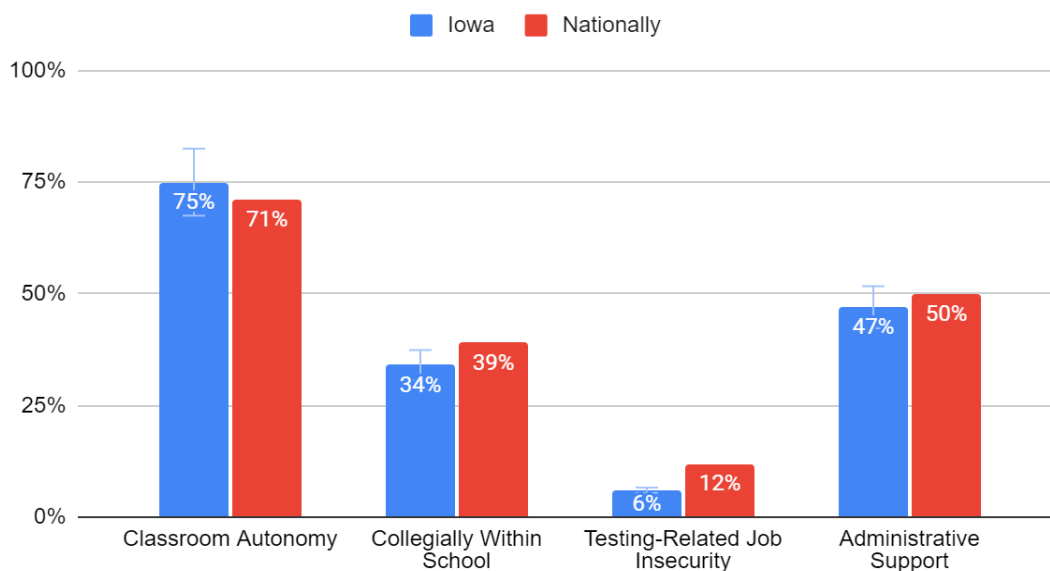


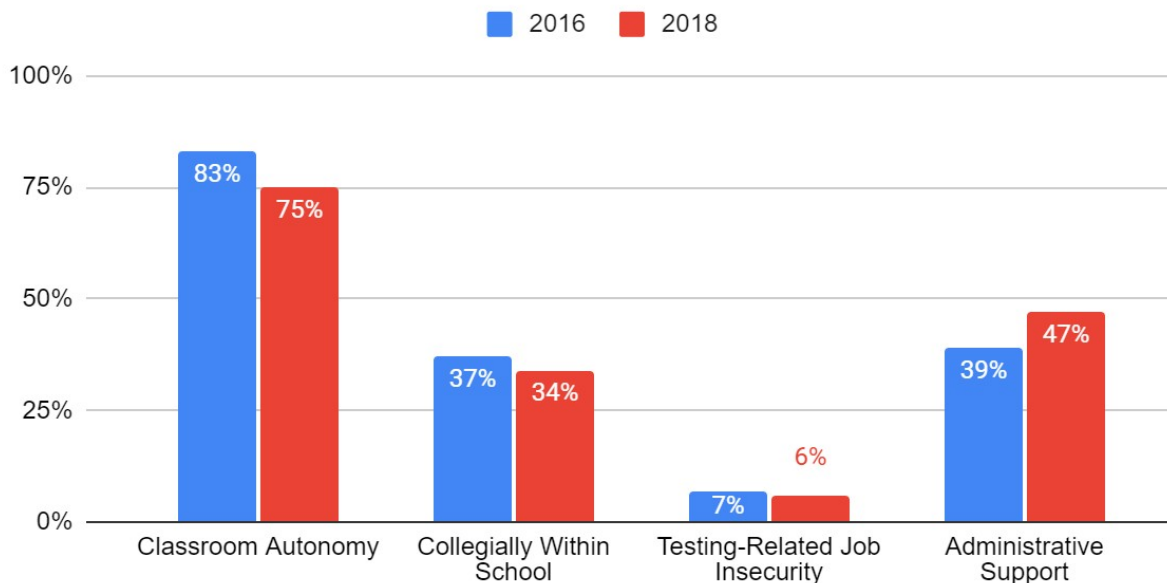
Figure 2, below, compares the data gathered in 2016 to the data gathered in 2018. The data shows that classroom autonomy, collegiality within schools, and test-related job insecurity all decreased slightly over the three years. In addition, administrative support showed a positive change, especially when working on the culture within a school. These findings are consistent with

the information gathered within the literature review previously in the paper. The two themes that emerged to be the largest indicators of positive school culture included collegially within the school and administrative. However, with the most negative trend in Iowa, how do these numbers compare to the national averages?

According to the data in Figure 2, below, Iowa is very comparable to the national average in all four areas. Out of the four areas, Iowa is higher in classroom autonomy, allowing the teacher to focus on higher level learning, and is lower in testing-related job insecurity. Both of these should be considered positives when looking at education in Iowa. However, when looking at collegially within the school and administrative support, both areas that affect a school's culture, Iowa schools scored lower than the national average, which can be an area of concern when looking at teacher retention. Updated information is needed to examine current teacher shortages and retention trends.

## Figure 2

*Comparing Teacher Shortages in Iowa in 2016 and 2018*



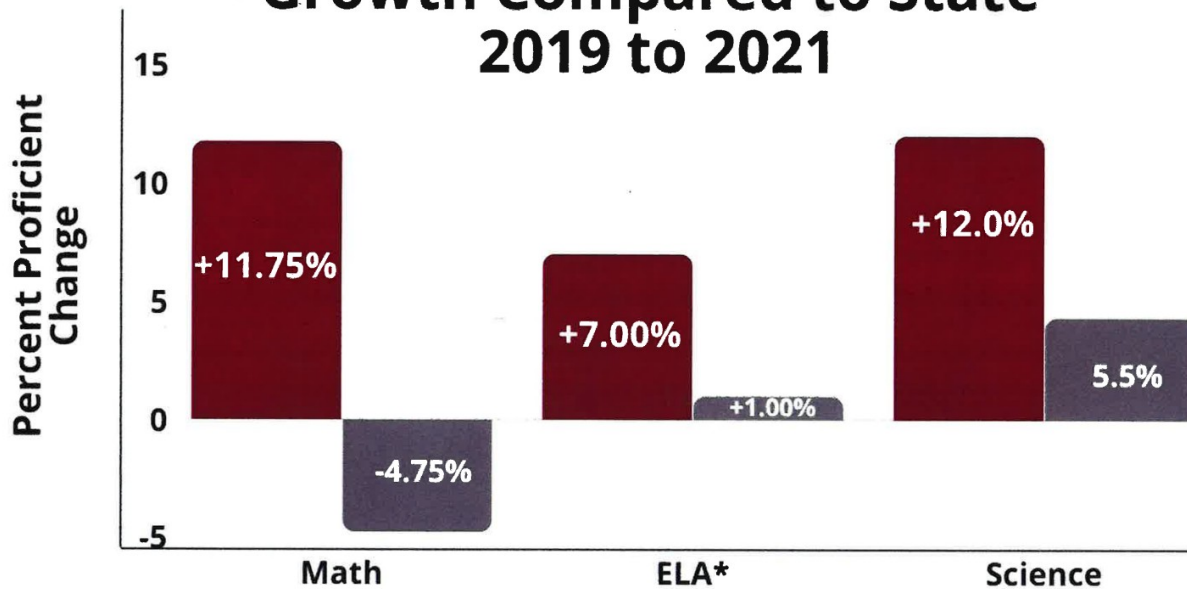
## Data

Okoboji Middle School, state, and national data are very similar. Okoboji has seen an increase in Math and English Language Arts scores on the ISASP in both 2021, as seen below in Figure 3. Preliminary scores from ISASP 2022 also show growth in both areas but have not been fully released to school districts at the time of this paper. However, teacher autonomy is very high throughout all grades allowing teachers to focus on higher levels of learning. This can be noted by the addition of higher-level questions within teachers' lesson plans. In addition, collegially between teachers and teaching teams continues to increase with the implementation of a weekly team meeting, and with teacher teams meeting during their prep time multiple times a week to discuss what is happening within the classroom and to ensure consistency throughout the grade level.

**Figure 3**

*Okoboji 2021 ISASP Scores Compared to the State Average*

## Okoboji Middle School ISASP Growth Compared to State 2019 to 2021



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Okoboji Middle School  
 State of Iowa

\*ELA = English/Language Arts

### School Strengths

Okoboji has spent the last two years laying the foundation to improve the culture within the school district. This foundation has begun with the principals ensuring they are visible to staff and students during passing times throughout the day. These times include the beginning and end of the day, during lunch and recess, and between classes. The principal also has an open-door policy and is willing to be a listening ear or provide advice depending on the situation at hand. He also attends weekly team meetings and sends out weekly bulletin emails to keep staff informed on what is happening within the middle school and the district.

### School Challenges

Through informal conversations with staff throughout all three buildings, teacher leaders began to understand weaknesses that continued to arise throughout the conversations. One of these

was the feel of top-down implementation of new material. A second area deemed as a weakness was the lack of communication on what teachers felt were essential areas within the schools. A third was the avoidance of conversations when a problem arose. With the lack of communication and avoidance of conversations being seen as an area of weakness concerns continued to arise within this area. There is a need to implement how to have crucial conversations to improve the culture within the school.

### **Other Assessments Needed**

Moving forward, all three schools within the Okoboji Community School District should consider doing a needs assessment on the cultures of the individual school. As the teacher leadership team begins working to improve the whole culture of the entire district, having a needs assessment for each school could help uncover the professional development needed at each school. This needs assessment must be completed at the start of the school year, mid-year, and towards the end. Conducting the needs assessment three times a year will give the teacher leadership team the insight to determine what is being done is helping within the areas of concern. Completing this assessment in each building will allow the teacher leadership team to see trends among the whole district, collaborate on the action plan, and assess the action plan to see if we are meeting our goals in improving culture and climate at our individual schools. According to Jim Knight (2007) the teacher leadership team needs to ensure the areas within their needs assessment need to be “powerful and easy to use (Knight & Forward, 2011, p. 195)

### **Action Plan**

The action plan will include the following steps to improve school culture using crucial conversations. The success of this plan will form around building a solid teacher leadership team. According to Cansoy R. & Parlar H. (2017), teacher leadership refers to "teachers' behaviors

related to institutional development, professional development and collaboration with colleagues, and their knowledge, skills and behaviors for improving learning and instruction at school" (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017). This plan will begin with a series of book studies completed by the administration and the teacher leadership team. During professional development days, the team will then present the information acquired through the book studies to the remainder of the teachers. Finally, the leadership team should consider presenting the information to the remainder of the staff through a series of book studies led by the team. Before this information is presented to the staff, a survey should be conducted to acquire a baseline of areas the staff feels could be considered high-need areas to improve the culture within the district. As in previous, with book studies, teachers will be able to receive continuing education credit for their participation through Iowa Lakes Community College.

The first step will begin with teacher leaders completing a book study on *Transforming School Culture* by Anthony Muhammad (2018). This book will allow the teacher leaders to understand the four types of teachers within the school building 1) the Believers, 2) the Fundamentalists, 3) the Tweeners, and 4) the Survivors. In addition, this book will support using specific strategies for each group of teachers to help improve the school's culture. Once the teacher leader team has completed the first book and understands the four types of educators and their goals, the second step will be to begin their book study on *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* by Grenny et al., 2022. This book will focus on what a crucial conversation is and how to navigate through them, along with understanding the emotions behind disagreement, ultimately being able to solve problems before little problems become large ones.

The next step in the process will include two books the teacher leader team will read, including *Multipliers* by Liz Wiseman (2017) and *The Coaching Habit* by Michael Bungay Stanier

(2016). *Multipliers* will help the teacher leaders, other staff, and the school's culture by learning to work with colleagues with different personalities and leading styles by using the strengths of the other to make everyday life easier. *The Coaching Habit* will be the final book read by the teacher leaders. This book will help the teacher leadership team become more of a coach, using questions to help guide staff to resolve their needs and allowing them to pull potential out of the team.

### **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

#### **Timeline**

For the successful integration of this plan, a thorough timeline had to be created and executed for successful integration. This timeline, shown in Figure 4 below, indicates the teacher leaders will begin by reading *Transforming School Culture* by Anthony Muhammad (2018) from August 2022 until October 2022. The second step will include reading *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* by Grenny et al., 2022 in November, December, and January. The third book will begin in February and be finished by March 2023; this book will be *Multipliers* by Liz Wiseman (2017). The fourth and final book, *The Coaching Habit* by Michael Bungay Stanier (2016), will be completed in April and May. The coaches will use the timeline to ensure they have completed the reading before monthly professional development days. During these professional development days, the teacher leadership team will gather and discuss the big ideas from the chapters read. After the big ideas from each of the readings are collected, the coaches will then use the end-of-the-year professional development days to design a plan to present the strategies and big ideas from the books to the rest of the staff. This plan should include book clubs for school staff during the 2023-2024 school year led by the teacher leadership team. As previously addressed, the teacher leader team and administration should create and use a needs

assessment conducted three times a year to determine the success of this plan. They will also use this plan to determine which areas must be addressed to improve the school's culture.

#### Figure 4

##### *Timeline*

#### Okoboji Teacher Leader Professional Learning Agenda 2022-23



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*Please have the assigned chapters read and be ready to reflect on and discuss big ideas from each chapter with the group.*

<b>Time</b>	<b>Learning Opportunities</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>August 22<sup>nd</sup></b>	Transforming School Culture (Intro- Ch. 3)	Teacher Leaders	OES
<b>September 12<sup>th</sup></b>	Transforming School Culture (Ch. 4-6)	Teacher Leaders	OMS
<b>October 10<sup>th</sup></b>	Transforming School Culture (Ch. 7-9)	Teacher Leaders	OHS
<b>November 7<sup>th</sup></b>	Crucial Conversations (Preface-Part I)	Teacher Leaders	OES
<b>December 5<sup>th</sup></b>	Crucial Conversations (Part II)	Teacher Leaders	OMS
<b>January 16<sup>th</sup></b>	Crucial Conversations (Part III)	Teacher Leaders	OMS
<b>February 13<sup>th</sup></b>	Multipliers (Preface-Four)	Teacher Leaders	OMS
<b>March 10<sup>th</sup></b>	Multipliers (Five-Nine)	Teacher Leaders	OMS
<b>April 10<sup>th</sup></b>	The Coaching Habit (Parts 1 and 2)	Teacher Leaders	OMS
<b>May 30<sup>th</sup></b>	The Coaching Habit (Part 3)	Teacher Leaders	OMS

#### Challenges and Barriers

Two challenges can be identified within this plan. The first challenge identified includes teacher buy-in, first by the teacher leadership team, then by the remaining teachers. If the teacher leadership team does not see the benefit of using the resources to improve the school's culture with the ideas obtained through the resources, this plan will not be able to improve culture through crucial conversations. Following buy-in from the teacher leadership team, there will need to be



buy-in from the remainder of the teachers. The teacher leaders will consider the four types of teachers discussed in the book *Transforming School Culture* by Anthony Muhammad (2018) to assist them in improving teacher buy-in.

Another challenge in every aspect of school, specifically in this plan, is the demand for time. The administration team and teacher leaders will need to ensure there is time for this plan to be successful. The plan will not be successful if the books are not read and discussed within the timeframes noted. Time will also need to be provided during professional development days to ensure collaboration during the book study during the 2023-2024 school year.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, through the support of the administrative team and teacher leaders, the culture within the school buildings can be improved to ensure work satisfaction, teacher retention, and cultivating a sense of community. With the use of the books *Transforming School Culture*, *Crucial Conversations*, *Multipliers*, and *The Coaching Habit*, the teacher leadership team will gain the knowledge to continue to move Okoboji forward positively and productively. This change will begin with the administration and teacher leads working together to build a foundation of knowledge. After this foundation has been established, this knowledge will be implemented for all staff throughout the district. This sense of community and improved culture will ensure we continue to Pioneer Pathways for Every Student.

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