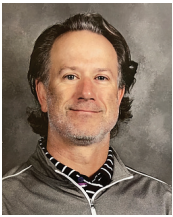


# Fostering Teacher Well-being: A Servant Leadership Perspective

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Public schools operate within two very messy, interconnected worlds demanding attention: mandates and local communities. On one hand, mandates placed upon schools by the state and the federal government dictate how educational organizations function instead of considering the ultimate best interests of teaching and learning. Progress from these mandates and student test scores are often the measuring stick for the evaluation of public schools. On the other hand, are the communities that public schools serve. Families, businesses and organizations look to districts and schools for direction, guidance, innovative leadership and support. These, and many

other leadership characteristics, are embedded within Bon Air Elementary School and the Burrell School District (BSD) through servant leadership. As defined by Robert Greenleaf (2002), servant leadership is a leader being a servant first and a leader second, ensuring the needs of those being served are met before leading happens. At BSD, intentional effort is made to grow servant leadership from administrators, to teachers and to students in hopes of creating more servant leaders.

Before delving into the transformative power of servant leadership, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges educators face today. Teachers often grapple with heavy workloads, challenging student dynamics and societal expectations that can lead to stress, burnout and a gradual erosion of the joy that initially drew them to the profession (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Bringing happiness and joy back into the profession is a challenging task. COVID-19 is often thought of as the tipping point for educators wanting to leave the profession. Low salaries, stress, burnout, teaching workplace conditions and feelings of a lack of respect and value are a few of the many reasons the teacher attrition rate for Pennsylvania in 2023 increased from 6.2% to 7.7% (Fuller, 2023).

State and federal mandates and local government control create a push-pull between stakeholders, teachers and administrators. The struggle lies between focusing efforts on test scores or other factors influencing their school's Future Ready Index instead of where the focus should be, on teaching and learning. With the current public education landscape, school leaders may find themselves witnessing their school culture suffer. Servant leadership is crucial at this time. Acknowledging the difficulties teachers face daily will not mend a suffering school culture or climate.

Administrators must listen to the needs of teachers and provide them with the leadership and support they require while offering opportunities to grow, both personally and professionally.

To determine if servant leadership is genuine, one can examine if those being served grow as people by becoming healthier, wiser and likely to become servants themselves (Lowney, 2003). This approach aligns well with the needs of teachers who often find themselves overwhelmed with responsibilities while trying their best to serve students daily. School leaders adopting servant leadership actively listen to teachers' concerns, empathize with their challenges and provide the necessary support to create a positive work environment. As communities look to public schools for support, how can school leaders seek innovative and revolutionary solutions to combat the attrition of teachers from the profession? One suggestion is to encourage open and honest dialogue within the school community. Open and honest communication should be the expectation when administrators perform check-ins, through informal and formal observations, as well as establishing an open platform for teachers to provide feedback expressing concerns and ideas. An approach to these types of open conversations is strength-based discussions with teachers. Strength-based discussions can shift the emphasis away from diagnosing problems and fixing weaknesses to examining strengths that will bring about a more lasting, positive change (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2020).

Another opportunity for servant leadership is providing meaningful professional development for teachers. A one-



size-fits-all approach to professional development is a thing of the past. Providing personalized professional development options for teachers instills ownership in the process. To understand the personal needs of teachers, data collection and analysis through surveys begins in advance of the next school year. This technique combines practicing open communication, personalizing to meet teacher needs and carrying those needs and wants throughout the school year. Accountability for assisting with individual goal achievement and providing feelings of efficacy for teachers is a critical element that needs to be a part of the professional development process. BSD's professional development schedule is designed for faculty and staff to prioritize required and optional learning opportunities. The district has found success in the last few years by instituting flexible options for teachers (the learners) to complete their annual professional development. Flexibility includes the opportunity to choose individual, relevant online courses and training and complete contractual clerical time from their home on designated in-service days.

When the learner's point of view is considered, the collaborative process leading to decision-making evolves into teachers becoming empowered learners. Believe it or not, learning then becomes a byproduct of collaborative decision-making. Remake Learning and Knowledge Works best describes the voice of empowered learners as "ensuring learners can articulate what they care about and how they learn best while playing an active role in designing their learning goals" (Remake Learning, 2023). Not all collaborative decision-making teachers might be invited to revolve around learning goals, but how nice would it be if it did? Establishing a collaborative process gives teachers a voice in the decision-making process empowering ownership and personal investment through their thoughts, feelings and beliefs. While this type of collaboration can evoke strong feelings and often become personal, teacher-voice opens conversations from both instructional and student advocacy vantage points. Within the Burrell School District, opportunities exist for teacher voices to be involved in the recommendations and decision-making for curriculum writing, adoption of curriculum materials, professional development topics and schedules, yearly school calendars and technology needs. We believe that serving teachers and offering a voice and choice in these areas enhances workplace contentment. Again, the collaborative process precipitates teacher buy-in and ownership of the process.

Creating a culture of appreciation within schools is another practical way of bringing joy to the teaching profession. Professional learning communities (PLC) are one starting point to develop a culture of appreciation. Building community within a teaching team can lead to the sweet spot of workplace positivity. The sweet spot includes connection to the organization, meaningful pursuits and a feeling of efficacy. The meaningful connections and positive reinforcement from team members can boost morale and bring joy and happiness back to teaching. BSD adopted PLCs and established teams in 2016. The PLC process is truly job-embedded professional development, enhancing teacher learning through the collection and analysis of their student data while learning pedagogical strategies from one



another that work best for their students. We believe the PLC process can be the sweet spot in making workplace positivity a reality for teachers.

Considering the seven pillars of servant leadership: a person of character, putting people first, skillful communicator, compassionate collaborator, foresight, systems, thinking and moral authority outline many opportunities for districts to put people first (Sipe & Frick, 2015). Servant leadership offers a compelling framework for revitalizing the teaching profession. By embracing empathy, collaboration and a commitment to growth, leaders can create environments where joy and happiness are not just ideals but tangible aspects of the teaching experience. Servant leadership opportunities within schools assist with reinstating joy.

Think about how frequently planning is done both inside and outside of classrooms using a collaborative approach. The Sunshine Committee at Bon Air Elementary aims to provide a culture of community for faculty and staff by planning a fun, collegial celebration once a month. Each monthly event is teacher – and administrator – driven with the final activity taking place at the end of the school year – attending a Pittsburgh Pirates' baseball game. Monthly activities have proven to be a wonderful way of bringing teachers together and providing them with opportunities to cultivate camaraderie outside of the classroom. Working hard to shift thinking over the past several years, BSD students have begun to share in the servant leadership role. There have been many ways students volunteer their time and raise money. One way has been through a fourth- and fifth-grade program called "Kids for Kids." Money is raised through a student-led market with profits in the thousands of dollars being donated to UPMC Children's Hospital. These small-scale projects cultivate service in individuals we assist and broaden the concepts of service to others.

In the pursuit of educational excellence, let us not forget the well-being of those at the forefront—the teachers—who, with joy in their hearts, shape the future of generations to follow. As leaders and educators alike reflect on the principles of servant leadership, there is a unique opportunity to usher in a new era of fulfillment and happiness in the teaching profession. It is our responsibility as school leaders to exercise creativity in the redesign and development of the systems and frameworks that enable teachers to teach, rather than state mandates and outside influences forcing them away from our children's best interests.

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