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Clearing the Hallways at Pottstown High School

By Dr. Christian D'Annibale



An Impossible Task

Pottstown High School had a leadership shortage in the fall of 2022. The new principal, assistant principal and dean of students had been hired, but could not arrive at their new positions until late in the semester. In addition, the acting principal was on his way to another position in his home district. Following the pandemic, the acting principal was tasked with managing 950 students essentially by himself, which proved to be an exceedingly difficult undertaking. At the end of the semester, despite having been assigned an impossible task, he succeeded in keeping the building together until he handed it over to the new administrative team.

By December, Pottstown High School had its full leadership team in place. As the new principal, I came to Pottstown with experience as a principal, but never at the high-school level, or in an urban setting. Pottstown High School is a wonderful place with a staff that is like family, a community that wants the best for its children and students who want success. With that said, I would be lying if I denied the shock I experienced on my first day in the building. From my first day, I observed that hundreds of students were skipping class. Coming from a suburban middle school, I had never experienced students skipping classes at such a high rate. I do not fault the acting principal because he was working alone, but during the fall 2022 semester, students consistently skipped class. During that time, there were close to 5,000 class skips with over 260 of the 950 students engaging in skipping class at least once. I knew that the matter of more than 25% of the student body skipping class had to be resolved immediately.

Student Voice Matters

I have been blessed throughout my career with great leaders to learn from. The importance of student voice was a common belief among all of my leadership mentors. The research also suggests incorporating student voice as a key, in addition to the wisdom of my previous mentors. Class cutting can be best resolved by working collaboratively with students and taking an honest look at your school's practices (Fallis & Opotow, 2003). As the new high school principal, the first thing I did was to develop a Student Advisory Council (SAC). The senior class president along with two of the most frequent class-skippers in the school were among the varied group of students who made up the SAC. Their voices were essential if we were going to solve this building-wide problem.

At the first SAC meeting, after much discussion and listening, the group agreed that the overwhelming majority of the school wants to have the hallways clear, students in classrooms and a school that is safe.

PRIDE at Pottstown High School

With the goal of clearing the hallways, the SAC asked me to share my thoughts on the issue. Since I appreciate excellence and often remind students that I trust them to put me to work, I said that I will do whatever it takes to make Pottstown High School excellent. In the next three hours, the students took the theme of "excellence" and created a framework to solve our problem. The students named their initiative "**PRIDE – Positively Recognizing Individuals Demonstrating Excellence.**" They created building-wide expectations for the hallways and designed PRIDE tickets to be distributed by teachers when students arrive to class on time, meet expectations in the hallways or use passes appropriately. Students could place their PRIDE tickets into a weekly raffle box, a monthly raffle box or a quarterly raffle box. Weekly, 20 tickets would be pulled to receive \$5 to be used at the school store. The SAC called this weekly reward "*Dr. D's Dollaz*," as an early nod to their new principal. Monthly, 10 tickets were pulled to win a \$50 gift card to a store or restaurant of their choice. Quarterly, five tickets would be drawn for a trip to the shopping outlets and a \$150 shoe shopping spree.

In addition, the SAC collaborated with our career and technology department's marketing class to create a social media campaign to inform students about the hallway expectations, the PRIDE tickets and the PRIDE raffle prize boxes. The PRIDE ticket program was instantly popular with the student body. Sadeeq Jackson, a member of the SAC and a former class skip artist, said, "We know Dr. D'Annibale can't give us a paycheck like at a real job, but knowing that we are going to be recognized and rewarded for showing up to class and doing the right thing is helping me to turn things around." His brother Abdul shared, "We really just want our own community and the communities around us to know that Pottstown is a positive place where good things happen. Knowing that we have the ability to create that positive change means the world."

Teacher Leadership and Trust

Every principal knows that building trust with staff is more important than anything else. Accordingly, I made it a point to spend plenty of time with department chairs and building union representatives to earn their trust. Our team's immediate message of wanting to clear the hallways was met with excitement and helped to



Pottstown High School students enjoying their first reward trip for the PRIDE ticket program.

build a sense of optimism and trust among the staff. The department chairs and building representatives worked with us to create an agreement that everyone would implement the PRIDE ticket program. We also implemented staff suggestions because of the staff's dedication to the students' solution.

Hallway Sweeps and Marching Bands

Our leadership team was faced with the challenge of deciding which of the over 100 staff members' recommendations for clearing the hallways would be implemented while building and maintaining trust. Our department chairs and building representatives were instrumental in assuring staff that our team was to be trusted. I requested our building reps to emphasize one important point: Clearing the hallways is not only the principal's responsibility, it is everybody's responsibility.

One of our building representatives produced the first staff suggestion, which was hallway sweeps. The idea was for every teacher and administrator to start at one end of the hallway and walk together as a solid group through the hallway "sweeping" students every block into two places: their class or the in-school suspension (ISS) room. (Once in the ISS room, administrators would use non-exclusionary strategies to get them back into class.) The teachers were willing to lose five minutes of planning time to conduct hallway sweeps. This was only possible because of the trust between the administration and our union

representatives. Ironically, the teachers found that they enjoyed this time! They shared that they never had more enjoyable conversations with colleagues about family, personal lives and weekend happenings than they did during those hallway sweeps.

The chair of the math department had the second suggestion. We all know students who skip class tend to "hang out" in restrooms. This staff member suggested that we play loud music in all the bathrooms. From that day on, our team pumped loud marching band music into every restroom to push students away from making social media videos and back to their class. It was a huge hit! Staff could not stop laughing at their "trick." It got students out of the restrooms and brought staff together through laughter.

Extending to Long Term

The PRIDE tickets, hallway sweeps and marching band music did help with clearing the hallways. We went from 5,000 skips in the fall 2022 semester to 2,000 skips in the spring 2023 semester. At the end of the school year, our leadership team and the building union representatives agreed that we were not at the finish line. Because of our mutual trust and the knowledge that everyone has a responsibility to improve the school climate, we collaborated to develop a long-term solution. Rather than hallway sweeps and marching band music, we shifted teacher planning time throughout the day to allow for teachers to have a hall duty built into their schedule. Starting in the fall of 2023, every corner of the hallway had a teacher on duty, asking for passes and serving as a constant adult presence. We have found that while on hall duty, you don't need to employ scare tactics, you just need each teacher to enforce the standards and communicate with administration in a clear and consistent manner.

When asked about the Pottstown High School journey over the past year, Jeff Delaney, a Pottstown Federation of Teachers building representative shared, "This was a dramatic change from what has been done in the past and the federation reps knew there would be some resistance from the staff. Working with Christian to deliver the proper message to the staff was critical as they needed to see that we believed in his plan and trusted his leadership. This was not a difficult task because, from the moment he arrived, he brought a positive and trusting climate and it was presented with a unified voice. The hallway issues have dramatically reduced this year, and the teachers have adjusted well to the changes."

Lessons Learned and Current Data

While at the high-school level we don't call our PRIDE program "PBIS," it is a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) program. The

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principalship. Setting boundaries for the hours when work demands will be met increases effectiveness. However, maintaining boundaries between personal and professional lives has become more difficult to maintain. By maintaining limits related to work demands, burnout impact can be countered. With experience and time, principals can remedy the impact of task overload with prioritization, delegation and shifting expectations to others who can complete supportive tasks. Leaders are also advised to acknowledge essential tasks to prioritize what must be accomplished. Considering when to stop checking emails, setting alarms to leave school on time or protecting uninterrupted time can all have a positive influence.

While changes in legislation, school structures and roles have the potential to support principal joy and well-being, the needed adjustments will not occur overnight or without advocacy. Principals can begin to make personalized changes today that are within individual circles of control to improve joy and

satisfaction impactfully and quickly. When principals can maintain joy and satisfaction, not only will the work become more enjoyable, but the role of the principal will also become more attractive to those considering stepping into critical positions. Principals can foster joy and fulfillment in their job while advocating for systemic change through implementing positive joy-supporting strategies into practice. Principals have the power to create a more joyful future individually and collectively. Not only does our society need joyful principals, but principals need to feel joy as well. For additional information, you may contact the author at abalsbaugh@warwick.edu. ■

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outcomes we received as a result of implementing our PRIDE program are similar to those typically seen by schools implementing PBIS (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). I've concluded from my brief high school experience that these kids would not accept a PBIS program created by adults. The PRIDE ticket program was only successful because it was **created by students, for students**. With its success, the SAC expanded its PRIDE ticket program to include expectations in all school settings. Additionally, the hallway sweeps and eventual move to hall duties could not have been successful without an amazing group of building representatives and department chairs who were willing to trust a new leadership team. Finally, without the expertise, trust and persistence of my leadership team and a student dean who grew up in Pottstown, knows every student and their family, has the building's pulse and is always in our hallways and at community events, our hallways would not have been cleared.

Although this article could not provide all of the details of our journey, I am happy to report that we had nearly 5,000 skips in the fall of 2022; 2,028 skips in the spring of 2023; and only 487 class skips in the fall semester of 2023. By trusting student voice, staff trusting leadership and a shared belief that Pottstown can be excellent, we saw a 90% decrease in class skips in just one year. For additional information, contact the author at cdannibale@pottstownk12.org. ■

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