PLUS Fellows Policy Brief

Understanding How Principals Can Disrupt Vicarious Trauma in OUSD

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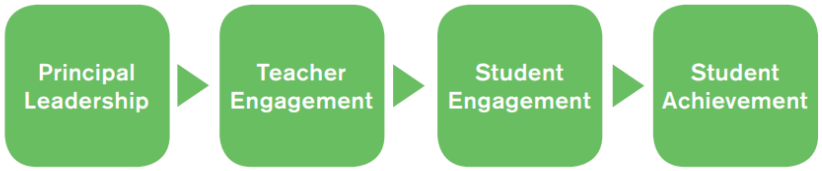
ISSUE

Oakland Unified School District faces increasing teacher attrition and levels of stress among teachers. Principal leadership is necessary to support teachers and ultimately student achievement. In order for principals to support teachers and make last, real change, policy changes at OUSD can be tied into the larger mission and vision of schools. Principals believe that staff suitability is a necessary part of serving students. When implemented correctly can lead to a 10 percentage point increase in student test scores and a narrowing of the black-white achievement gap.[i]



Principals can move from wellness as a physical state of wellbeing to a deep cultural shift and belief in collective efficacy. Changes start at the surface level, but become embedded in every day interactions and be continuously monitored and implemented.

METHODS

This report utilizes a mix of focus groups, literature review, and interviews to better understand the landscape of Oakland Unified School District. The project seeks to explain current initiatives and cases studies by interviewing principals, stakeholders, and community members. The goal of the literature review was to understand national best practices and opportunities for improvement. The report asks:

- How can principals and school leaders shift culture and support wellness at their schools?
- What best practices currently exist in OUSD?

FINDINGS

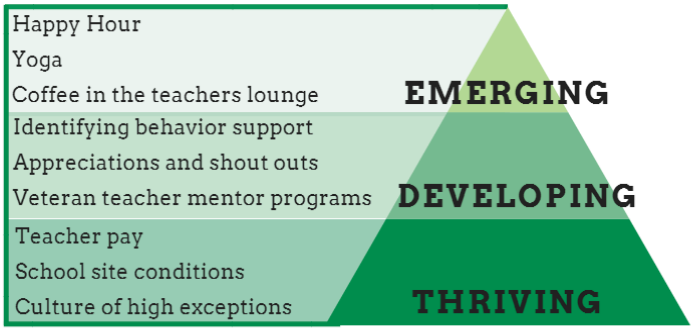
There are currently multiple groups working on supporting wellness within Oakland Unified Below is a list of current initiatives in OUSD:

- Wellness Champions: OUSD has Wellness Champions at schools throughout the district. Wellness Champions are staff members who work to promote physical, emotional, and social wellness for staff at their schools. The champions coordinate activities with school site staff. There are currently 33 Staff Wellness Champions (27 elementary school and 11 secondary school). Elementary Wellness Champions receive $850 a year and secondary schools receive $1100 in grants.
- Teaching Well: The Teaching Well is an Oakland based non-profit that focuses on supporting teacher wellness. The Teaching Well provides trauma sensitive trainings and professional development at schools. In addition, they provide one-on-one coaching and principal coaching to address culture change. The Teaching Well is currently at

Greenleaf Elementary School. After working with Teaching Well in 2016-2017, Greenleaf saw a 50% decrease in teacher attrition.

- Newcomer Grants: Funded through the Haas Foundation, the Newcomer Office gave $3000-$5000 targeting wellness for Newcomer teachers in OUSD. Seven schools received funding for staff designed wellness projects.

Groups are working to promote wellness, but many of the initiatives are focused on physical wellness rather than shifting culture, which is more effective. Principals should simultaneously maintain the day to day interactions of establishing trust by actively listening to teachers and consistently reacting well under pressure with long term goals. Principals should see a larger vision for their school and community to thrive. Similarly, teachers who are failing may not only need instructional support, but counseling in the school's mission and vision. Below is a chart explaining how principals can balance moving from physical to emotional wellness.



If principals do not establish healthy relationships with colleagues, teachers will burnout and leave OUSD. Schools with high levels of attrition have high costs and must recruit and train new teachers. Furthermore, there is a loss of social capital and an erosion of a cohesive school vision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations for principals to implement to further support wellness at their schools:

Recommendations for principal support systems include:

1. Case study examples of programs within the district that are principal focused
2. Professional development that is targeted and efficient. Principals should encourage collective efficiency and collegiality between teachers through observations of other teachers and team planning.
3. Principal understanding of wellness as a part of the principal selection process and training.
4. Streamlining data collection and surveying of teachers and principals.
5. Principal rubric for self-evaluation of wellness

[i] Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement. Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.