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*Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.*

Improving Student Achievement in an Elementary School by Creating a Culture of Appreciation, Brenda Moen

This story is about a principal's approach to improvement in a small elementary school located in a small rural community. The story provides an especially good illustration of the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#) in action focused on building trusting collaborative relationships with and among staff with the goal of accomplishing a clearly identified set of shared goals for student achievement.

The first school I was assigned to as principal was a small-town elementary school with 250 students called Riverside Public School, in Elmira, located in the Waterloo Region District School Board. It was very much a community school. When I arrived, the staff members were friendly with each other and there was a pleasant feel in the hallways. Students were well-behaved and staff was caring. I was pleased to begin my career as a principal in such a warm and welcoming school.

As I settled into my role, my biggest concern was that the school's EQAO scores did not seem to demonstrate the potential that the staff saw in the students. As well, while one or two teachers were working on current best practice in their classrooms, others were not there yet. Many of the teachers were starting families, so the staff included many new teachers not yet under contract, teachers coming back off a year or two of maternity leaves, and a few seasoned veterans on staff. I began to think about and gather ideas about how I could improve teaching and learning in the school.

At the time, I was a principal team member with the *Leading Student Achievement* project and during the fall symposium Dr. Kenneth Leithwood outlined LSA's *Theory of Action*¹. The new idea of [Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways \(TLCPs\)](#), a form of Collaborative Inquiry, and their potential for school improvement was also described. Looking at these ideas together, I thought they provided excellent approaches to improving teacher practice and student learning in my school. I

¹ Leithwood, K., Patten, S., Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how leadership influences student learning, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 5, 671-706

could see that there was the potential in staff and students to become a school of excellence.

One of the grade1 teachers was a particularly diligent and reflective teacher. She loved to learn and put new ideas into action in her classroom. She was a natural mentor to other teachers. She knew the school and staff well. She became a key partner with me in a plan for school improvement. I had the opportunity to bring her with me to the LSA Symposium and on the car ride back home that day, we drafted the basic tenets of what turned out to be a highly successful three-year plan for school improvement. I knew that I had to make changes on several fronts.

I needed to work on many of the practices referred to in the *Ontario Leadership Framework* as Building Relationships and Developing People, improving the instructional program and developing the organization. LSA's *Theory of Action*, particularly its description of the Emotions and Rational Paths, helped me to develop the plan we needed, with the help of teacher leaders.

I knew that asking teachers to begin to work in planning teams and learn new teaching strategies would require them to read or attend workshops to understand new ideas, and to work both alone and together on putting them into place in their classrooms. This would require considerable time and effort. As a result, teachers would have to work together outside of the school day. This request on my part might have a cost to their personal, family or social lives. Given the hard work that the teachers were going to be doing, I felt strongly that it was important for me to show appreciation for the work they were undertaking. I made creating a culture of appreciation a priority.

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

I wanted to celebrate teacher work that made a difference for students. So, I praised teachers' efforts to School Council and other members of the community. I praised their work to our Superintendent. I praised their work to other principals and teachers. I had regular appreciation assemblies and honoured teachers in front of the school community. I modeled for students how to show their appreciation for school staff, as well.

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff

Aside from thanking them for their work, it was important to find ways to support teachers in doing that work. I timetabled in common planning times. I brought students together in the gym for guest speakers or school assemblies to free up teams of teachers to work together on their goals during the school day. I gave up precious staff meeting time for

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

teachers to work in teams on their goals. I found ways to bring in experts to help support teachers in improving their practices.

I worked with teachers on setting achievable school goals and ways to reach them. I wanted to make great teaching easier to do.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared short-term goals

I also listened to teachers' needs and found ways, often very creatively, to get the resources they needed. These resources were the focus of the school budget. It meant driving a hard bargain or offering to be a pilot project with a publisher to be able to buy a set of books. If, for example, guided reading tables and six-pack sets of leveled texts would help a teacher improve his small group instruction reading practices, I found a way to get them.

What I discovered was that this appreciation and support encouraged teachers to maintain or increase their efforts to improve. This success, built teachers' sense of efficacy, or confidence, as well as their instructional effectiveness and both spread from team to team. The appreciation and support also encouraged some teachers to take on leadership roles with peers, leading to more support for teachers and more improvement in their practices.

3.6 Allocating resources in support of the school's vision

Psychological PLRs – resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity

The culture of appreciation created a positive feedback loop. People worked harder and felt better about what they did when they felt appreciated and supported. Teachers could, and would, take on lofty goals because they knew that they would be supported. Over the years, Riverside became renowned for its improved teaching. Teachers working together and working harder meant better things for students. I am proud of the goals that the staff and students achieved. The school became a better place to be for everyone.

2.1 Providing support and demonstrating consideration for

The teacher who helped me develop the initial plan, is equally proud of the changes that happened and continue to happen at Riverside school. From her perspective:

I have been part of Riverside's growing success story for a number of years. The principal was instrumental in developing a community of teachers who demonstrated a willingness to change their current teaching practices to improve student learning. Her expectation of continuous improvement, high expectations for students and her philosophy that all students will/can learn was acknowledged and appreciated by teachers. Teachers were eager to make necessary changes to grow as educators, to be involved in worthwhile, relevant, meaningful collaborative opportunities. A large part of our success at Riverside was a result of the principal's awareness that this

collaborative time needed to be within the school day. She was creative, and hands-on in providing numerous opportunities for teachers to collaborate with same grade/division teachers to plan and moderate student learning. Our success continues today as a result of our principal's belief in teachers opening their doors and working collaboratively to improve student learning for all.

As I moved to a new school this year, I intended to create the same conditions for success. So, I began to build a culture of appreciation, expectations for improved teaching, supports and resources for teachers to work together and time for collaboration in the workday. What I found was, when we put teachers in the same room, they end up talking about teaching, supporting students and learning from each other, regardless the school.