

# LEADERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY = STAFF AND STUDENT SUCCESS: 10 TIPS FOR JOB SATISFACTION & RETENTION

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Whether new to the job or a long-serving administrator - these tips will allow you to build supportive relationships that lead to your students, staff and district's success.



As the state of education remains in flux with ever-increasing candidate shortages and limited search pools of applicants, we have watched educators leave school districts through retirement and work as consultants, college professors and volunteers. While one of us has spent over thirteen years as superintendent in the district and the other just a few years, we both are enjoying our educational journeys, and we want others to know that working in education, while challenging, is still rewarding and, yes, actually fun.

Most importantly, our students, staff, families and communities need positive, passionate, persistent and prepared educational leaders now more than ever as communities are wrestling with economic, mental health and racial challenges.

### 1. Collaborate with all stakeholders

An age-old adage says, "It takes a village." When one considers the complexities of leading schools and school districts, it becomes evident that moving toward goals requires community involvement and support. It is equally important that everyone is rowing the boat in the same direction when the village shows up. If 50 percent of stakeholders row in one direction and 50 percent row in the opposite direction, quite logically, you will not advance the academic enterprise. It is a critical skill for leaders to tap into the support systems that exist within the walls of their community or regional area.

Schools must collaborate with community agencies and invested stakeholders, whether welcoming school-based health clinics into their schools for mental health, dental and medical services or extending hours through local community agencies' after-school and weekend programs. Schools also must provide opportunities for staff professional learning and development and family engagement and support. Your senior citizen population may also open up unique partnerships through student book reading programs, intergenerational spelling bees and technology training days for seniors.

Distributing personal protective equipment was a collaborative community event, with coordination efforts between school districts, mayors' offices and local health departments. Through these collaborative efforts, districts could get these COVID-19 mitigation resources into the hands of their stakeholders, further improving their ability to provide their students with safer learning environments. Education must leverage these new relationships to support their students and families.

Building buy-in with all stakeholders, especially your staff, will provide the support network

leaders need to navigate the leadership challenges that all educational leaders will face during their tenure.

### 2. Value your team

A critical and essential skill set for educational leaders, which is sometimes hard to achieve, is putting together a robust and competent team or developing the capacities of an inherited team. This skill is necessary at every level of the academic organization. However, once the team is assembled, it is essential that the leader's emotional intelligence and social intelligence, or the ability to understand and manage interpersonal relationships, function at a high level. Ruth Wageman et al., in their book: *Senior Leadership Teams: What It Takes to Make Them Great*, as well as Daniel Coyle in *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, provide some compelling suggestions that can be applied at all levels of the academic organization. A central focus or takeaway from their recommendations is a commitment to psychological safety and coaching for continued development.

The cost of staff turnover is an economic, time and culture drain.

Consistency of staff allows district initiatives to take hold and student progress to be supported.

Professional learning for certified and classified staff must

be supported with staff choice and personalization opportunities. It is vital to support the dreams and wishes of your team and find every opportunity to celebrate, laugh and have fun while you are doing it—especially during turbulent times.

### 3. Innovate

One of the most apparent lessons learned from the pandemic is that we are uniquely positioned (and sometimes required) to think outside the box without a playbook. We are naturally driven, pedagogically, to infuse our students' cognitive habits into their academic identities to become innovative problem solvers. The pandemic positioned us to do the same. We were tasked to reimagine how we go about "doing school." Of course, there will always be accountability guardrails that may impact the scope of your innovative practices. However, it would be highly inadvisable and a missed opportunity not to try new things simply out of necessity. For 100 years, public education has had its challenges. Over the last two years, it has become cliché to say, "We cannot go back to what we used to do." Poignantly, truer words have not been spoken; we know what used to be done did not serve all children. Innovative and abstract thinking that strips the current design of education and re-engineers it in ways that can produce better outcomes for children must be the charge of education leaders everywhere.

So encourage all stakeholders, especially your staff and students, to think outside the box, try new things and dream big. A climate that fosters innovation will keep students and staff excited and engaged. Game-based learning and virtual reality are providing new opportunities for all students. Allow game-based learning to personalize learning, provide immediate student feedback and set individualized goal targets. Embrace virtual reality and put the world in the hands of your students.

Uniquely enough, the constituent group that could give you the best and most creative ideas to celebrate academics is the classroom's individuals—students and teachers. Be sure to tap into that opportunity.

#### 4. Celebrate student & staff success

Sometimes, no news is good news, but we know bad news spreads quickly. Because of the frequency of events, it is easy to celebrate athletics and other extracurricular activities during the school year. However, based on your academic calendar, you have fewer opportunities to celebrate academic success other than at the end of each quarter, trimester, semester, or end of the academic year. School and district leaders must deliberate in their design to celebrate academic achievement and outcomes to strengthen or enhance their school community's academic culture. Acknowledge student and staff success at Board of Education meetings and through the use of district emails. Use social media to celebrate students and staff and deliver relevant information. Honor students and staff with STAR Performance Rewards for their

progress on standardized testing measures. Look for regular reward opportunities: Model Citizens, You Care-We Care, Community Support and Exemplary Achievement; all are viable options. Partner with your city and maximize the use of city resources such as park signage, downtown banners and city digital billboards to recognize your students and staff.

#### 5. Be transparent in all interactions

Knowing who you are and owning that is a crucial attribute of quality leadership. Of course, integrity, ethics and morality should remain your navigation instruments. However, the social-emotional IQ of constituents often find comfort in knowing that their leaders are "human." It is essential always to be honest and open, even when challenges arise or things go wrong. Show them your human side, letting your constituents know we are all fallible from time to time. Empathy is a uniquely galvanizing phenomenon.

Building a climate of trust and transparency with your staff, students, families and the Board of Education is required. Data should be analyzed regularly by subgroups and shared openly with all stakeholders. One of the best ways to be transparent is to insist that district data is shared openly at meetings and on your website.

#### 6. Support Shared Governance

In leadership, it is widely understood and accepted that effective



communication (in shared governance) is a two-way dynamic. If you are fortunate to have supportive Board of Education members and community stakeholders, you must continue to nurture those relationships. Create productive working relationships that foster shared governance. This work is even more critical during turbulent times or when, nationally, a significant amount of educationally charged issues directly impact the district's goals. Communicate often, communicate transparently, emphasize decorum, acknowledge any frustration and remain focused on the bottom line: children.

#### 7. Focus on academic success

While the pandemic required us to focus on the social-emotional needs of our students—and rightfully so—we are still in the business of educating students as academic scholars. Social-emotional learning became a delicate balance for educators who are not all traditionally trained to be responsive, with technical skills, to the social-emotional needs of students. While it continues to ebb and flow, some promising signs indicate that we are on our way out of the pandemic and potentially entering the endemic stage of the global COVID-19 virus experience. Our work must concurrently be centered on data-driven objectives to ensure that our students do not lose three years of academic growth opportunities. We know from pedagogical theory that students learn at different rates. We must continue to keep the bar high and challenge them as scholars. We can use normed assessments to continue setting aspirational targets for our students, staff and ourselves.

#### 8. Provide enrichment opportunities for all learners

If there is such a time to tap into students' interest, the heels of the pandemic are the best time. Learning loss has been the national

narrative in education for the last three years. With that comes questions about what best engages students intellectually. Offering an eclectic selection of programming rooted in learning standards can serve as supporting strategies that facilitate intellectual transactions for students at a time when the summer slide rears its face. It is recommended that you examine local partnerships as there is often a rich amount of community-based opportunities that can support your enrichment programs.

Districts are increasing summer readiness options and launching enrichment programs that tap into the interest and talents of their students. Students and families have embraced programs in technology, music and athletics. Dedicated teachers and staff members have led the charge as they work side by side with community partners to meet the needs of students.

#### 9. Pursue your passions

As we encourage students to pursue their dreams and search for a career that excites them, we must also provide our dedicated teachers with opportunities to pursue their passions.

It is much harder to pour into people's cups if your cup is empty. As educational leaders, we must continue to pursue what has led us to these leadership opportunities. For us, specifically, that is centered on continued learning. What can we say? We geek out on relevant ongoing personal development! Spending time with colleagues, mentors and the people we work with, discussing the essence of our work and matching plans to meet specific ends drives our passion for what is debatably one of the most challenging professions in the world – being an educator. We are inspired whenever we engage with like-minded professionals, which serves as the gas that fuels our motivation.





## 10. Develop leaders

Nothing is better than knowing you changed someone's life and left a lasting impact. Beyond the altruistic rewards of positioning people to find success, nothing is more rewarding than helping people fulfill their dreams.

There is an understanding that getting to the professional level in sports is extremely hard. There is a concurrent understanding that it is even harder to stay there once you get there. The same thinking can be applied to school and district success. A way to hedge and create sustainable positive outcomes is through the core component of any enterprise – your people! Many assets come along with this strategy; chief among them is safeguarding proprietary institutional knowledge that drives the processes and morphs cultural dynamics into effective solution-driven collaborations that result in organizational success. Choose wisely and pour into those individuals who demonstrate readiness and capacity.

Too often in education, we are too busy, too committed to the next assignment, too focused on the upcoming task, too driven to cover all the material by the end of the year and too concerned about graduation day to focus on developing your team's leadership capacity.

Let's get to work! Good Luck!!



*Dr. Mark Benigni has been an educator for over twenty-five years and is starting his fourteenth year as Superintendent of the Meriden Public Schools. Dr. Benigni served as a teacher, principal, and Mayor of the City of Meriden. The Meriden Public Schools has received awards from CoSN, the Learning Counsel, NSBA, District Administration and Edutopia. He is committed to providing exceptional learning opportunities for all students in the Meriden Public Schools.*



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## President's Corner From the Desk of Dr. Dale Fisher, AASPA President



Hello Friends,

As we approach the beginning of the new school year, I wanted to take a moment to extend my warmest wishes to each and every one of you. Your dedication and passion in shaping the lives of students and adults in our educational institutions are truly commendable. It should never go unnoticed that it is the unwavering commitment of K-12 HR leaders who work tirelessly to place talented educators into classrooms that support all the constituents we serve.

Furthermore, I am thrilled and excited about the upcoming Annual Conference in October, where we will be coming together in Anaheim, California. This event promises to be an incredible opportunity for professional development, networking and gaining valuable insight and perspective into our profession. As always, the conference will serve as a platform for us to exchange ideas, share experiences and collectively grow as an organization. I encourage each of you to broaden your knowledge base and choose the sessions that will force you outside of your comfort zone. While in Anaheim, I strongly encourage you to thank an AASPA staff member for their efforts! This amazing group, led by AASPA's Executive Director, Kelly Coash-Johnson, can't be honored enough for the opportunities they have coordinated for us in Anaheim. The PD will be amazing and the networking events will be MEMORABLE!

Once again, I wish you all a fantastic start to the upcoming school year, filled with enthusiasm and determination to make a difference. And just as important, I look forward to connecting with you in a few short months for an unforgettable Annual Conference in Anaheim, California. Let's embrace the incredible opportunities that soon await us.

Thank you for your dedication and I am honored to lead and support such an exceptional group of professionals.

Warm regards,

Dr. Dale Fisher  
AASPA President

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