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## **An Analysis of the Role of Collaboration and Change in School Development**

Daniel Farley, Jerry Johnson, and Shane C. Shope

The purpose of this retrospective case study was to capture the experiences and glean insights from a school administrator tasked with merging two existing programs to develop a new school and program to meet the needs of a specialized student population. Two alternative day schools, whose role was to serve the needs of special education students who exhibit behavioral needs, were combined based on the financial needs of their respective administrative agencies (a local school district and a special education interlocal cooperative). Both schools had been operational for many years, but low enrollments led to an agreement between the two agencies that the interlocal cooperative would assume control and occupy the building vacated by the school district's former program. The resulting merged school, Day Academy, served a student population ranging from 20 to 25 students and a staff of 10-15. Drawing on reflections of the administrator who led the merger process and served as the first leader of the new school, we apply findings from the existing literature.

### **Literature Review**

The research assembled for the literature review provides recommendations for a new program or building being constructed. The materials guide the administrator down a path beginning with little framework and support and lead them to interventions that will construct the structure needed to develop a solid culture, system of communication, and ensure the proper resources are available to students and staff of alternative settings

(Atkins et al., 2008; Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Brunetti, 2020; de Valasco et al., 2017; Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Francisco, 2019; Foley & Pang, 2006; Gagnon & Leone, 2005; Gagnon & McGlaughlin, 2004; King et al., 1998; Lagana–Riordan et al., 2011; Lange, 1998; McGee, 2001; Murray & Holt, 2014; Owens, 2010; Pharo et al., 2012; Price et al., 2010; Rayle, 1998; Reimer et al., 2003; Stanford University, 2020; Tierney, 2020; Walter & Petr, 2004; Wilkerson et al., 2016). The arrangement of the subjects in the literature review can be followed in a variety of orders based on use, but the way they are listed is an example of how the development of the subject school in the article was constructed.

### **Developing New Programs**

Studies investigating the process of development of new programs collectively suggest that effective practices, accountability, appropriate facilities and resources, and a positive culture are all essential (de Valasco et al., 2017; Pharo et al., 2012; Price et al., 2010; Owens, 2010; Reimer et al., 2003; Stanford, 2020). Building effective alternative programs requires a network of accountability measures to ensure that alternative school staff continue having professional development provided to them to ensure growth professionally (de Valasco et al., 2017). Areas of professional development need to be centered around organization of the school day, performance-based accountability, student achievement, and the creation and maintaining of a supportive environment (de Valasco et al., 2017). To be able to achieve this level of development, communication between stakeholders and financial support needs to be in place (Pharo et al., 2012). In the book *Alternative Schools: Best Practices for Development and Evaluation: Effective*

*Strategies for School Improvement* by Reimer et al., maintaining a teacher to student ratio of 1 to 10, a small student population, a clearly stated mission and discipline code, caring faculty with continual staff development, high expectations for student achievement, individualized learning program, flexible school schedule, commitment to student success, varied instructional strategies and a strong community around the school were suggested as best practices in the development of a new program. As the program becomes established and maintenance of the program is required a planning team should be established to ensure that the responsibility of a new program does not fall on an individual only (Reimer et al., 2003). Leaders of alternative sites should strive to empower staff using data to support school change, advocate for their students, and establish a supportive culture (Stanford, 2020).

In the study “WANTED/NEEDED: Leadership Preparation for leaders of correctional education and alternative school” alternative administrators were compared to traditional school administrators (Price et al., 2010). The alternative administrators ranked higher than their peers in the areas of encouraging inquiry, being decisive, moving forward, and networking (Price et al., 2010). Decisions may need to be made quickly in the alternative setting due to the fluidity of the student and the diversity that the alternative building administrator experiences. Individualized learning also requires the administrators in these settings to be flexible to collect information on new students and develop the systems to make them successful. These settings also require the alternative building administrator to be able to collaborate with multiple stakeholders for each

student. The requirements of an administrator in an alternative setting require ongoing training and development (Owens, 2010). As the program is being developed initially, administrators should be mindful of the structural integrity of the program, which includes the roles of staff, goals, and collaboration (Owens, 2010).

### **Culture**

The culture of the building is a factor in the staff and student performance of alternative schools (Lagana–Riordan et al., 2011; Murray & Holt, 2014; Tierney, 2020). Murray and Holt (2014) identified specific themes that, when present, promote student success. A caring and committed staff, instilling hope in students, and staff members focusing on student progress led to successful results from the studied alternative programs (Murray & Holt, 2014). Tierney (2020) found in a separate study that the more focused the resources are on the individual student's life and needs, the higher chance of success the student has. Programs that blended the individual focus with goal setting and transparency have a higher likelihood of success (Tierney, 2020). The ability of an alternative program to maintain transparency and effective communication to utilize collaboration between the student's stakeholders develops a system with a higher probability of successful student experiences (Facey, 2020). Utilizing a survey to capture the perspectives of students placed in an alternative program, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that the students believed that the alternative setting policies were better suited for them to achieve success than their traditional placement (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

In alternative settings, staff relationships and professional development needs are factors related to the success of the individual student and the maintenance of the school culture (Francisco, 2019; McGee, 2001; Walter & Petr, 2004). Importantly, these relationships comprise not only collegiality among staff within the school, but also relationships between the alternative school staff and both students' families and neighborhood schools. In a reflection written by former alternative school principal McGee (2001), an open-door policy is an effective tool to combat the negative stigma surrounding these settings. In this situation, McGee allowed a group of students belonging to a school newspaper at the regular education high school to come into the building and shadow two students for the day. The result of the shadow experience was an article published that shared a completely different experience than they expected. The students and environment were calm, productive, and enjoyable to be around. This decision to allow students to experience the setting made it possible to change perceptions, so by allowing individuals from the community and schools the opportunity to come in and see the environment firsthand, the public image will improve (McGee, 2001). In most cases students are sent to these locations due to previous behaviors in their "home" school that were unable to be dealt with or have happened with a frequency that required a change in student placement. This can lead to the stigma of a "dumping ground" for these schools and could negatively affect the staff and students in these environments.

Developing relationships between stakeholders in both the students' lives and their schools was determined to be a key factor in how successful the students' transitions and experiences are in the alternative setting (Walter & Petr, 2004). Improving the developing relationships between stakeholders in both the students' lives and their schools will decide how successful the students' transitions and experiences at the alternative setting will be (Walter & Petr, 2004). The expertise of the alternative school staff also will have an impact on both school culture and the transitions of students. Francisco found in a study examining the culture of alternative schools showed that when teachers are given contingent rewards based on their effectiveness, their self-efficacy will improve. It is also important that the administration and teaching staff at alternative sites continue developing their professional practices to further the likelihood of innovation programming through graduate programs and courses (Francisco, 2019).

### **Effectiveness**

Research examining the effectiveness of alternative education programs found that students experienced success in the alternative setting, but that success and effectiveness depended upon having the right structures and conditions in place (Atkins et al., 2008; Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; King et al., 1998; Rayle; Wilkerson et al., 2016). Results from a survey of student perceptions (Atkins et al., 2008) showed that the participants felt they had made their biggest gains in academic and social outcomes. There were gains for the students in the behavioral realm, but as compared with the other two categories, the perceptions of improvement were not as strong (e.g.,

59% reported skipping school less and 57% reported a drop in trouble at school, while 77% reported having more friends and 75% felt they had become better students). In contrast, Wilkerson and colleagues reported the opposite effect on student progress in the alternative setting, with students being negatively affected by placement in a behavior-based school (e.g., lower attendance, continued suspensions). Importantly, the results do not suggest that an alternative education setting is harmful in and of itself; rather, results indicate that these alternative sites must be developed in specific ways so that they do not hold back students academically or socially (Wilkerson et al., 2016).

Other work specifically addresses the kinds of structures and conditions that need to be in place for alternative education settings to be effective. Duke and Griesdorn (1999) recommend that the use of one alternative school is not as efficient as being able to utilize multiple alternative learning environments, a recommendation based on analyses of data from multiple school districts showing that alternative schools can be effective in helping students who have not experienced success in the school setting, but that flexibility is necessary. Their results also showed that students who are placed in alternative schools prefer to stay in that setting because of the success they experience, supporting the recommendation that students should not be rushed back to their original school setting (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Other studies (King et al., 1998; Rayle, 1998) reported a greater likelihood of student success when the number of students in the program is limited. Rayle (1998) found that even though the program can meet the needs



of the students, there are areas of need that are neglected because there is only one program with limited resources.

In a qualitative study of a school within a juvenile detention facility (King et al., 1998), the findings support that smaller enrollment in these alternative settings allow the staff to implement personalized learning for the students. The adoption of a personalized system can aid in preventing the alternative setting from developing the stigma of a “dumping ground” for behaviors (King et al., 1998). Atkins and Bartuska (2010) reported that by personalizing the learning environment and not rushing students back into a traditional school setting, there was a higher likelihood that they joined in extracurricular activities and advanced to the next grade level. Recommendations included having targeted interventions in place for the younger groups of students along with developing policies to keep the students in school as opposed to suspending or expelling them for infractions (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010).

### **Autonomy and Curriculum**

Studies focusing more on the staff in alternative settings identified teacher autonomy as a relevant consideration in the development and supervision of an alternative school, particularly as it relates to curriculum decisions (Lange, 1998; Gagnon & McGlaughlin, 2004). Lange (1998) reported that most (86%) of the alternative schoolteachers participating in the study stated that curriculum decisions were made by the individual teacher with some input from the building leadership, which also led to many of the teacher respondents (89%) answering that they felt they had more freedom

working at an alternative school than the traditional model of a regular education setting (Lange, 1998). A potentially negative impact of having the freedom to select a curriculum specific for the alternative setting is that the curriculum discovered in a study by Gagnon and McGlaughlin (2004) was that the curriculum implemented in the alternative setting did not always align with the district curriculum. This misalignment caused a gap between what the alternative students were learning and what their classmates were being taught in their regular education setting. The gap would make a student transition between the two settings difficult. Taken jointly, the two studies (Lange, 1998; Gagnon & McGlaughlin, 2004) show the need for both settings to maintain communication to ensure alternative program autonomy.

### **Resources and Facilities**

Researchers have identified a relationship between the overall effectiveness of alternative programs and the resources and facilities that they have available to them (Brunetti, 2020; Foley & Pang, 2006; Gagnon & Leone, 2005), collectively demonstrating that program effectiveness relied upon having abundant resources and appropriate facilities. Foley and Pang (2006) conducted an expansive qualitative study of eighty-four administrators from site-based programs. These program administrators filled out a questionnaire that included six domains of interest: program administration, funding sources, school management approach, administrative structure, quality of facilities, and accessibility to resources. The selected programs were in separate facilities from the school district which limited access to educational resources and extra-curricular

opportunities for students (Foley & Pang, 2006). Alternative schools located closer to their district facilities are viewed favorably and frequently communicate with their neighboring schools (Brunetti, 2020). Efficiency of communication increases with proximity along with higher levels of support that can be offered to alternatively placed students (Gagnon & Leone, 2005). As communication and resources increase, the higher the likelihood the individual student will be successful during their time in the alternative setting and when they begin their transition back to their school. Additional findings from Gagnon and Leone's (2005) study include the need for state agencies to continue to monitor the adequacy of funding, resources, and the day-to-day structure such as the length of the school calendar and instructional time. The transfer of students should only be the modification of their placement, not the reductions of the resources they are allowed to access.

### **Methods**

The research design for the study was a retrospective case study (Stake, 1995). Original data were collected through a guided reflection process with the building principal, and those data were supplemented by existing documents and artifacts related to systems, structures, and processes put into place during the principal's tenure that are still in use in the current program. The data was analyzed via thematic coding (Saldana, 2014), with priori codes developed from the extant literature. Triangulation across data sources, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) were

utilized to refine themes and to enhance trustworthiness and credibility of findings (specifics are noted in the presentation of results).

### **Results**

Attentive to the relevant literature, the experiences of the school leader were examined via a process of guided reflection. Results of that process suggest that an individualized student focus and managing the size of the program can lead to a successful alternative program. These results also lend support to the location and quality of academic resources of the alternative program influencing effectiveness, culture, and staff development.

### **Development of a New Program**

The beginning stages of the development of Day Academy required collaboration between the two districts that were merging their respective programs. To situate the program in a position for long-term success and to be able to meet the short-term needs, the structural integrity of the program had to be developed. The structural integrity entailed the roles that each organization would play in the process, establishing a system of collaboration between the entities, and identifying shared goals for the program. These identified practices and strategies align with findings presented by Owens (2010). Moreover, the inclusion of stakeholders to share in the work and construction of the program also was found to make the process more efficient. Administrators from both districts came together to share their goals and perceptions on what success looked like and how it was achieved. The administration involved decided that day-to-day operations

would be run by the Country District and City District would provide the location and aid in the funding and resourcing of the building. This gave the Day Academy a direction to start heading to ensure there was no confusion about what role each entity would play in the process. Country District handled the staffing and program decisions such as curriculum and managing of the Individual Education Plans.

With the shell of the program established, the focus of Day Academy turned to the development of a culture. Communication between stakeholders began and revolved around what existing structures would be brought from the previous day school that Country District operated. Aligning with literature, the target culture for Day Academy was creating a system that is supportive of learning, empowering for teachers, data-driven, and advocating for the students served in the academy setting (Stanford, 2020). Day Academy developed into a setting that was student-focused. The goal was for students to experience success. As the students experienced success, the staff felt the same positive energy and these experiences spread across the building creating a positive vibe amongst staff and students. Part of creating a successful environment for students was empowering teachers with ownership of the decisions and innovation in their classrooms. Professional development centered around strategies for developing a supportive climate and data collection were conducted to give Day Academy staff the tools to be able to generate and interpret data needed to sustain the positive culture and make data driven decisions as reported by de Valasco et al. (2017) and colleagues. Staff met to include all perspectives and to move forward as a group with a shared focus

instead of a group with multiple perspectives. The day-to-day processes such as behavior tracking created data that allowed the staff to make informed decisions based on relevant data for their setting. With this data and relationships within the school setting, the Day Academy staff were able to move outside of the school and advocate for their students as they began their transitions to their home districts.

### **Culture**

Embedded in a positive and supportive culture was the individualized focus on students. Day Academy was designed to be a community for staff and students to have equal access to innovative learning opportunities and resources. The results of Day Academy utilizing a student-focused approach matched Tierney's (2020) findings from the study. Individualized consideration was also incorporated into the environment through frequent celebrations for birthdays, individual, and school accomplishments for both staff and students. Students and staff were not met with negativity when requesting materials, but instead met in collaboration to figure out whether it was something Day Academy had at its disposal and if not was it something they could obtain or if there were other alternatives. Trust and transparency were at the root of the relationships developed at Day Academy. Navigating an unfamiliar environment could be stressful for both students at Day Academy and those surveyed in the existing research, so it was important for them to find allies within the staff to navigate their daily challenges (Facey et al., 2001). Of the challenges they faced, a misunderstanding of what and who the Day Academy served existed within the greater community and in the neighborhood schools

that the students would eventually transition back to. To offset this perception of the program, there was an open-door policy at Day Academy. The goal of this policy was to allow school staff from the associated regular education schools to come in and experience the environment. The open-door policy would prove to be an effective method of changing community members' perceptions of the building like the case study conducted by McGee (2001) in a similar alternative setting. Allowing visitors was not the only method used to get people in. Day Academy routinely held events such as Back to School night and the annual Thanksgiving Dinner in which staff and students could bring up to three guests totaling close to 80 people for the meal. Students earned the privilege of going out into the community on field trips in the community purposefully planned to allow for interaction with professions and adults the students could look up to. These communications not only allowed to change the narrative of how everyone viewed the school, but also allowed for interaction with the sending schools that the students would transition to. When a student is sent to an alternative location, there is the possibility that the sending school may forget about the student. As reflected in Walter and Petr's (2004) research, creating frequent opportunities for contact allowed the sending school to remain connected with their student and reclaimed a sense of ownership.

### **Effectiveness**

Effectiveness for Day Academy, like most facets of the school, was measured on an individual basis. The blending of students created new situations for our staff that they had not experienced at the older program, so this required staff meetings to work as a

group and produce outside-the-box incentives to reach some of the students we were not accustomed to working with to avoid impeding their progress. Frequent communication and developing individualized interventions resemble lessons gleaned from previous research surrounding alternative settings (Wilkerson et al., 2016). For a student housed at Day Academy, a variety of interventions were used to keep the student's interest in what they were learning while allowing the staff to diversify what each student was engaging in. Some of the successful interventions that SCA used were getting student input as well as staff input into what the incentives will be for student success. The purpose of both perspectives addressed in the literature collected showed an increased effectiveness rate in developing interventions because the individual preferences of the student were identified in a study by King et al. (1998). Following the individual nature of the interventions, the staff developed point sheets and made changes as they arose on the make-up and structure of the point sheet. The behavior sheets were designed so that the staff member and the student had to communicate with each other so that the student and staff understood why a student received the results that they did. Additional lessons from the study showed a positive effect no matter whether it be a behavior or academic intervention, the interventions designed to be personalized to the target student were successful when they remained flexible (King et al., 1998). The number of students was maintained between 20 and 25 students with a max never exceeding 35 students over the three classrooms: Elementary, Middle, and High School. Staffing in each of those rooms



varied based on the availability of staff, but each room had a teacher with two or three paraeducators.

Our staffing and managed student population ensured that the appropriate students received our services and protected the personalized atmosphere. The individualized nature of the program extended to student transitions and were also monitored based on each student's needs. Duke and Griesdorn's (1999) study validated the individual focus employed across the alternative environment at Day Academy. This resulted in students experiencing success at Day Academy which made it difficult for them and their families to comprehend ever leaving the alternative setting and returning to the previous educational setting that caused them grief. Because of this fact, we maintained the option to keep students at Day Academy if it was a benefit to them and did not stunt their progress. In the first year of the program, two students graduated early from Day Academy.

### **Autonomy and Curriculum**

The merging of the two programs not only brought about social changes and physical changes to various aspects of the program, but it also required a change to the curriculum used. Joining City District, which was larger than Country District, afforded new curricular advantages to the Day Academy program. Both original alternative programs were left to choose what they taught and how they taught it. This caused issues when students left the program either to transition or move to another district. Before the development of Day Academy, there was not a streamlined curriculum that was used.

Access to the curriculum used by City District changed that. Day Academy students were now being taught by staff using state and district approved materials. Materials that are used by the sending districts and utilized at the alternative site allow students to not experience a gap in their learning based on the research findings by Gagnon and McLaughlin (2004). This allowed student progress to be monitored at a district and state level alongside their peers at the regular education sites. This also gave Day Academy staff access to professional development opportunities that allowed them the knowledge to modify the material based on the student needs. The teaching staff at Day Academy were given the state approved curriculum by the administration, but they were allowed to modify it to be useable in the alternative setting. The research by Lange (1998) validates the effectiveness of a staff when they can manage the curriculum based on their caseload, which also led to increased ownership and staff happiness. Students that transitioned to Day Academy often had significant academic struggles that stemmed from their identified exceptionality, removal from either the classroom or school, or chronic absences. Gaps had formed in their learning and those required that the Day Academy staff have the freedom to modify the curriculum to meet the incoming students at their level.

### **Resources and Facilities**

Day Academy was the combination of two programs that had been neglected and left to function in isolation from their regular education buildings. This left both programs without vital curricular resources and necessary materials to provide the

students with an education equitable to what they would have been provided at their neighborhood school district. The partnering of the two districts allowed resources and funds to be pooled that increased both programs operating budgets when combined versus running on their own. By using the building supplied by City District, Country District students were able to be in an actual school setting while being allowed to develop their own identity in a separate facility from their neighborhood school. The data collected from Duke and Griesdorn's (1999) study validates the importance of a separate facility allowing students to cultivate a new experience in a new setting and not have to overcome the struggles experienced in the previous environment.

For the Day Academy program, the newer environment was much bigger which made the program accessible to a higher number of students. Country District students were previously transported 15 miles or more from their rural districts to the Country District facility. The facility was an old industrial building. The students were not able to have access to programs and extracurriculars due to the distance from their home districts. Existing literature showed that the closer a program was to an established district, the resources improved in value, for Country District it was able to relocate its school to the new facility that was in the middle of its district (Foley & Pang, 2006). Along with the resources, the combining of programs allowed Country District to follow City District's policies and schedule structures. Country District and City District students were both afforded the opportunity to have access to a core curriculum provided by City District along with the behavioral focus of the Day Academy, which aligned with

Gagnon and Leone's (2005) research that promotes a shared focus between academics and behavioral needs. The accessibility of curricular and extracurricular resources has continued as well as increased in some areas along with the partnership between Country District and City District.

### **Discussion**

Reviewing the results of the strategies implemented at Day Academy shows positive effects on the students who attended the alternative setting. As portrayed in the literature and demonstrated in the alternative setting, students benefited from the individualized nature of Day Academy. During the first year of implementation, two students, one from each of the partnering districts, who were behind in credits upon their placement in the Day School graduated earlier than their regular education peers. Both students had attended the programs before the merger and had different relationships with the academy staff. Communication and shared ownership between the school and the sending district enabled the students to be able to navigate each setting seamlessly to not cause any obstacles getting in the way of their graduation. Along with the graduations, multiple students began or increased the amount of time for their transitions back to their neighborhood school. Transitions were based on individual factors such as performance at Day Academy. The speed that a student could transition back depends on their performance at both sites. Transition schedules could vary, but many of the students transitioned back to their school in the afternoon and left Day Academy earlier in the school day as their time increased. With the academy's centralized location, students

could transition back for individual classes and activities as well as sporting events.

Students had access to smaller blocks of time due to the lessening of travel and distance between their educational settings.

For Day Academy staff, low staff turnover was immediately evident based on the changing of the environment and culture. When the programs merged, the City District had no staff to join the new Day Academy structure opting for placement at other locations within the City District. This left Day Academy, beginning its existence with new staff or the staff coming in from the Country District. During that initial year, only one staff member left the academy that had worked previously for the Country District. There were a few new hires that had started with the program but had transferred to other locations and not left the Day Academy due to frustrations or disagreements with the direction of the Day Academy. The Day Academy, still in existence has multiple staff members still employed with the program that either predated the merger or were employed during the first year. Multiple employees have gone on to advance their careers from when they started with the program, becoming teachers and administrators. Ownership of the program extended across all positions in the school and continues to this day. The shared vision of the program has also continued to take hold in both the Country and City districts. The enrollment for Day Academy has continued to steadily increase requiring an increase in staff and the continued need to maintain the open communication and acceptance of family and school input that the program initiated during its operation.

This process provides an example for both beginning and veteran administrators of the importance of communication, collaboration, and individual attention to all stakeholders. The initial merger took two programs and their respective communities down an unfamiliar path to establishing a new program. The communication needed to undertake this process needed to be driven from a long-term perspective while being mindful of the short-term for those involved. Consideration of multiple perspectives required collaboration and patience to follow the process and not rush to a decision. The process itself required flexibility, which was accomplished through the adoption of an individual focus. The actions taken by Day Academy are subject to the environment and would vary based on the setting, but the key principles of communication, collaboration, and individual consideration can be implemented in every setting. Day Academy provides an example of not only starting a program but being able to sustain its existence through the implementation of the same principles used during the construction phase of the program with the willingness to tweak the day-to-day processes as issues arise.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The retrospective examination of the process that developed Day Academy and the experiences of the administrator tasked with the challenge of merging two programs into one has provided multiple considerations into future administrative endeavors across academic settings. Communication and developing relationships were qualities that proved to be invaluable during the process and have continued into the current state of the program. Day Academy is performing at a successful level for both Country and City

districts and has maintained this level of execution through two leadership changes using the same processes and principles that were employed at the beginning of the Day Academy development. The long-term success that this program has continued to have has highlighted the following recommendations that can aid in the practice and development of future leadership in all settings:

*LEADERSHIP PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS*

- Develop a system of open communication and collaboration with school or program stakeholders
- Implement an individual focus for staff and student development
- Utilize data reflective of the environment to drive decision making
- Build relationships with stakeholders involved in the school and program to create program support and ownership in the program

*LEADERSHIP PREPARATION RECOMMENDATIONS*

- Leadership programs need to develop the skill of administrators to be able to manage a fluid and individualized setting for both staff and students
- Leadership programs should provide opportunities for administrators to develop communication and collaboration skills for the establishing of a system and teams
- Leadership programs must develop new administrator skills to lead, manage, and execute professional development and opportunities to ensure the effective implementation of the targeted culture

- Leadership programs should target long-term development of administrator skills to be able to advocate for the necessary materials needed for student and staff success

### **Support and Rationale for Leadership Practice Recommendations**

Based on experiences at Day Academy, creating and maintaining an open system of communication and collaboration between settings is the first recommendation of practice. Open communication allows all parties to remain involved in the student's education. For Day Academy, we frequently provided updates and communicated to ensure the sending school was kept on the student's team. The goal was to allow them to stay in the position of ownership since eventually the student would transition back to their environment. The purpose of this practice is to establish a communication system that allows for the success of the student to be across all settings (Facey, 2020). In any setting, there will be multiple members of the student's team and developing productive communication between members will present administrators with unique challenges to their individual setting. The methods may be different, but the goal of maintaining open communication will remain the same.

The second recommendation for administrative practice is the implementation of an individual focus for staff and students that provides the stakeholders in the setting the opportunity to fit their skill set to the environment and allow them to set goals for personal growth that will remain in the forefront of everyone's focus. Programs that can embed this process into the environment have a higher likelihood of success (Tierney, 2020). At Day Academy, the numbers were kept at a manageable level to ensure this



practice had time to develop. As the numbers increased, the practice was already in place and allowed for minor modifications to ensure the system could support the growing numbers of staff and students. This recommendation will look different for any setting it is implemented in because of the differences between the individuals involved and the set-up of the school or program. An important consideration, much like what was considered at Day Academy, is to make this system fit the current environment. Adaptations can be made as the reasons for change develop.

The need to make appropriate adaptations reinforces the third recommendation of practice, utilize data driven decision making practices. The ability of any program or school to implement the individual focus employed at Day Academy requires the use of data driven decision making. This practice provides the leader with the ability to individually focus on staff and student development with fidelity. Data is a term that has many different meanings. These meanings are dictated by the setting that it is collected in. For Day Academy, the data collected was used to develop a supportive and positive climate (de Valasco et al., 2017). Point sheets were implemented to provide staff with the ability to monitor the student day and identify areas that the students were struggling in. This also helped identify areas that staff might have been experiencing challenges as well. Staff using the data collected provided them with the ability to support their individual classrooms along with providing their own personal support to their professional practices (Stanford, 2020). The Day Academy was an alternative setting, so the structure had differences compared to a regular education setting, but a similarity is

the use of that data. Day Academy staff had a shared focus and collected the same data across the school day. In any setting, the collection of data should be uniform for an individual student or staff member to ensure the viability of the data collected. Even though the data will be different for every administrator, the importance of a common goal for the use of that data will remain the same.

The final recommendation is to cultivate relationships and a support system that is involved in the school and maintain the relationship between the students and their school staff. This practice places the program in a position to be able to utilize resources and expertise that may not normally be available along with promoting a positive relationship with the student and their neighborhood school. In settings where the student does not leave their home school, this still is powerful to apply because of the ability of the staff to utilize individual plans across multiple settings in the school environment and ensures the likelihood of student success (Walter & Petr, 2004). At the beginning of the Day Academy program and now in its current state, opportunities for staff from the regular education environment have been manufactured to allow for them to be able to organically come into the environment and interact with the kids. The use of any event such as luncheons and Back to School events can assist in the creation of opportunities. A factor to consider is to make sure this is applicable for the setting it is being implemented in. The examples in Day Academy were successful because they were efficient and able to be implemented continuously because they did not put a strain on resources or

schedules. They were planned with the purpose of being able to continue over the length of the student's duration in the program.

### **Support and Rationale for Leadership Preparation Recommendations**

Based on the success of Day Academy, it is highly recommended that administrators get experience in managing these situations. Managing a fluid and individualized setting for both staff and students can be overwhelming at times, especially as the process is being implemented. The type of setting and structure that is already in place can dictate the level of maneuverability an administrator possesses. The alternative setting is naturally designed for this type of management to be employed on a regular basis as compared to a regular education environment for administrators (Price et al., 2010). For the administration at Day Academy, this was a skill that had not been developed until their time in the alternative setting. The skill of administrators, no matter the experience level, to be able to assess their respective settings and pivot accordingly to their environment is difficult and something that has been learned through previous experience. Previous experience does not ensure that they are appropriate practices, but they are implemented, nonetheless. Providing student administrators access to case studies or exposure to administrative staff that have proven to be adept at this type of management is a start to setting up administrators with efficient leadership skills to adapt to their settings.

For administrative training programs, it is recommended that students develop their ability to build teams through communication and collaboration. Day Academy's

environment is a collection of examples that show the importance of developing communication and collaboration skills that aid in the establishing of a system and building teams. The development of teams, whether a new program or an existing school, allows for the decisions to not fall on one individual (Reimer et al., 2003). Day Academy's internal teams allowed for the development and support of the internal structure that has maintained the program's practices over its existence. As a new leader, the idea that decisions can be made with a group and managing varying perspectives is a skill that can enhance the likelihood of a program's success, but failure to do so can also enhance the possibility of failure. The ability for new administration to have an opportunity to put these skills into practice could be integrated into a practicum during their program of study. The purpose is to provide the leadership candidate with the chance to practice and learn from their successes and failures.

The ability to develop skills to lead, manage, and execute professional development and opportunities to ensure the effective implementation of the targeted culture is the third recommendation for training programs. This is a skill that can be blended in with the practicum opportunity to build a team. At Day Academy, much of the material discussed in the inaugural meeting changed as the environment developed. This required the staff to be trained as new students and situations arrived. The Day Academy administrator had to be able to identify when there were stressors being placed on the system or when the staff and students were asking for help through their actions even if not verbalized.

The final recommendation for training programs to implement is that administrators, no matter the setting, must have the skills necessary to implement the needed interventions and advocate for their staff as the need for resources arise. Communication for both tasks can be similar, but different. They both require communication to provide the support needed to the staff that in turn positively affects the students (Pharo, 2012). As a new administrator there are tasks that take precedence over advocating for the building or program. The skill that needs to be developed is setting up the program in a way that the necessary data is collected and able to be disseminated to the necessary stakeholders that are consulted when a resource needs to be advocated for. This is a skill that can be developed with knowledge of how to choose the appropriate data collection method and best practices when identifying and implementing a particular method. Advocating materials and resources depends on the ability of the administrator to show their governing body the need is there.

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