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# Best Practices

In School Personnel

American Association of School Personnel Administrators



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- 8 Promising Practices for Recruiting Diverse Educator Talent
- Diversity Double Check
- The Value of Diversity in a School District
- A Leader Please . . . Building a Diverse Applicant Pool
- Multicultural Champions in My Journey
- Teacher Effectiveness in Urban and Non-Urban Settings
- Transforming Public Education in South Carolina

# A LEADER PLEASE...BUILDING A DIVERSE APPLICANT POOL

By Mark Benigni & Thomas Giard

Facing an accountability movement that includes a new teacher evaluation and development system, as well as the Common Core State Standards and Smarter Balance Assessment conversion, educators are operating in uncertain times. Add to the mix, shrinking financial resources and additional federal and state regulations, the need for distributed leadership becomes even more essential to the success of our public schools. So how will we secure dynamic, diverse and effective leaders? We have seen schools and organizations launch nationwide searches, enlist the assistance of head-hunting firms, hire marketing agencies to capture their message and at times, just panic. We also have seen school districts hire non-educators to lead their school districts with limited success and questionable results. What we have come to realize is that our greatest opportunities to attract highly-skilled multicultural and multiethnic leaders lies within our own district. How will we develop our most important resource—our staff? How will our organization support our employees' hopes, dreams and desires? How will we assure that every school has effective leadership that reflects and values the diversity of our students, supports our staff and assures student growth? And, of course, how will we pay for it?

In Meriden, our teachers' union and management decided to address this problem head on by developing leadership capacity at all levels to improve student achievement and assure leadership continuity, diversity, coherence and effectiveness. We knew we had to inspire, excite and motivate our

staff by investing in their personal and professional growth and including them in the decision making process. Our central office team and union leadership discussed "The Dream Manager" by Matthew Kelly. We took his message to heart and we put his thoughts into action. Kelly stated, "An employee is responsible for adding value to the life of a company, and a company is responsible for adding value to the life of an employee." So we began to systematically plan on how we could add value to our teachers, staff and future educational leaders by developing a support framework and a comprehensive and coherent talent development system.



As Meriden rolled out their new teacher evaluation and development process, a commitment was made to provide educators with the development and growth opportunities they may need. So union and management created the MTSS Team (Meriden Teachers Sharing Success) to recognize our exemplary educators and to provide support and growth opportunities for teachers. MTSS team members, tenured Meriden Public School teachers who have taught the same grade level for years and led their students to substantial student growth for four consecutive years, opened their classrooms for peer visitations and availed themselves for reflection. MTSS Team members can assist their colleagues in the continual growth process.

Professional development line items finally opened to individual teacher requests. By reallocating funding that was used to pay outside consultants, we were now able to honor teacher professional development requests and pay our own teachers to provide training to our staff teams. Teachers could

now choose professional development opportunities that they felt would best support their learning and growth. Teachers volunteer to serve on administrative interviews, help design interview protocols and facilitate teacher feedback surveys. We decided to develop tomorrow's leaders today as the Meriden Public Schools launched the Leadership Academy. The mission of the Meriden Public Schools' Leadership Academy is to build and develop leadership capacity throughout the district through collaboration, professional development and support in order to increase and sustain student achievement. The program is designed for aspiring teacher leaders, current teacher leaders, effective teachers looking to increase their personal and professional growth and aspiring administrators. Minority candidates are encouraged to apply and participate in these development opportunities.

The Meriden Public Schools' Leadership Academy is a one year learning experience that includes targeted in-district professional development sessions on all facets of effective leadership, attendance at select conferences, shadowing opportunities and the development of district leadership projects tied to school improvement plans. We are developing a cadre of diverse educators committed to developing their leadership skills, expanding their leadership knowledge base, widening their cultural competence and taking an active role in school and district improvement and student success.

Together, union and management are breaking down the barriers that have isolated educators from their colleagues and peers and building a leadership pool that is diverse, knowledgeable and ready to lead. Our peer-coaching program provides educators with an opportunity to observe other educators in action. The premise of our program is that our best teachers are our best teachers and that together they can improve student learning. The major roles of a peer coach are to collaborate, provide beneficial feedback, share effective teaching strategies and reflect on teaching and learning. Peer coaches use an established protocol to share honest and open feedback with their peer coach and to guide their reflections on what they learn from each other.

Our in-district college partnerships have provided unique learning and professional development opportunities for our staff. The Master in Education Certification Program from the University of New Haven is housed at Lincoln Middle School in Meriden. The program also requires participants to complete

a year-long internship in a public school setting, and many interns work with a teacher mentor in our district. Our teachers are sharing their expertise and assuring that future educators have the foundation and skills needed to be successful.

Southern Connecticut State University runs an educational leadership cohort model at Washington Middle School in Meriden. This administrator certification program has been well received by our staff and has encouraged many teachers, including minority educators, to begin their journey into educational leadership. It has also allowed coursework and discussions to focus on our district initiatives and has helped us build a cadre of future administrator applicants. As an urban school district with salary constraints, building our own diverse pool of administrative candidates is not just helpful, it is essential.

In an era of increased accountability, we must remember that greater support will lead to sustained improvement. The final four components of the Meriden Public Schools' Talent Development System are new teacher induction, executive coaching, administrator professional development and non-certified staff professional development.

As a district, we are moving forward together with a good balance of trust and compromise. We are a collaborative team that has created a unified and inclusive vision for our district. We believe that every child is entitled to a high quality education, teachers and leaders impact every child's achievement, collaboration improves student learning and building leadership capacity at all levels sustains our mission to see our students make positive progress. Just this past year, we saw the highest scores in district history in Grade 3 Reading, Grade 5 Science, Grade 6 Math, Grade 7 Reading and Grades 7 & 8 Reading and Writing. We also have experienced greatly improved school climates and cultures. Since 2010-2011, suspensions are down 32 percent, expulsions are down 80 percent and arrests are down 54 percent.

In the past two years, we have seen internal minority candidates land key leadership positions in our district, including principal positions, as well as district-level leadership positions. In the Meriden Public Schools, we value the diversity of our students and staff, and we know we can build a diverse leadership pool by investing in a talent development system that develops our own teachers and leaders.



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## MULTICULTURAL CHAMPIONS IN MY JOURNEY

By Javier Melendez

My life is replete with moments of deep multicultural awareness that have significantly shaped who I am. It was not until recent self-reflection that I fully understood to what extent. The truth is that many young lives have been impacted by these turning points inspired by multicultural champions. I am one of those lives.

In my senior year at the University of Puerto Rico, I was invited to attend a recruitment session held by a professor/recruiter from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. When the session began, one thing became painfully obvious to me; the more he spoke (English) the less I understood him. Yet somehow he knew precisely who I was. Then to my amazement he began explaining the purpose of his visit in fluent Spanish. My language barrier instantly banished. Our visitor had learned Spanish from years of teaching experience in Peru and Colombia, and now he wanted to reciprocate by supporting Spanish-speaking students to advance their higher education studies.

With our communication restored, I learned that he was representing a major university and he was offering full scholarships to prospective graduate students for the College of Education at SUNY Stony Brook. I also discovered that a group of professors had recommended my candidacy for one of the scholarships. I was thrilled and more than ready to go to New York, but it was not that easy. Being that my mother was poor, I had no money for the airfare, personal spending or even a place to stay once I arrived to New York. My professors came to the rescue. Their relentless support led them to take a collection among themselves which helped cover my airplane ticket and some badly needed clothing for the trip.

Boarding the airplane was one of my longest walks ever - uncertainty kept assaulting my courage - until the moment of no return. The airplane door was finally closed and I was going to New York or bust!

I arrived at JFK International Airport with very little command of the English language and \$30 in my pocket left over from my professors' collection. There was literally no one waiting for me and nowhere to go. My options were to remain in the airport (forever it seems) or make it from the airport to Stony Brook, Long Island. I made it to the university and was splendidly supported by its faculty and staff. By the way, till this day I am proud of my survival skills and having this chip on my shoulder "as long as I have \$30 in my pocket, there is nothing anyone can do to me because I would still be breaking even."

As you can imagine, I was supposed to be frightened by these challenges. There was one powerful reason why I was not—my mother. She had made the trip before I did. I was indeed following her footsteps. My mother arrived to New York years earlier, without friends and fearful of what destiny had in store for her. She was poor but driven with the ambition to succeed—not in a grand financial way but just for herself and her family. My mother arrived in a great but strange city where she knew no one, could not speak the language or even defend herself against every day prejudice. After long days of hard labor in a shoe factory, she continued her education at night school, and after years of this grinding routine, she finally mastered enough skills to leave behind the painful factory work. She had the courage and determination to succeed. She was a champion.

Her example taught me an important life lesson. It taught me to have compassion for people, to be generous with my talents and strength and to use them to help people in need. My mother also taught me to show gratitude to this nation that gave us a chance to succeed. Because of her, I promised to not let any form of discrimination enter my heart and to become a champion of all the virtues intrinsic to multiculturalism, fairness and a genuine understanding of other people's perspectives and circumstances.

After completing my graduate schooling and years into my professional career, I was challenged to be loyal to my promise. I was tapped by the superintendent to lead the newly created district office of multicultural services. It

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