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Melanie Rinehart
Principal, Bell Elementary, Deming Public Schools
Change Management—Show, Don't Tell

Community Challenge

Bell Elementary School was in its seventh year of a turnaround process when Melanie Rinehart was placed as principal. The school was 2.5% proficient in math, and 10% proficient in language arts. Nearly all students were from economically disadvantaged families. Rinehart was a seasoned principal who entered the school well aware of the situation. For the staff, Rinehart's arrival was 'just another leader coming in with yet another strategy' to turn things around. They had worked hard. What could she possibly know to help them succeed?

Action Taken

Rinehart and her assistant principal scheduled an in-service day to discuss her approach. They could talk about the failing data all day long, but the teachers had been living with the numbers for seven years. Leading with the numbers wasn't the way to start.

Instead, Rinehart printed all the students' faces on plotter paper, cut them out, and posted them around the room—it was completely covered with their faces. A 2% data point in proficiency was the equivalent of one child. Rinehart also listed various jobs at the front of the room—some required college degrees, and others required a high school education. As teachers filed in, they assumed someone put their kids on the walls as a welcome back to school. No one said anything about it. When all teachers were seated, Rinehart directed them to look around the room and said:

Here are our kids, and all of these kids are failing. Every face you're looking at is unsuccessful right now. How do they compete for jobs? How do we make sure that they have a chance at these jobs?

One of the headteachers who had been in the school for 25 years started crying. Others joined. It became a very emotional beginning that led to change. Rinehart pressed further, "Okay, what's our vision here at Bell?" She went around the room and almost every idea started with "our students deserve." From that activity, Rinehart and her staff created a vision. And "all students deserve" became the opening of Bell's vision statement. Perhaps one of the defining factors

around Rinehart's approach was her experience as a participant in the Principles Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program. She was confident the leadership skills she gained had an impact.

Key Takeaway

A fundamental of the PPE program included the introduction of change management concepts and models. The same group of teachers who worked to improve test scores and failed at Bell Elementary was the ones who got students over the hump and learning at new levels. What Rinehart did was anchor the change in the school's culture by creating a sense of urgency among teachers. She was not just *telling* staff this is why they were in an urgent situation. The staff and Rinehart's leadership team had to *see* it to understand the need for change.