



DARDEN SCHOOL  
of BUSINESS



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## **Peter Deswood**

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### **On or Off the Bus**

#### *Community Challenge*

Labels can easily lead to misunderstandings, and if used improperly, calling a school a place for “troubled” students was no exception. Rocinante High School was a place for students who had difficulty learning in other schools. Perhaps among the most noticeable differences to other schools was it offered childcare facilities. The student body consisted of roughly 72% Latino or Native American students, and many from families with strained financial or emotional resources. “A lot of our students have trauma in their lives,” Principal Peter Deswood said. “It’s well-known that creating a learning environment means having enough to eat, feeling safe, and not worrying about what’s going on at home.”

Deswood was just one of those people who wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. Earning a degree in accounting, Deswood launched his career as an accountant. While interesting, the work didn’t leave Deswood fulfilled. He returned to school and made a career switch to education. The very first year as principal, Deswood was invited to participate in the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program. Following each session, he was eager to return to Rocinante to work on improving teacher and student learning.

“Most students don’t see principals unless they are in trouble,” he said. Among his goals, Deswood wanted to shift his own behavior to become an instructional leader. He started making rounds through the schools sitting in classrooms. The notion was two-fold. Ensure students would know who he was and improve the teacher feedback cycle while building capacity with staff.

Another change Deswood wanted to make was to implement social-emotional learning (an education model that embraced self-awareness and control). He would start on professional development days to bring teachers and students together in a “talking circle” for 45 minutes. Deswood’s assistant principal was familiar with the framework and a base of support. But how would he convince the rest of his staff to give it a try?

#### *Action Taken*

Part of the process Deswood learned with PPE was identifying key stakeholders in the building— “[identify] which teachers are on the bus with you, which teachers are dragging their feet, and those who are not on the bus at all.” After identifying early adopters, Deswood recruited

them to influence others who were more hesitant about what they were doing. Before implementing talking circles with students, Deswood used staff meetings to model talking circles with teachers on issues around the school. Essentially the teachers sat in a circular position to share feelings, thinking, and goals. With students, Deswood started with easy questions like “who is your favorite hero” and as sessions continued moved towards “where do you see yourself in five years.” Deswood and staff could then try to create a path with students around their future careers. “The talking circle was literally ‘let’s put in a safe place for students to share,’” he said. “And the commitment was there to do it among teachers.”

### ***Key Takeaway***

Without the support of others in the organization, change efforts can be greatly undermined. Building commitment among all people who actually play a role in the process is fundamental to success. “The talking circles really helped build a positive school community,” Deswood said. “Making teachers part of process and decision making made my staff feel safe to share—they feel valued as professionals.”