

A Sense of Belonging at School:
A SMART Goal for the 2016/17 School Year
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August 13, 2016

Introduction

As we learned in *Influencer* (Grenny et. al., 2013), the first step in making a change is to be as intentional and specific as possible. From there, one can make a plan for accomplishing the goal. This is why, as I prepare for my second year as a school counselor, I want to be as specific and concrete about the goals I am creating for myself and my schools. For the purpose of this paper, I chose one specific goal (to increase student's sense of belonging at Holley Elementary School) to focus on. Below, I will turn this into a SMART goal and then discuss the steps I will take to accomplish it.

SMART Goal

Belonging is an important factor in resilience and long-term success in students and school is an ideal setting to cultivate belonging. During the 2016/17 school year, I will take the lead as the school counselor in facilitating school wide and targeted interventions to increase a sense of belonging among all students at Holley Elementary School. According to Sprinks (2013), the factors that create a sense of community include membership (emotional safety, personal investment, common symbol system), influence (feeling as if one matters and is listened to), integration, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. So, as measured by pre- and post- survey data, at least 97% of students at Holley will be feel safe from bullying and will be able to identify at least one friend at school and one staff member he/she can trust. In addition, ODR data on student to student aggression will decrease by 20%, compared to the 2015/16 school year data. To accomplish this goal, interventions will be geared at increasing the following vital behaviors: students will reach out to those who don't have anyone to play with, students will seek help when needed, and staff members reinforce student behavior that contributes to a positive school community.

Steps to Accomplish This Goal

Gathering Information

In order to accomplish this goal, I will need to begin by gathering information. In the beginning of the year, I will ask students to take a survey, which will assess all of these factors. This survey will also assist me in identifying students who may need additional support in demonstrating the vital behaviors and/or feeling a sense of belonging at school. To further identify and support students, I will track ODR data and discuss student needs at the weekly Student Support Team (SST) meetings.

I will also need to consider staff perceptions and motivation to support this goal. In the beginning of the year, I will hold a meeting to propose this goal and elicit support and advice from staff. During this meeting, I will consider which staff members are already motivated to assist me and I will draw upon them throughout the school year. I will put considerable effort in eliciting support and feedback from staff members who are leaders in the school community, so that they can influence other staff members to commit to the goal as well. I will also identify staff members who may be resistant or will need additional support.

I will need to gather information on evidenced based interventions. These interventions will include character education lessons in each classroom, targeted group interventions, and individual interventions. They will also include school-wide activities (for example, I could plan an all school bonding activity or school pride activity). As I reflect on my character education lessons last year, I realize that I also need to build my competencies in this area. I will draw upon teacher expertise in classroom management skills and designing effective lesson plans. I can also draw upon the expertise and support of my professors at Oregon State University (OSU), as well as the expertise of my cohort members.

Building Motivation

The accomplishment of this goal will require commitment from school staff (including myself) and buy in from students. I will utilize motivational interviewing techniques to increase

commitment from all parties. According to Miller and Rollick (2013) change occurs when people have sufficient reason, motivation, confidence, and readiness to change. Below I will discuss each of those factors in terms of my SMART goal for Holley Elementary School.

Reason to Change. Holley Elementary School is comprised of a very committed and connected staff. During the 2015/16 school year, the small staff change quite a bit when four new staff members joined the team. This change created some rifts between staff members and everyone is feeling less connected than before. This has impacted the overall school climate and students are not as connected to one another or to staff as they once were (as reported by staff members). Students are more likely to argue, leave one another out, are getting into trouble more frequently, and attendance has decreased. In the 2016/17 school year, we are losing a valued teacher who has been very important to the school community. This could further negatively impact the school climate.

Because Holley staff members are so committed to the school and very turned in to the overall school climate, I believe that the majority of the staff will have sufficient reason to tend to the school culture and student belonging. I can connect student belonging to attendance, overall student engagement in school, resilience, self-advocacy skills, overall student well being, and school climate. I believe that if I am able to articulate this to staff in a meaningful way (utilizing data and eliciting input in the accomplishment of the goal), the majority of staff members will have sufficient reason to change.

In addition, I am motivated to accomplish this goal in order to improve my Comprehensive Counseling Program (CCP). This goal will be a great way for me to practice utilizing data and evidence-based interventions to create change in a way that is in line with my values and theoretical background. In tracking data and tending to this goal, I will also be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of my CCP and the importance of elementary school counselors. This goal will be a way for me to advocate for my students, myself and my profession.

I will also need to consider students readiness to change, as they will play an important part in the overall goal. I believe that every person has an underlying desire to belong and feel accepted. I can begin by helping students see this common humanity. From there, I can educate students on how they can increase their own connectedness at school and help one another feel that they belong. With adequate information and understanding, students should have adequate reason to tend to this goal.

Motivation to Change. Next, everyone must have the motivation to play a role in this change. One significant barrier to cultivating the motivation will be the necessity of staff time and effort in the accomplishment of this goal. For example, I may ask staff to mentor specific isolated students, or reinforce my character education lessons in the classroom. Once again, I can reinforce the reasons for the accomplishment of this goal and emphasize the fact that when students feel as if they belong, staff members will not have to use as much time to mediate difficulties between students, there will be fewer ODR's, and school attendance will improve. All of these factors will in the end save staff time and effort and will support a healthy and cohesive school. As I mentioned above, cohesion and community are two very important values for Holley staff members.

Students can be similarly motivated. As I mentioned, all people have the desire to be connected to one another and to belong. Through my character education lessons and targeted small group and individual student work, students will begin to see that they can build their own connectivity by helping other students feel connected. In addition, I will facilitate activities in which students explore and consider their core values. These core values could be connected to this goal.

Reinforcement of Vital Behaviors. Thus far, I have discussed techniques to fostering intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is important for the long-term success of the goal.

However, once this intrinsic motivation is established, I could utilize reward systems to reinforce the vital behaviors I am looking for. It will be very important that I am intentional when utilizing these rewards, so that I do not undermine the intrinsic motivation. The primary reward I will utilize is social recognition. I will ask staff members and students to recognize when they see someone reaching out to someone in need. I could also place students who regularly engage in the vital behaviors in leadership roles and recognize them through kindness awards at the weekly school-wide assemblies. In addition, I will recognize the teachers that support me in my goal and demonstrate vital behaviors. I could do this by writing them simple "Thank You" notes, or giving shout-outs at staff meetings.

It will be important to communicate that bullying behavior is unacceptable at Holley School. This could be communicated through the very intentional and careful use of punishment. The punishments must not shame students and they must be related to the unkind behavior. Although the school will utilize punishment occasionally, my main focus will be on providing supports and interventions for students who struggle in demonstrating vital behaviors.

Confidence to Change. In order to take steps towards this goal, students and staff members will need to believe that the goal is feasible and that there are adequate resources to accomplish this goal. I can foster this confidence by emphasizing the skill and commitment of the staff. I will also utilize evidence-based techniques. As I will be taking the lead on this goal, I will gather resources and information to share with staff members, so that they feel supported in their efforts. In addition, I will track data throughout the school year, to show staff the positive changes that are being made and/or revise the plan if sufficient progress is not being accomplished. Some students may doubt their ability to connect and belong at school. These students will need to be identified and targeted group interventions and/or mentorships will be fostered to assist these students in building connections and helping them see their ability to connect.

In order to maintain my own confidence in the accomplishment of this goal, I will need to seek out support from others. Being the only counselor in the building and only being part time in the building, I can at times feel isolated and ineffective. To prevent this, I will make an effort to connect with other staff members, solicit frequent feedback, and maintain my own self-care regimen, so that I may remain in the 'eye of the storm' and do my job to the best of my ability.

Readiness to Change. Finally, all parties must be ready to take the steps towards this change. This readiness and commitment may fluctuate throughout the school year and I will have to utilize motivational techniques to maintain commitment. Because of the staff make up and willingness to work, I believe that most staff members will be ready and committed to play their part in this change. Importantly, I will have to motivate key staff leaders to commit to this goal. Once they are committed, most staff members will commit as well. For example, I already have the principal's support. He has committed to assist me in creating a character education schedule, so that I may conduct lessons in each classroom bi-monthly. This will be an important component of this change.

Structural Support. An important component in preparing the school for this change will be to ensure that the school is structured in a way to support the goal. First, a schedule must be created, so that I may conduct my character education lessons in each classroom bi-weekly. I will create this schedule in collaboration with the principal and staff members. The school already has weekly school wide Morning Meetings, this mechanism will reinforce my goal. In addition, classes must be structured in a way to maximize student connection (without disruption), and minimize isolation. Mechanisms must be created for students to report concerns and for staff members to respond to these concerns. With the assistance of staff members, I will devise these mechanisms.

Staff Resistance. Although I believe that the majority of staff members will be motivated to engage in this goal (as long as I give them autonomy and value them as experts), I can foresee at least one staff member being resistant to this initiative. Although it would be helpful to have the commitment of all staff members, I believe that as long as I have the majority committed, I will still be able to accomplish this goal, as long as I have access to the students in the resistant teacher's classroom. However, I can attempt to elicit this teachers support by understanding his concerns, validating them, and linking his values to the accomplishment of this goal. I will be flexible in the means I utilize to accomplish this goal and and elicit this teacher's input and expertise. I will also call upon school leaders (such as the principal) to hold this staff member, and other, accountable.

Administering Interventions

Finally, the school will administer the interventions identified in the staff meeting. These interventions will include school-wide supports, including character education lessons in each classroom, and school climate-building activities. They will also included target interventions for students struggling with a sense of belonging. Many of the interventions will be collaborated on and supported by staff members.

Conclusion

As I move into my second year as a school counselor, I am excited to improve my CCP. I will do this by being very specific about my goals and remaining focused. Fostering a sense of belonging in students is very important in long term success and resilience. Thus, this will be an important goal for this coming school year.

References

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