

The Role of Trust in School-Wide Implementation of an Innovation

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### Abstract

Through our experience with implementing a new initiative at Diamond Hill-Jarvis High School, Student Ownership And Responsibility, we have learned that school-wide teacher buy-in to the vision of a new initiative is strongly dependent on individuals' perceptions of the initiative as a whole and how it impacts student achievement. Trust emerged as a theme central to the success of teacher buy-in. Teachers must first trust that the innovation being implemented is beneficial for students. Furthermore, teachers need to trust team members to successfully implement systems that address student needs. Lastly, teachers must trust that they have influence in the implementation process. We have learned that building trust happens when: 1) transparent school-wide communication about the initiative is used, 2) curriculum development and professional development is inclusive of teachers not originally involved with the design and implementation of the initiative, and 3) decision-making regarding improvements to the innovation utilizes teacher and student feedback.

### The Role of Trust in School-Wide Implementation of an Innovation

Our school, Diamond Hill-Jarvis High School (DHJ), was ranked in the 39th percentile for overall student achievement in the state of Texas. In all three of the combined markers for school accountability (student achievement, closing performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness), DHJ ranked in the 30th percentile. We are one of 18 high schools in Fort Worth Independent School District, which serves over 86,000 students in over 150 different school settings. Our enrollment of 693 students (May 2015) is 95% Hispanic, and 93% of students were eligible for free/reduced lunch in the 2014-2015 school year.

We are a school on the move and implemented a plan for school-wide Disciplinary Literacy from 2010 to 2012 under our former principal. The current principal implemented school-wide Disciplinary Literacy from 2012 to 2014 with a bigger emphasis on quality of student writing, as well as accountability from teachers. The school-wide implementation of Disciplinary Literacy under both leaders was met with some resistance from the staff. Some of our fellow teachers felt that this initiative deterred from their curriculum. Some students expressed feeling overwhelmed by the same type of writing activity during all seven periods. Like all school-wide implementations (district or campus level) that it followed, the initiative followed a ‘top-down’ model. The Disciplinary Literacy program was perceived by some of the staff as ineffective, while others remarked on the improvement in student achievement. Many teachers felt forced to be compliant, while many others already engaged in these practices before the school-wide implementation. This led to many inconsistencies in implementation with an ambiguous effect on student achievement.

Because of lukewarm and conflicting feedback from the staff we experienced in previous improvement efforts, we were pleased to find that the National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU) approach was to build from the bottom up. We were designated by our principal to be members of a school innovation design team (SIDT), which was comprised of teachers from our school who were charged with taking an innovation design and making it work for our school context. The innovation, established by a district innovation design team (DIDT) through a year-long series of design activities, was called Student Ownership And Responsibility (SOAR). It established a broad framework for introducing growth mindset and problem solving instruction coupled with professional development. The lessons and professional development were intended to change attitudes and develop skills so that student would be more likely to take ownership of their own learning. The SIDT team focused on different implementation methods for SOAR in an effort to garner teacher buy-in.

At our school, the SIDT decided to implement the SOAR innovation through a weekly advisory period with a common curriculum. Every teacher (with the exception of a few assistants) was assigned an advisory. The lessons were focused on problem solving and growth mindset, as well as suggestions from other stakeholders. The innovation revolves around the idea that students must have an approach to solving problems they may face, in and out of the classroom. They must also believe that effort is the key to progress, and obstacles are part of this process and key to growth. Students will continue the problem solving process by learning from these obstacles rather than being defeated. The steps to problem solving require a student to continually try other possible solutions if they are unsuccessful the first time in resolving their issue. By fostering a growth mindset philosophy and explicitly teaching the cognitive process of problem solving, the SOAR innovation helps students gain a sense of ownership over their own

learning. An NCSU study of our district found that student ownership is key to student achievement.

There are many components working together that determine the effectiveness of SOAR on a school campus including student buy-in, common language, and best practices and procedures, which are all vital aspects for a successful program. However, with the advisory period, teachers are the vehicle through which growth mindset is modeled and problem solving skills are delivered to the students. The entire effort of SOAR is futile if a campus is full of teachers opposed to the advisory period and uncommitted to the vision of SOAR. Therefore, teacher buy-in has been our largest area of focus regarding planning, implementation, and data collection. Through analyzing the SIDT's weekly operations, the most important factor in increasing teacher buy-in is building trust. Transparent school-wide communication, inclusive curriculum and professional development, and using feedback for decision-making proved to be the three avenues through which trust was built.

### **Building Trust Through Transparent School-Wide Communication**

The SIDT at DHJ communicates amongst each other, with administration, teachers, office workers, and support staff alike. Different modes of communication are necessary to fulfill the weekly activities. Here, we will describe the effect of communication on relationships between the SIDT and the rest of the DHJ staff. The impact of trust filled relationships on buy-in can be seen by contrasting the actions taken between fall and spring semester.

The change in strategy we took from our early communication practices to our later efforts illustrates the importance of transparent and school-wide communication in fostering trust. During our first semester of implementation, we established a routine method of sharing lessons with teachers. During that time, every SIDT member received feedback, questions, and

criticisms of SOAR from teachers implementing the innovation. Our responses to these questions were haphazard and often reflected less than pleasant communications. We came to recognize that everything from the timeliness of the response to the tone in which it is given can all factor into the trust in the initiative built with the recipients. We came to the realization that we had to set norms and expectations for SIDT members when interacting with the staff.

Another area of concern with communication came for reasons out of our control, such as inclement weather and standardized testing. For example, the cancellation of advisory classes was announced through school-wide email and with incomplete justification. In response, I heard colleagues sigh with relief and exclaim, “Advisory is cancelled!” Others complained about advisory being cancelled because they preferred consistency, while others were disappointed because students were missing SOAR content. The lack of justification met with resentment and loss of belief in the program. When communicating with the staff on advisory changes, we learned that lack of transparency bred mistrust. This may have led to non-SIDT members’ perception of incompetence in the management of SOAR, a possible reason to lose trust.

Moving forward, we invited five new colleagues to join the team for the 2015-2016 school year. The SIDT developed a set of norms and expectations for new and returning members to abide by to maintain positive and constructive communication with all stakeholders in the school. In the plans for the 2015-2016 school year, this deficiency in a formal system for stakeholders to give feedback will be addressed by a Google Doc linked to the DHJ SOAR website. The newly scheduled monthly meeting agenda will include reviewing staff feedback, among other items brought to SIDT by the staff or students.

### **Building Trust Through Inclusive Curriculum and Professional Development Approach Used for Curriculum Development**

In order to prepare lessons for the fall, teachers were invited through school-wide email to plan in August before the start of school. For the spring, five non-SIDT members were personally invited through face-to-face interaction to develop lessons for the spring semester. 24 out of 67 teachers participated in the planning in August and 100% of the staff that were invited in this personal manner to the January lesson development day accepted. Three SIDT members developed lessons alongside non-SIDT members.

The participants were given a lesson and a topic from the scope and sequence of SOAR. They had the autonomy to design the lesson and how this content was presented. In the afternoon, participants came together to model their lesson for the rest of the group. All participants completed a feedback form, and most lessons ended with vocal praise from each other. This format provided a way for the group to give constructive feedback in an environment where presenters felt comfortable, while studying the effectiveness of each lesson. All feedback was discussed as opportunities to improve the lessons for our students and teachers. Transparent discussions on how to improve lessons with this goal in mind seemed to build trust among the participants.

All staff who participated had dramatically improved perceptions of SOAR. All non-SIDT participants voiced the idea that SOAR was different than what they had perceived. Being engaged in developing lessons for the school-wide curriculum seemed to build a sense of ownership among participants. As members of SIDT who participated in this planning, we witnessed colleagues who have not been involved in professional development in the past become engaged and excited about SOAR. One non-SIDT member emailed the final lesson at 1 a.m. later that evening! This is evidence of a colleague who worked until he developed the best presentation possible, based on others' feedback. These teachers were invited because we, as the

SIDT, believe that being involved in the process would build their belief in SOAR, as well as their belief in their ability to make school wide change.

Non-SIDT participants seemed willing to participate in SOAR activities and professional development after this event. This may be due to increased trust in the actual content of SOAR lessons as well as the procedures used to develop them. Non-SIDT members who participated in the planning in January also seemed to develop more trust in the SIDT members themselves. We observed the non-SIDT participants who previously did not execute the lessons with fidelity, (or sometimes at all) begin doing so.

### **Approaches Used to Improve Professional Development**

In the initial planning of the SOAR program at DHJ, the SIDT decided that the most effective way to teach problem solving and growth mindset to students was through a weekly advisory period. In order for lessons to be delivered with integrity, all teachers were provided ongoing professional development. Over the course of the 2014-15 school year, the SIDT team found that the manner in which the professional development sessions were conducted had a great effect on how much trust teachers had in SOAR. These observations were facilitated by the use of the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) improvement process, and as a result of our improved approach, we were able to dramatically change the way teachers embraced newly created lessons.

**Initial approach.** As members of the SIDT, we experienced professional development trainings from the perspective of a presenter and an audience member. We decided to allocate part of the time during waiver days and during faculty meetings to present the upcoming lessons to the staff. The modeling strategy used during the first semester's professional development days seemed to be an effective method of training. The 10-15 minute block gave teachers enough



information to deliver the necessary information. However, despite our best efforts, the data we collected through informal advisory class observations, written feedback, and attendance at training sessions indicated that teachers were not fully invested in the SOAR program. For example, less than 30 percent of the faculty attended the before or after school training sessions in October.

As SIDT members, we participated in the creation of the lessons and knew the details of each lesson. So, when our colleagues were presenting, we were able to take stock of body language around the room during professional development sessions. Our observations concluded that there was little engagement. Most teachers are compliant and respectful, yet they did not offer critical feedback or ask questions to help them further their ability to deliver the lessons.

**Improved approach.** The most important action taken by the SIDT to increase trust from the faculty was through involving as many people as possible during PD to show that SOAR is truly a school-wide effort. Leading into the next professional development, one SIDT member approached teachers who had not been big participants in SOAR, and asked them if they would model a lesson during the next professional development. After being approached this way, all of them accepted the offer.

From the SIDT perspective, this approach communicated a message that all staff members are valued for how they can contribute to reaching the school-wide vision of SOAR. Secondly, inclusion efforts encouraged teachers to take some discretion in how they are teaching the lessons. PowerPoints are provided as outlines for the lessons, but the best lessons are delivered when the teacher adapts to their specific audience, using their own teaching style. This

newly realized sense of autonomy created trust in SOAR, which inspired teachers to buy-in. Additionally, the way in which volunteers were approached was key.

Our data collection during the second semester found that there was a clear increase of overall teacher buy-in to SOAR. These findings were further supported from the NCSU field visits in October, which showed some stark contrasts to the report after the April field visit. NCSU reported that “Individuals who were reluctant adopters or who had not been involved in creating the lessons previously were invited to help create them, and in the process of getting involved they became more invested in the innovation.” The stark contrast was evident to SIDT members not so much because there was major push back to the first approach, but rather, that there was a change in amount of indifference about SOAR. For example, in the research report from October 2014, under the section “Teacher Perceptions of SOAR”, researchers described, “The majority of teachers are onboard with the idea of SOAR...There are other teachers that are compliant, but not bought-in to the innovation and still others that are not compliant and unsupportive”. Overall investment from the teachers was reportedly absent. Instead, teachers were compliant. Compliance suggests a lack of buy-in and ownership of the program, which in turn, leads to the lessons not being delivered with fidelity.

### **Building Trust by Using Feedback for Decision-Making**

Teacher and student responses to feedback surveys collected during PDSA cycles guided school-wide decisions in implementation. All responses were shared with the staff, so they could witness the PDSA cycle in action. The PDSA cycle provided an organized and timely system to utilize teacher feedback in order to make changes in SOAR during the spring semester. All responses and decisions were communicated to the staff in an effort to be transparent. By utilizing all feedback to make decisions and communicating every step with the staff, teachers

may gain a sense of efficacy by seeing that their opinions were used in the decision-making part of a school-wide change. SIDT predicted that participation in the PDSA cycle may increase teacher desire to continue giving feedback and possibly contribute in other capacities.

### **Use of Teacher Feedback in PDSA**

Teachers were asked to give input in a range of ways starting in Spring of 2014. They completed surveys and gave feedback through formal and informal discussions. All responses were used to make school-wide SOAR decisions. These practices were done within the data collection steps of PDSA. After executing a change strategy, the SIDT gathered feedback from teachers to study and take actions for subsequent implementation based on lessons learned. The participation in the PDSA process allowed a broad range of teachers to participate in and more deeply understand the decision-making process. We made use of professional development resources and professional learning communities to encourage open discussion about the strengths and deficiencies of the program. These formats provide an opportunity to collect qualitative data from stakeholders which we also used in the decision-making process.

For example, in preparation for the 2014-2015 school year, the SIDT recruited as many staff members as possible to develop and present lessons for the August 2014 professional development day. 27 out of 64 teachers created, gave feedback, edited, revised, or presented lessons from the weekly advisory curriculum. During this week, there was an overwhelming sense of buy-in from the staff members who participated. There was an additional required training in October held before and after school to prepare teachers for the rest of the lessons for fall semester. However, by this point, buy-in and enthusiasm for SOAR seemed to be waning from the staff. The drop in enthusiasm was determined from comments in the hallway, email exchanges, and other informal communication through which SIDT members gathered mixed

feedback, positive and negative, that varied from content, format, to management issues. In preparation for spring semester, DIDT representatives conferred with the principal in regards to implementation and teacher buy-in. The lesson creation and professional development for the spring, as described in the previous section, was intentionally realigned to include as many non-SIDT members as possible. We intentionally included as many changes from the feedback we received to clearly show the staff the use of their input in the PDSA cycle.

### **Use of Student Feedback in PDSA**

School-wide initiatives often come from the district or campus level administration. Teacher perception of these initiatives are often negative because they feel that they have to comply with an effort that they don't believe in or that it will not have an impact on student achievement. In addition to gathering teacher perception on student needs, we gathered student feedback. Every time student feedback was collected, it was presented to the staff.

The SIDT believed that there were many benefits to using student data, including addressing concerns about relevance of the proposed initiative to students, as well as providing further support for SIDT decisions. We felt that if teachers were convinced that SOAR was a program that our students wanted, it would lead to an increase in teacher buy-in. All decisions were based on teacher and student feedback, not only district or administrative directive. Our school's most impacted stakeholders witnessed our own identified problems being addressed by our locally developed solutions. This was validated by collecting data from student surveys and identifying what students thought to be the most beneficial aspects of advisory. This data was widely communicated through the use of posters and visual displays in the conference room where teachers participated in teacher meetings dedicated to SOAR. Teachers seemed surprised by the student survey feedback about advisory. Presenting the student feedback allowed teachers

to see the needs of our students. The use of student data helped build trust from the staff by indicating that this initiative not only is favored by students, it addresses areas that students themselves are concerned about.

### **Lessons Learned**

Part of the success of the SOAR implementation was due to staff members experiencing a recent school-wide implementation of another initiative in which teacher leadership was not as central to decision-making. Learning from the previous models of school-wide implementation, the DIDT intentionally designed an innovation that left many parts open to adaptation in order to encourage school autonomy. This approach allowed more opportunities for input from all stakeholders, especially teachers and students. Because the non-negotiable aspects of the design were agreed upon by all three innovation sites, decisions regarding the adaptations during implementation were left to each SIDT, under the guidance of NCSU and the oversight of campus administration.

Use of the PDSA cycle, which was presented to us by NCSU, was a key mode of operation that allowed the SIDT to continually improve our practices. By always being aware of how effective certain aspects of the SOAR program were, whether it be through surveys, focus groups, or just informal observations, any changes that the SIDT made were because of the study part of the PDSA cycle. Throughout the year, this process created many valuable lessons learned. In each of the main avenues to increase teacher buy-in which are mentioned above, the SIDT strived to build trust through the decisions made about professional development, interactions with other teachers, and implementing feedback through PDSA.

School-wide teacher buy-in to the vision of SOAR is strongly dependent on individuals' perceptions of the initiative as a whole, and how it impacts student achievement. Trust emerged

as a theme central to the success of teacher buy-in. Teachers must first trust that the innovation being implemented is beneficial for students. Furthermore, teachers need to trust the SIDT members to successfully implement systems that address student needs. Finally, they have to trust that have influence in the implementation process. Several more specific lessons learned regarding building trust emerged:

- Decisions need to be communicated through multiple modes to the faculty, and a rationale must always be provided with every decision to satisfy all stakeholders.
- We must move away from mass e-mails and move toward more personal modes of communication. Results were produced by using more face-to-face interactions, being aware of how the SIDT logistics person communicated to the staff through email, and conducting group discussions about the school-wide vision of SOAR. Moving forward, SIDT will strive to place transparent communication systems in place that will validate and consider all feedback and utilize PDSA to address concerns.
- The strategies used by the SIDT to garner teacher buy-in are the same ones used by effective teachers to create a sense of ownership among their students in the classroom. Conversations that took place during the design process, as well as during implementation, always went back to this idea. All stakeholders need validation, a sense of belonging to their school, and a belief of efficacy over their learning environment.
- The use of PDSA in refining SOAR allowed all stakeholders to see that this was truly an initiative that they have a part in. Sharing data, along with all other student feedback, proved to be an effective and integral step to teacher buy-in and trust. Including all stakeholders in the PDSA cycle and being transparent about the decision-making process builds belief and buy-in for SOAR.

- The manner in which the professional development was conducted had a significant impact on teacher perceptions of SOAR. They must be conducted in a way that breaks down the barrier between the SIDT and the rest of the staff to create a feeling of inclusion and genuine trust in the innovation. That is why the SIDT strived to invite non-SIDT colleagues to present the new advisory lessons, as well as create them. Additionally, the adjustment to incorporate the trainings into already allotted meeting time (faculty meetings and in-service days) was key to improved teacher perceptions of SOAR.

Building ownership is strongly connected to the stakeholders and their sense of efficacy over their environment. PDSA served as a system to effectively validate and incorporate the feedback from all stakeholders in order to build this sense that individuals have the power to make campus-wide change. Transparency in every step of the PDSA cycle builds belief in the program, as well as developing trust for those who facilitate it. Collecting data from stakeholders and allowing that data to guide the decision-making process, while ensuring transparency of these actions, empowers stakeholders of all levels connected to SOAR. Although the same PDSA process was utilized during the fall and spring semester, the increased effort for transparency in the spring semester proved to increase buy-in from the faculty. The experiences we gained as SIDT members reinforce our belief that relationships based on trust are key to making meaningful change.