

Friday Reflection

September 18, 2020

As I have shared before, it is fascinating how certain weeks prove to exhibit a certain theme. This was one of those weeks for me as I engaged in four meetings throughout the week to consider and plan our SPSA, School Plan for Student Achievement. This is our school improvement process which centers around an important document which represents much of our work. This document is central to the Tustin High School Site Council purpose. The initial meeting occurred this Monday.

School Site Council is composed of 12 people from a variety of stakeholders: 4 parents, 4 teachers, 2 students, 1 classified and myself. Each of these members, besides myself, were elected in some form or another. Our meeting Monday afternoon centered on the introduction to the group and its purpose. Another significant activity was the analysis of our SPSA from last year in preparation for creating a SPSA for this year. I was impressed with our School Site Council in our first meeting. They had good insight and they contributed meaningfully to the conversation. Our analysis was richer because of their input.

Later this week, I was part of two training meetings to support the writing of our SPSA. Early in the school year, our focus was evident as we entered continued pandemic restrictions. Based on our experience this Spring, we knew we needed to shift to one learning platform. It was just too complicated to have multiple ways of accessing the curriculum. Our district selected Schoology as our platform and Florida virtual as our foundational source of curriculum. We knew this was going to be a major shift for all of us, but we also knew it would help our learners. Using one platform and utilizing a base curriculum would give us more continuity of instruction, and we decided early on to make this one of our goals for this year.

Another pandemic induced need that surfaced last Spring was the impact of distance learning on mental health. We were so grateful that a large chunk of our Title I funds were spent last year on two additional counselors to support our EL and learners, as well as additionally potentially disengaged students. We knew these additional counselors were going to prove even more critical in this year of continued distance learning and hybrid instruction. TUSD also saw the need for increased mental health support and increased our mental health professional allotment from one part time person to an additional full time professional. It was obvious that SEL (Social-emotional learning) and mental health required attention.

A third important focus area we identified was the need to better support our EL (English Language) students. About 78% of our students identify themselves as Hispanic, and a significant portion of these students come from Spanish speaking backgrounds. About a third of our students over-all are still learning English as they simultaneously learn the various content areas. It is no doubt a huge challenge, and I am always impressed when I see our students taking on this challenge. My wife and I lived in Berlin, Germany for three

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years as young adults. We didn't know the language upon arrival and remember the challenge. I have so much more empathy after that experience for families coming to this country and learning the language. It is difficult. We analyzed data this summer which highlighted the learning challenge, specifically with reading. We knew we needed to continue to focus on EL students and support their language and academic transition.

With three important areas of focus identified, and a great deal of work already completed to plan for our work this year, the SPSA document remains. With the help of our School Site Council, Teacher Leaders and administration, we will create a document that articulates the needs above and our plan to address those needs over the course of the year. While this might sound like kind of dry work to many, I am grateful for a structure to help organize and coordinate our work. This document also helps with itemizing our budget and making sure we spend our money consistent with our goals and areas of focus.

As a result of our work this year, we want to make sure we deliver continuity of instruction by making sure our students can access their classes and curriculum through one platform, Schoology. We want to make sure that our students increase their SEL or mental health, despite the current challenges we face. And finally, we want to show improvement in reading among our EL students to support their language transition. These are big and important goals. The SPSA document is important, but the most important aspect of our work is the work itself.

I have been so proud of how our teachers, staff and students have approached distance learning. We still have work to do as grades emerge, and there still exists a gap for some between turning on the computer (which almost all are doing) and completing the assignments and activities (where there is still room for growth). However, we have a good foundation established from which we can build. The structures are there and the routines established. Now it comes down to execution. Tustin High School has traditionally been a school that executes well, and I see that continuing on from distance learning to our hybrid model of learning. No matter the mode, our Tillers will prevail. I look forward to making this year a growing and learning experience on which we can proudly and warmly reflect.

Go Tillers!

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