



# CELEBRATION: AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF CULTURE

Intentional, shared celebrations build stronger schools



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## PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture*

Our staff recently hosted teacher-leaders from another school district in our state who are in the initial phase of laying their foundation as a PLC (Professional Learning Community, as defined by Solution Tree). It's always an honor for our staff to share our story and the important lessons we've learned along our own journey as a PLC. Whenever we have visitors, I try to make sure some of our own teacher leaders are a part of the visit. They have a valuable lens on the work from the classroom and team level, and sharing the journey with

others is a great way to reinforce, for ourselves, the things that are foundational to our own success and accomplishments as a school.

### USING CELEBRATION TO MOVE FORWARD

During this most recent visit, one of the visiting teachers commented that, in spite of how difficult and daunting the work can be sometimes, the culture of collaboration and commitment to growth our staff created at Hidden River shines through. One of our teachers quickly responded with an insight that served as a great reminder for me as a

“What allows us to press forward, through any challenge, is the way we celebrate each other and our progress along the way.”

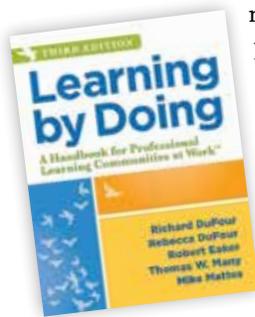
principal. She said, “What allows us to press forward, through any challenge, is the way we celebrate each other and our progress along the way.” She talked about many of the ways we recognize each other for the effort and commitment it takes to work

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toward achieving our purpose as a school. As I sat there and listened to her (which was in itself a celebration for me as a leader), it struck me how the things we do to celebrate at Hidden River have not only propelled us forward and kept us united on the things that matter the most, they've become a critical element of our culture that our staff highly values.

Throughout our journey as a staff, there are a few key lessons learned and principles we followed as a part of the process of using celebration to move us forward. To start, and probably most important of all, we use celebration to support and reinforce the foundational beliefs and behaviors we agree are most critical to achieving our goals as a school. For your school, what are those foundational beliefs and behaviors?

If you have yet to wrestle with that question as a staff, getting clarity on what is most important for your school would be a great first step. The book, "Learning by Doing" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, Mattos, 2016) is an excellent resource and road-map for any school in the beginning phases of defining the foundational components of mission, vision, collective commitments and goals — what they define as the "pillars" upon which everything else in the school is built.



Without those foundational components in place, your celebrations may or may not be reinforcing what you want and, ultimately, could be reinforcing the wrong behaviors. For us at Hidden River, our foundational tenants include:

- Serving our students in highly functioning collaborative teams;
- Continuously learning and growing together;

- Putting the needs of students ahead of our needs as adults; and
- Ensuring every student receives what they need in order to achieve mastery on the skills we believe are essential in middle school.

As a result, the celebration structures we have in place are intentionally purposed to reinforce those essential elements of who we are and what we believe in.

## PLANNED OPPORTUNITIES

The second important lesson we learned around celebration is the processes and structures for it need to be intentionally built into the natural rhythm and flow of the workday and workweek. Because it is so easy to focus on all of the things that need attention or are not going well, authentic and purposeful celebration can often be forgotten or left to chance. These planned opportunities do not have to be big ordeals or special events that feel uncomfortable and awkward. When the structures are simple and frequent, the celebrations become a natural part of the day or week that staff members look forward to.

For example, every week our admin team sends out a short "nuts-and-bolts" type of email that captures some of the information staff members need that we intentionally keep off our collaborative team and guiding coalition meeting agendas. Within that weekly email, we always highlight at least one staff member or team for an "above and beyond" type of effort that is an example of one of the tenants that we believe is important in furthering our goals as a school.

At every staff meeting, we set aside the first five minutes for what we call our "staff spotlight" and any staff member can recognize one of their colleagues for doing something that fits into what we believe is important

as a school. Those moments are priceless — at the end of a sometimes long and exhausting day, our staff get to pat each other on the back and bring a little positive mojo back to the room. I can't even count the number of times those simple celebrations lifted my spirits.

“ As I've started doing this, I've noticed that it's causing me to pay more attention to what's important, which is a good thing! ”

Another example is our weekly collaborative team or leadership coalition meetings, where our teams take a few minutes to share an "All Means All" story or two — stories of specific students that have met mastery on an essential skill, or maybe a student that finally met his or her behavior goals for the week. This quick storytelling opportunity is built into all of our team and coalition agendas because it helps our staff remember we have committed to all students at Hidden River and it reinforces our belief that all students can meet the learning expectations we have for them.

Those are just a few examples of ways we built celebration into the natural ebb and flow of our work. The key point is that it is easy, simple, and necessary!

## SHARED CELEBRATING

The final lesson we learned and principle we try to follow is when many opportunities are created, everyone can be the celebrator and everyone can be celebrated. To cement celebration as an integral part of the culture, one or two people shouldn't be the only ones responsible for recognizing others. That's not sustainable and that doesn't foster

ownership of the critical elements important to your school. When you allow for many opportunities for staff to recognize each other and those structures and processes happen naturally and often, it causes all staff members to participate in the process and it allows for many winners.

Over time, your staff will begin to look forward to those moments, and as you sit back and watch them recognize and celebrate each other, you will begin to notice that your staff is paying attention to the cultural elements that you are trying to reinforce. It has a snowball effect in that the opportunities not only lift up a staff member or a team for their actions and beliefs (which is what we want), it also calls attention back to what's important for your school, which in turn embeds those critical elements further into the fabric of your culture. It is amazing to watch that process unfold, especially over the course of a couple of years.

Author, speaker and RTI expert Mike Mattos, when referring to the work of a PLC, will often say, "If this work was easy, everyone would be doing it!" He is spot-on in that this life-saving work we are engaged in together is often challenging, daunting, and difficult, which increases and highlights the need for regular celebration within our schools. When we celebrate the things that matter to us, it re-energizes us in the work and moves us forward in accomplishing great things for the kids that we serve.

So, what's your next move in adding opportunities for celebration at your school?

For me, as I continue to look for ways to improve in this area as a leader, I've started leaving one hand-written note for a staff member or colleague every day that connects an action or belief back to what is important at Hidden River. It's simple, it literally takes less than 5 minutes, and it's intentional.

As I've started doing this, I've noticed that it's causing me to pay more attention to what's important, which is a good thing!

Celebration is a key driver in growing forward, as a staff, as you work together to create the school you have envisioned together. Don't underestimate the power of it. Once it's embedded and becomes a normal part of how you operate, it can't be stopped, and it truly will cement the actions and beliefs that you have agreed are most important in your school. ■

*Brett Wille has been the principal at Hidden River Middle School in Monroe School District for five years. Because of the commitment, hard work and dedication of the staff, Hidden River is one of 42 middle schools in the United States recognized by Solution Tree as a model Professional Learning Community.*

