

YOU MAKE THE CALL

Building a Distributed Leadership Structure to Improve School Culture



Travis Drake

*Prairie High School,
Battleground PS*

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Planning with Data,
Improving Instruction, Managing Resources*

We, as administrators, are not necessarily the smartest people in the building.

Keeping that in mind, we at Prairie High School structured our building leadership teams to make sure our administrators don't operate under the false narrative that because we have our jobs, we must then have the intelligence. Simply not true.

When I started as an assistant principal at Prairie High in 2010, there was a tremendous amount of distrust amongst some of the staff. This isn't a knock on the principal at the time, simply an observation. I remember having a staff member come to me and ask if our admin team was reading their emails. I thought she was kidding, but when I realized she wasn't, it became apparent we had a lot of work to do.

Fast forward to 2018, and our yearly survey shows 100 percent of our staff members "like working at Prairie." We haven't had a building union rep meeting all year and any small problem that comes to the forefront stays small, big problems are resolved quickly, and we move forward. Overall, there is a general feeling we are all in this together.

“What happened is we walked our talk when we say the admin team isn't the smartest group of people in the building and our role is to support the mission of the building, not lock ourselves in an office and dictate everything that happens.”

MAKING A SHIFT

How did the shift happen?

Not surprisingly, a few of our teachers approached me a couple of years ago with the idea of flattening our building leadership structure. We were operating under the traditional School Improvement Team (SIT), led by a group of teachers passionate about the success of Prairie. Unfortunately, SIT had the reputation of simply being a few power-hungry teachers in the back pocket of the principal. When I sat down with the two teachers to talk about shifting our structure, we came up with the following:

The idea is simple: We have staff members on our Student Support Team (SST), Faculty Support Team (FST), and then of course, the traditional Department Chairs. Between these three teams, we have over 50 percent of our certificated staff in decision-making roles. Our next challenge is to increase our number of classified staff (they can join either the SST or FST, but we haven't figured out

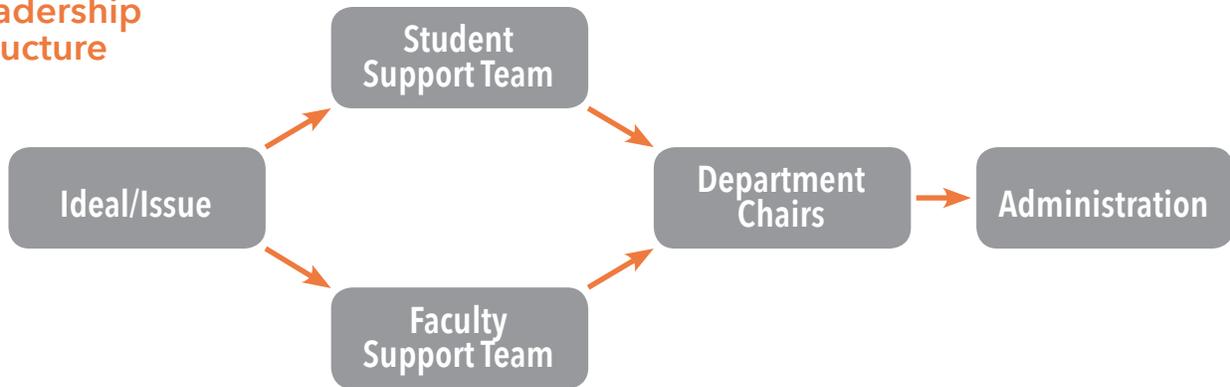
a schedule to allow more classified staff members to participate). Here's how it breaks out:

TEAM LEADS:

We have a SST Lead and a FST Lead, both paid a stipend out of our general budget. These leads create the agenda and lead the meetings. Because both teams are decision-making groups, it is imperative each Team Lead understand the importance of their role. We have processes in place to identify the leads each year to ensure we don't allow any one person take the role and never relinquish it.

Another imperative role in our leadership structure is the Communications Lead. This person works with the Team Leads to create and communicate the agenda for the monthly meetings. They also take notes and email out the minutes for each team, making sure people will always be informed, even if they choose not to participate.

Distributive Leadership Structure



WORK GROUPS:

Another main component is the formation of work groups. A work group meets for a specific purpose and usually has an end date (once the task is completed, they no longer meet). This allows many people to get involved without the commitment of meeting throughout the year. Each work group operates under either the SST or the FST and any decision must be approved by those teams (work groups are not decision making groups).

COMMITTEES:

We still have standing groups who meet year after year. For example, we have a Recognition Committee that meets throughout the year to talk about student recognition, as well as graduation. Any existing committee we had prior to the formation of the SST and FST we put under the ‘umbrella’ of those teams.

OVERALL PROCESS:

Team Leads and admin meet the last Friday of each month to develop the agenda for the following month. We have our SST and FST meetings the first week of each month (Tuesday for SST and Thursday for FST). Afterwards, we report out on the team meetings to the Department Chairs. The work groups and committees meet

throughout the month. We also share all this info through our weekly staff newsletter.

OUTCOMES

The administrative team hasn’t met as a group to decide on something for the building in a long, long time. At first, there was some hesitation (what is our role if we don’t get to make

any decisions?), but none of these concerns became our reality.

What happened is we walked our talk when we say the admin team isn’t the smartest group of people in the building and our role is to support the mission of the building, not lock ourselves in an office and dictate everything that happens. ■

It’s Time You Considered
Becoming a District Leader





SEATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

Seattle Pacific University’s Educational Leadership programs can help you get there. Accelerate your career while combining best practices in leadership with effective use of educational policy and research. We offer outstanding academics, flexible program designs, and convenience so you can become a catalyst for change.

CHOOSE FROM

- School Executive Leadership/Superintendent Certification*
- School Executive Leadership/Program Administrator Certification*
- Education [EdD] /Superintendent Certification: 3-year option
- Education [EdD or PhD]

*For gainful employment disclosure information, visit spu.edu/gainfulemployment.

For more information, contact gradadmissions@spu.edu, or call 800-601-0603.

spu.edu/EDL