



Recommendations for Improvement East Dubuque Unit District 119

Performance Learning Inc. consultants Dr. Lloyd C. Kilmer and Dr. PJ Caposey spent two days in East Dubuque meeting in focus groups with as many stakeholders as possible. Throughout the two days, the following sessions were conducted to engage in dialogue about the East Dubuque school district:

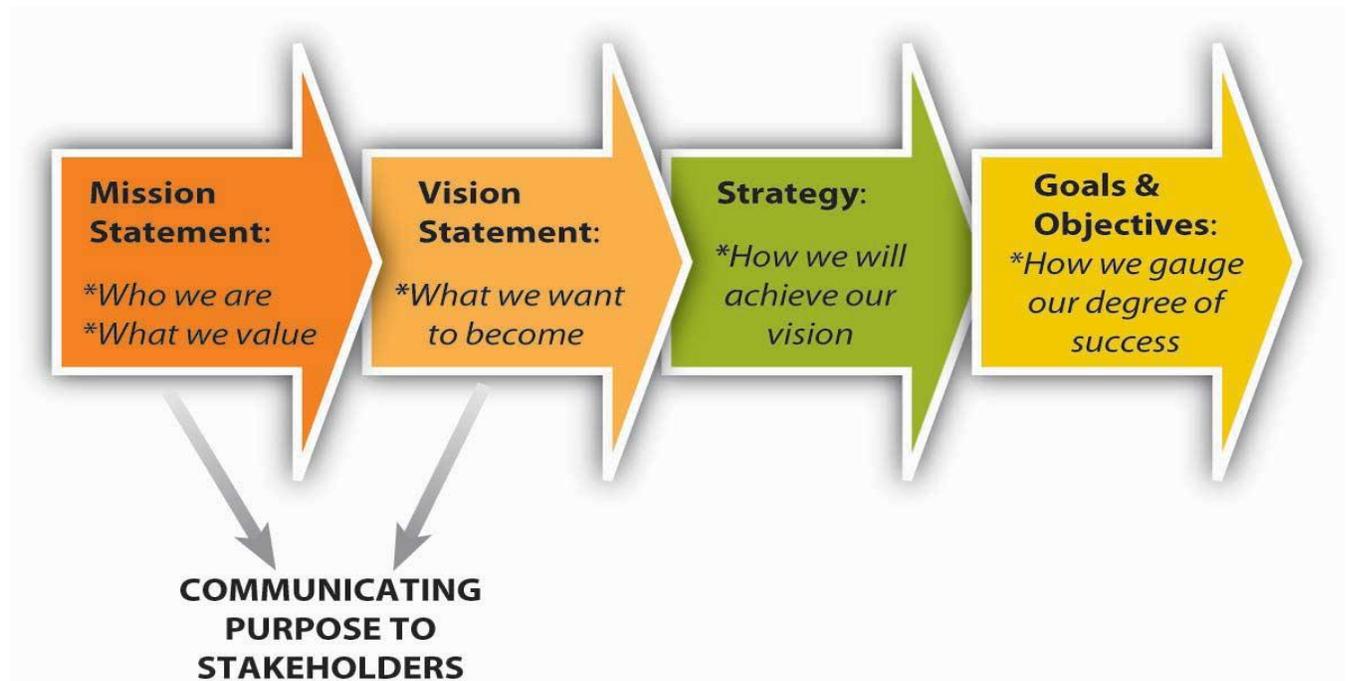
On December 7th Performance Learning issued their findings in a report delivered to the School Board President and Vice President. As a secondary service provided by Performance Learning, a set of recommendations for improvement are provided in this document. To create this document, Performance Learning not only examined the findings from the focus group activities, but examined all data sets and supplementary information provided to the district by Superintendent Lindeman. For transparency, these data consulted consisted largely of financial information provided in the audit, academic performance available through the school report card, and cultural information contained in the “5 Essentials” survey results.

Given the totality of the information consulted, Performance Learning will provide four (4) recommended next steps based on the data collected, shared experience of the consultants, and research based best practices. In school and district reform there are limitless possibilities for improvement, but our attempt is to identify the handful of efforts we believe would produce the highest yield results.

1) Mission, Vision, and Values

The backbone of most successful organizations rests within its mission, vision, and values (MVV). While elements of this triumvirate of organizational improvement may exist within East Dubuque, they are not serving their intended purpose of guiding the behaviors and decision-making processes of the district. In the absence of these structures, decision-making, autocratic and unilateral tendencies emerge at all levels, from building administration to district administration to the School Board. Additionally, it becomes commonplace for everyone with authority to attempt to solve the problems they are made aware of and there is no commitment to process or systematicity. Individuals begin to act based on their own vision and values instead those of the organization. This leads to miscommunication, mistrust, and misalignment.

An article from University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing “Principles of Management,” explains the purpose of the MVV exceptionally well and in a concise manner. An excerpt from their [larger article](#) on the topic states: Mission and vision statements play three critical roles: (1) communicate the purpose of the organization to stakeholders, (2) inform strategy development, and (3) develop the measurable goals and objectives by which to gauge the success of the organization’s strategy. These interdependent, cascading roles, and the relationships among them, are summarized in the following figure:



Suggested Next Steps:

Conduct a meeting with key stakeholder groups to openly and transparently discuss the mission, vision, and values of the organization. This meeting can be held in a variety of formats and completed in a variety of ways and still be effective and successful. The importance of the activity is establishing (or redefining) a mission/vision you will use to set goals, establish values that members of the organization hold, identify behaviors in alignment with these values and hold those leaders accountable who do not behave appropriately. Once these standards are established, make a standing agenda item at School Board and Leadership Team meetings to review and to remind one another of the agreed upon backbone of the organization.

2) Goal Setting

A district must have direction. In times of crisis this often becomes lost. The goal simply is to survive and continue to keep your head above water. Once this happens, and goals no longer start to drive behavior, many negative things occur as a result. To name a few, the status quo becomes desirable, individuals allow personal agendas to supersede the goals of the district, and without a target in place which demands new actions it becomes very difficult to change organizational behaviors.

The clearest example of this is in the realm of finance. No group that we spoke to could articulate a financial goal for the organization. Conversely, most of the groups commented on how financially deficient that the district was and how the financial difficulties of the district played a part in the district's struggles. With all that information considered, the audit revealed a perfect 4.0 score for the district on the state's Financial Profile Rating Scale. Without having a crystal-clear idea on what the financial goal is for the district, it becomes impossible to make difficult decisions with clarity and conviction. To explain further, the elementary teachers voiced strong displeasure at the lack of paraprofessionals available to help with before and after school duties. This personnel issue created a situation where collaboration and data sharing became exceedingly difficult. Pending the development of financial goals for the district, this addition of 'man-hours' may or may not be feasible but illustrates the lack of a coherent financial plan.

Harvard's University goal setting research in educational settings reveals that learning, motivation, and self-regulation can be improved when goals that are concrete, proximal, meaningful and optimally difficult are pursued. SMART goals help to define and articulate a process for goal-setting that helps the leaders who are conducting the goal setting practice achieve optimal impact. (A S.M.A.R.T. goal is defined as one that is specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and timebound)

Suggested Next Steps:

The School Board should identify no more than four broad goals. Typical goals may be thematic around the topics of finance, academic achievement, and school culture. Once the goal areas are identified, the School Board will work with the Superintendent to determine short and long-term metrics to measure their progress toward the stated goals. Correspondingly, the Superintendent will work with each school and department to format individual school or department goals (as appropriate) that are aligned with the district goals. The School Board and superintendent should create a process for supervision over these goals and the corresponding tactics used to achieve them including reporting out at regularly scheduled public meetings.

3) Relationships Matter

Relationships matter and are strained at nearly every level of the district. The strained relationships have eroded trust and make systematic organizational improvement nearly impossible in its current state. There are many instances and decisions to point to in why the relationships have devolved over time in the district. However, two major and reparable causes are (1) the propensity of leaders in the district to "try and fix" instead of "lead" and (2) the lack of accountability at all levels.

To explain, the School Board is involved in seemingly many day-to-day or operational issues. These issues should be left to the School Board's sole employee (The Superintendent) to carry out. If the employee does not carry out the daily activities to the satisfaction of the School Board, then the members of the Board have a variety of accountability actions ranging from coaching the employee, to recording leadership impact on performance evaluations, to disciplining her. Likewise, the superintendent should be overseeing and supporting her principals and directors as they lead their buildings and correspondingly holding them accountable if they are not being successful or upholding organizational norms and values. With the meddling that is occurring, and no significant accountability measures being employed, organizational relationships erode. These situations have a technical fix that can be employed.

There are also relationship issues that do not have a technical fix. Bonds and trust have been broken and are in a pretty dire state within, and across, many segments of the organization. These can only be remedied through intentional action, transparent communication, values-based behavior, and time. Key decisions need to be made to determine the viability of the repair of these relationships and make key decisions accordingly.

Suggested Next Steps:

Have honest and open conversations between the School Board and Leadership Team as to what and where the broken relationships are within those two essential stakeholder groups. From this conversation, determine what is salvageable and if repairing those relationships are worth the time and effort necessary to do so. This may require an impartial third party to facilitate.

Irrespective of those decisions, clear protocols need to be set in place for roles, responsibility, and accountability. Short term fixes or solutions are causing far more long-term work and stress than is easily perceived in the moment.

Many districts have successful protocols in place, but instead of adopting a boilerplate version from the outside, we encourage that the district work through this complex task transparently and together. A School Board sub-committee and senior leaders in the organization could complete this work and share their findings at the Board level to achieve consensus.

Most importantly, once those decisions are made there must be strength and confidence in the assumed positions. Creating protocols to violate them and not provide accountability is debilitating and will serve to place the district in an even more precarious position.

4) Communication Planning and Norms

Objectively, the district is performing relatively well. Given the expenditure per pupil data, East Dubuque performs academically well. Additionally, the financial rating of 4.0 is extremely impressive. These successes seem lost on all community, faculty, and staff as the district struggles through their current difficulties. In times such as this, strategic communication efforts become even more critical for the district.

The issues the district is facing include uneven proactive communication strategies and vast disparities in reactive response times. Items that multiple stakeholder groups pointed to include the many trials and tribulations the district has faced attempting to find a math instructor at the high school and the chaperoning of the summer trip. Additionally, parents pointed to many similar products and efforts taking place to communicate with parents ranging from the teacher level all the way to the district level.

Suggested Next Steps:

Create a comprehensive communication plan. This plan should be made at the administrative level and brought to the School Board for critique, recommendations, and ultimately approval. This plan should clearly articulate a strategy for communication. This includes the type of information shared and on what platform such information should be shared. This is a complex task that must take into consideration that schools need to communicate to many different stakeholder groups in many ways including print, website, and social media.

Secondarily, norms for return communication must be implemented. A simple rule of all communication must be acknowledged within one day and resolved within 1 week would reform many of the negative opinions on the district's communication. A rule or norm such as this may be met with skepticism as to its feasibility, but this is eminently doable. The vernacular is also important, i.e. resolution and acknowledged. For example, a leader's day is filled with all to wall meetings and concludes around 6pm and there are 32 emails left in your inbox. It seems overwhelming to reply to each and every one. Most likely, of the 32 only 15 or so need a response from you and an email simply stating, "I have read your email and will get back to within (insert time period here) days with an answer" goes a long way to re-establishing trust. Of course, follow through is incredibly important. It is incredibly important that this behavior defines your attempt at internal and external communications.

For complaints, a simple acronym can help define your communications: LEARN

L – Listen

E – Empathize

A – Apologize

R – Resolve

N – NOW! – End call or escalate

Respectfully Submitted,

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