

Listen, Lead, and Live:

Tips to Steer a Solid School Community

By Meenoo Rami

It's September, classrooms around the country have been cleaned and rearranged, and the smell of freshly sharpened pencils hangs in the air. Teachers have scoured every inch of every piece of furniture. Others have spent the money from summer jobs to buy the supplies students will need during the year. Classroom libraries are being organized from books found in used bookstores, garage sales, and donations.

There is a sense of hope, starting anew, and recommitment to our craft in these times. However, over the coming weeks, will this spirit wither away? The demands of our daily work take a toll on teachers, and stress corrodes the hope that started the year. The tension and anxiety from testing ensue way before the tests are administered; the stress begins with test prep that takes place months in advance of the test itself. How can school communities acknowledge and address growing stress within our profession? When this energy runs low, what is the role of the school leaders?

It is not a revelation that teachers are stressed. Although there are many negative implications of this stress, ranging from high teacher attrition rates to investment of billions of dollars on hiring and training new teachers, one effect is rarely discussed. Are we, knowingly or unknowingly, passing our anxiety on to our students, and what is the long-term impact on them? Anyone who has taught for a measure of time knows instinctively that our energy, positive or negative, shapes the work we do with students and impacts how our students feel in school. When our students see us take the focus



away from their learning to their scores, they are being asked to recalibrate their understanding of what it means to be a learner in this space. This can be shocking and confusing for any student.

Although the climate of testing in schools is a much bigger topic than I can address here, there are some concrete things each school community can do to protect students from the fallout of our test anxiety and even thrive in these times. As leaders of learning communities, principals and administrators can do a great deal to keep the community moving forward. Here are some ways that building leaders can turn the tide and better support their teachers.

Listen . . .

Many teachers may simply need you to listen to them about their day, that difficult sixth period in their schedule, or a new approach they are trying in their classroom.

Taking the time to simply listen will empower teachers to process their thinking about teaching and will help them to be more reflective. This simple act will enable them to listen to students more attentively and supportively.

Lead . . .

Take time to celebrate the good that's happening in the building. Highlight the good work that's happening in the building by giving



shout-outs in meetings and posting pictures on your own or your school's social media sites. This is an important way to recognize the great work already happening in the classrooms and to give parents a peek into the work we do every day with children.

Provide time for teachers to learn with and from each another.

You don't need to be alone when it comes to being the instructional leader your faculty needs. Create opportunities for teachers to share their expertise during meetings. Recently, I sat in on a session led by my colleagues Matthew Kay and Pearl Jonas on creating meaningful conversation opportunities in our classrooms. It was an amazing way to learn from colleagues and had an immediate impact in the classrooms of many of those who attended the meeting.

Live . . .

Extend the ethic of care to your teachers. We often talk about the ethic of care—the ways our students need to feel cared for in our schools—but why do we leave teachers out of this care? When their personal lives become challenging, be flexible in your expectations so that teachers can find ways to balance both their personal and professional responsibilities. This is not about bending rules; it's about treating teachers with the same respect that you would extend to students.

Monitor your own stress and anxiety and examine how it affects your teachers. No doubt, testing is testing all of us, but be mindful how your stress is being transferred to your teachers. Find ways to connect with other administrators and share strategies to reduce your own stress.

If you're an administrator reading this, I want to thank you on behalf of teachers everywhere, and I extend an invitation to try these ideas in your building and report back your experiences. I look forward to your responses. Thanks!



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