

Leading Change Through Service

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Leaders are acutely aware that enduring and impactful organizational change is difficult to accomplish and even more difficult to sustain. Service to other educators is a powerful approach to naturally promote professional reflection and intentional change. Community High School District 117 developed a service program, Relief Through Leadership (RTL), to assist communities, schools, and teachers in Puerto Rico impacted by poverty, recent natural disasters, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Supported by the Board of Education, a group of dedicated educators raised money through individual, civic, and corporate sponsors to provide refurbished technology and professional development in instructional strategies to teachers. Teams of teachers skilled in instructional strategies and technology integration into the classroom delivered three days of professional development to their colleagues in Puerto Rico. Through impactful service and reflection, teachers' personal and professional self-worth is bolstered likely improving the retention of skillful teachers. An increase in student engagement has been observed with participating teachers along with the intrinsic value of assisting teachers in Puerto Rico.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether your organization is the top in its industry or at the bottom, there is always a need for continuous improvement. As an organization, you move either forward or backwards: there is not status quo. Therefore, the question for leadership is, "How do you effect positive change in an organization that is both enduring and impactful?" At Community High School District 117, serving the communities of Antioch, Lake Villa, and Lindenhurst (north of Chicago, Illinois), we have found one answer: service. Through providing service opportunities to our staff over the summer has increased morale, aided in retention, and has provided us an opportunity to expand our educational influence both locally and internationally.

In September of 2017, Hurricanes Irma and Maria moved across the island of Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands over the span of several weeks. The impact to the island was not just physical, but also educational. Many people left the island before the hurricanes arrived and caused a loss of quality educators and quality students. What remained after the destruction was chaos, loss, and a feeling of concern for the future. As leaders, Dr. Jim McKay and Eric Hamilton collaborated to find a way to provide help and support to the island. Thus, the program Relief Through Leadership (RTL) was created.

Initially, the effort consisted of providing physical labor to help paint and patch a high-poverty school. Upon reflection, the leadership questioned if there was a way to have a greater impact in addition to physical reconstruction. The idea was generated to provide professional development to Puerto Rican teachers on how to integrate technology into the classroom.

NEED FOR SERVICE

As this idea was being generated, several area Superintendents were discussing the fact that they were coming up to the point of obsolescence on their Chromebooks. These districts had engaged in a 1:1 computer to student initiative approximately four years prior and were challenged with not knowing what to do with their computers. There is a cost to recycling them and you cannot throw them out. Many were asking if any other school or schools would accept or want them. This prompted the RTL team to collaborate with the Lake County High Schools Technology Campus to receive the computers, have students review them, wipe them of any saved files, and make any necessary repairs to have them up and running again. Initially, 300 Chromebooks were donated from various schools, which were shipped to the island. In the summer of 2019, 21 teachers and 19 support personnel (both educational and business partners) trained approximately 100 Puerto Rican teachers over the span of three days. In keeping with RTL's original focus from 2018, we did engage in physical labor and painted the common area of a vocational high school. The impact of this has caused a change in our organization and a retention of our high-quality teaching staff.

We are fully aware that there is a teacher shortage in the United States. In a report released by the Economic Policy Institute in March of 2019, they reported that the shortage is growing. Further, their report indicated that the shortage was having an even greater impact on schools of high poverty. This shortage has a long-term impact on students, staff, and the community. The lack of consistent faculty due to high turnover has an impact on a student's ability to learn. (Weiss, 2019) As Tucker and Stronge report in their work, teachers have transformative powers and a high impact on student achievement. (Stronge, 2005) Further, staff instability causes the community to devalue education as there is no consistency and the families are not reaping the benefits of an educated youth. (Weiss, 2019)

Through providing service opportunities for our staff, we are able to increase employee engagement and retention. (Cultivating Capital, 2020) Further, the State of Corporate Citizenship 2020 examined how corporate citizenship efforts contribute to business objectives including attracting and retaining customers and the development of innovative new products. Additionally, 90% of the companies surveyed reported improved employee engagement, increased commitment to organizational values, and a positive impact on community branding. (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2020) Additionally, we have seen an impact on their ability to work as a member of a team and to collaborate with others, which is also confirmed by the same study. (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2020) Members of the community have also expressed their appreciation for the work being done and it has increased our branding, not only in the local communities but also throughout the county.

TEACHER TESTIMONIALS

Anecdotally, our staff has commented on the power of the service. Their statements supports the benefits of volunteering such as building community spirit, networking with like-minded professionals, and setting a model for your family. (Cox, 2012) Some of their responses are:

RTL is important because it is crucial that as educators, we continue to cultivate and establish professional relationships that challenge the conventional strategies of teaching. I try to inspire my students to actively engage in civics and instill a sense of pride and responsibility of helping people in need. It is important that we continue to participate in opening ourselves up to new experiences, explore opportunities, and share commonalities.

Leona Swieton (CHSD117, Lake Villa, IL)

I don't get to collaborate with many professionals outside of the educational world, so for all of us to come together with our different backgrounds was a special experience. There is something about being able to work with individuals over several days, get to know them, talk to them, and help them that leaves a profound impact on you as a volunteer. I felt very impacted last year by both the teachers and their gratitude for our project.

Michaela Towne (CUSD95, Lake Zurich, IL)

The service project motivates me, enriches my teaching, and more importantly, makes me better. RTL has changed me as a person and as an educator. The goals of RTL, to work with and assist educators, is why I feel it is of extreme importance.

Rich Drobny (District 212, Leyden, IL)

Making connections with teachers and learning from each other, helping others in need, gaining a better perspective of how educators "work" with kids with limited resources, utilizing my Spanish skills and learning from my Boricua friends was a meaningful experience.

Carlye Hamilton (CUSD95, Lake Zurich, IL)

RTL is important because teachers teaching teachers can be very impactful and I feel that globally we should be sharing our practice. The best PD is when teachers share what works for them and share their ideas.

Melissa Garcia (CHSD117, Lake Villa, IL)

CONCLUSION

Change occurs because members of an organization reflect on where they are, where they want to be, and how to get there. Throughout the process of engaging our teachers in service to teachers in Puerto Rico, we have been able to further accomplish our mission of "Igniting passion and discovery in every student." Our retention of high-quality instructors and positive impact on the communities both locally and internationally has only begun. An increase in student engagement both here and in Puerto Rico has also been observed. As we continue to work with the present educators in Puerto Rico, we know we will influence the future lives of students.

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