

My Principal Uses The “F-Word!”

Transforming Organizations in Critical Condition

Dr. Christopher Bonn

The Students Aren’t Lost, We Are

Recently, I have seen a decline in schools throughout the nation. I have worked in both large urban schools as well as smaller rural schools; in Arizona and California. The pattern remains the same. Parents, and students are opting for a more customized education and emulating the Burger King, Starbuck, Walmart Super Center and Amazon. Many may ask, what are the differences? The current generation of students are natives to a digital or customizable scenario what I would call the dot com (.com) generation. They want to customize all their experiences and make life more covenant. Many would argue this is the demise of this generation and has created a society of entitlement and children that lack work ethic and coping skills. Students are being home schooled, completing school online, attending specialized charter schools, paying for private education and even opting to test out school completely.

Schools throughout the country are trying to stop the attrition and exodus of students from our school systems. Yet, before schools start a massive and expensive recruitment campaign, they should first seek to understand why students are leaving. These campaigns have little or no effect and for everyone student that returns to traditional public schools many more are leaving, and districts haven’t been able to make up the difference. Unfortunately, for our schools the situation continues to deteriorate when students leave so does the revenue stream that employs the personnel needed to keep a school operational and the comprehensive nature of the school declines as non-essential classes and programs are cut and or eliminated in an effort to reduce the budget.

The question that needs to be asked; why students are leaving traditional comprehensive schools? This is an extensive list of critical causes but is not exhaustive. Comprehensive Traditional Public Schools have lost their ability to be comprehensive by cutting programs and non-essential instruction

* + Physical Education
  + Art
  + Music
  + Drama
  + Career and Technical Education
  + Field Trips
  + Libraries
  + Advanced Placement Classes
  + Debate
  + Athletics
  + School Sponsored Events (Homecoming / Prom)
  + Counselors

Schools lack the technology and infrastructure to keep up with the 21st Century and real-world situations

* + Lack of computers
  + Digital Libraries
  + Uninterrupted Internet Access for every student simultaneously
  + Secure and Safe Systems

Inadequate equipment

* Lack of qualified and effective education professionals
* Obsolete instructional and classroom materials and furniture
* The facilities are antiquated

The scope and sequence of curriculum and classes are still aligned (similar) to a class schedule and order of events from fifty (50) years ago.

* Lack FUN!

It shouldn’t be a surprise that students are leaving traditional schools that begin or at least have students standing at the bus stop before the sun rises in the elements to attend a school that begins at 7:30am in the morning. The argument for not starting school later in the morning is often an argument in favor of athletics or extra-curricular activities. Several studies by prestigious universities in Oregon and Minnesota have concluded beginning school later is better for student cognitive function and has other health benefits. Not to mention it is better aligned to parent work schedules and student preference.

I would even argue we should be offering a longer day and allow students to align their schedules to make the best use of time. For example, schools could still begin at 7:30am in the morning and end at 4:00pm and set a standard for time in the seat. Parents and students could then plan and schedule their school day to make best use of their time. Schools could also build enrichment activities and tutoring into the school day instead of find revenue and resources that are lacking and dwindling annually to make these essential functions work. There are extensive arguments about this practice including the cost of staffing. I would argue and could prove the school is already in service but the classrooms are empty so the cost of utilities would be minimal. You could flex your staffing, just like the students. On every campus there are staff members who prefer working early mornings and going home early. There are staff that would prefer coming in late and staying late. There may be working mothers or fathers who would like to split their schedule and have longer lunch so they could spend time with an infant that is still nursing to check in on another family member with health concerns. If a student was able to obtain all their seat time (classroom instructional hours) in four days they could take a three-day weekend to travel, work, take advanced level classes at a college. This list is extensive, and I am sure everyone gets the point. As you can see the school is now becoming customized.

Traditional comprehensive public schools must also take notice from private schools and charter schools. These schools look at the students as a customer and allow these students to advocate for their own education. For example, if a student wants to take Geography and World History their Freshman year in high school they aren’t prohibited because the curriculum map (scope and sequence) prohibit it until the sophomore year. If a student wants to take health their senior year they are allowed. In many schools across the country the classes and contents are highly prescriptive and restrictive. In Arizona, many school districts require students take Physical Education. Physical Education isn’t required by the state, but districts have opted to require it for graduation. This increases the credit requirement therefore, increasing the revenue needed to fund the additional resources, equipment and staffing. Recently, in a large urban school district in Arizona; three (3) out of every four (4) students assigned to Physical Education are there for remediation or credit recovery because they failed it one or more attempts. This increase in student rosters requires additional staffing. In this school district with over 53,000 students the costs for the additional staffing is more than two (2) million dollars. This money is then robbed from other areas that are more engaging putting these classes and programs at risk. Physical Education is necessary and important but why not make it an elective like art, music, drama, auto, culinary arts, poetry? Proponents of this practice argue we must require Physical Education to curb the obesity epidemic in the United States. I can go on about the statics, but this is supposed to be a ‘FUN’ book to read so I will respond by saying, “*How is, that working for you?*” These kids that are failing aren’t having FUN being in there, they don’t dress out and they don’t participate. Why not put them in a class they would benefit and enjoy. These students have figured out, there are several online schools and charter schools that don’t require Physical Education so why am I staying here and being tortured. I will ask schools a profound question, how can you afford to fund programs by stealing revenue and resources from programs that are working and performing well? More importantly, if leaders and legislators did a quick analysis of the data it would reveal the problem with forcing students to take classes and courses not required or meaningful to the students often results in increased discipline incidents further resulting in suspension and referrals. This also effects student’s attendance and funding in schools and more importantly enrages our students.

I would also like to comment about boredom and complacency in the classroom. If you were to ask to observe a classroom today and sit through a lesson or activity, it wouldn’t look much different to classrooms fifty (50) years ago. There are a few outliers really engaging students and having student apply their new obtained knowledge in real work applications. For example, the automotive teacher using math in class to teach student conversions or pressure ratios, the Physical Education teacher engaging the students in health, wellness and nutrition while having them graph this fitness or explain anaerobic versus aerobic exercises. What about lifelong fitness and nutrition, turning the gymnasium into a roller-skating rink; teaching mountain bike safety; skateboard safety; yoga; kayaking; urban and nature hiking. While in California the school district I am serving has a bowling alley one block from the school and it is often empty. I would argue if we change our mental models, we could make our classes more relevant, and FUN! Many classrooms today, are lecture based and students fill out worksheets all day long. Even more problematic are those classrooms that teach from a textbook and they flip the pages every day. Even in schools with one-to-one technology, many of the students aren’t being engaged. They rely on the technology to be the teacher or the curriculum. This creates boredom and many of our students have found out they can do the same thing online and work at their own pace. They don’t have to get up early in the morning and get dressed. They don’t have to suffer the elements waiting for a bus to get to school. They don’t have to stand in the lunch line for boring and flavorless cafeteria lunches. They can stay in the comfort of their own homes and do the same exact thing they are doing at school. In fact, we still ring a bell to dismiss students or have students line up after recess. We still have our classrooms arranged like factory assembly lines from the industrial revolution. Science experiments have ceased or are very limited because our schools lack the financial means to purchase the supplies. Our students are buried in a textbook. Heck, the technology is so horrible in most schools the teacher isn’t even able to show a video of an experiment or real-world application. If the student were to stay home, they could watch it on the internet. The fact is our students are powering down when they come to school.

Recently, when my oldest daughter was in high school. I was asked to assist her with her math homework. I have an advanced level degree and I was a principal at the school. I shouldn’t have any problem. Well, my daughter was solving and graphing linear equations. I hadn’t solved one of these problems for over 20 years. I thought it was like riding a bike after a couple practice problems I should get the hang of it. Well I couldn’t help her and even more frustrating was I couldn’t program or use her graphing calculator. I was stumped, frustrated and humiliated until my daughter told me I could probably find a video on the internet. I was able to find the video and when my daughter and I watched it, she was able to complete the homework assignment without my help. I wasn’t going to be embarrassed again, so I made sure I spent several hours a week observing my algebra teachers so I could help my daughter at home. It worked but I then realized two important points; how about the parents that don’t have the luxury of sitting in a classroom learning how to solve and graph linear equations and my daughter didn’t need a classroom teacher to learn math. She was only attending school for the social aspect and the extra-curricular (comprehensive) activities.

Finally, school spend so much time setting rules, regulations, standards, protocols, and policies. It doesn’t surprise me that students don’t want to come to our schools, and we have also alienated our parents. We tell students what to wear with our outrageous dress code policies, we don’t allow students to wear hats or head coverings in our schools because it isn’t allowed at home, we tell them what types of foods they can eat and what time of the day to eat. I would argue this is still a practice from colonialism and outdated. Students are banned from using cellphones and personal electronic devices because they intimidate the staff but are far more efficient than the technology being implemented at the school and have access to the internet. Teachers would argue the students are using social media during instructional time. I would counter by saying, “students are bored and trying to stay engaged.” This isn’t a popular response but again I would agree with Marc Prensky when he said, “If *we aren’t engaging students, we are enraging them!*” Our students are powering down when they come on our campuses and we want to blame online schools and charter schools. We should first look in the mirror before we look out the window. The problem isn’t online schools or charter schools; traditional comprehensive public schools are the problem. We won’t change how we do things and we are rigid in our approach. School isn’t FUN anymore. We could learn a lot from these schools and even take a riskier approach and take the lead from Amazon, Starbucks, Walmart Super Center, and Burger King. Customize education for our customer, our students and their families. Make school more enjoyable and FUN!

I started seeing this trend many years ago and it was discredited as being a decline in school enrollment. I was watching the census and the housing boom; I realized the population is increasing and we are educating more students, but they aren’t coming to our schools. It wasn’t enough to recruit students back to an institution they felt necessary to abandon. If I was successful, I realized I was losing more students then I was able to recruit back. I took great care in noticing that as we eliminated or discontinued funding of programs like art, music, drama, automotive, construction technology, culinary arts, field trips, the library we were able to function as a school, but the students were leaving in mass. As student were failing classes, they learned to take online classes or attend charter schools for credit recovery and recognized they had to the inefficiency of staying at the traditional public school and often opted to transfer to the school offering credit recovery. I was successful in stopping the exodus but finding resources and revenue to stop the elimination of valued and necessary programs but I also offered online credit recovery so no student would ever have to leave to get back on track again. I placed more emphasis on making our campus attractive again with a few gallons of paint, floor wax and water for our trees and fields. I focused on individual students instead of blanket policies for everyone. I made the teachers feel valued. My dad always told me, “*If momma is happy, everyone is happy*” and I took that to heart. I even went out and looked for the most successful athletic coaches, the most talented marching band director and innovative teachers that didn’t believe in teaching out of a textbook and wanted to set up classrooms outside. Students picked their graduation outfits, the venue for prom and graduation. We celebrated our short-term wins and accomplishment publicly and at assemblies both athletically and academically.

We made school FUN again. I even took a risk and refused to enforce dress code policies unless they were gross violations. I wouldn’t confiscate personal electronic devices and rewarded teachers who found innovative ways to incorporate them in the classroom. I stopped enforcing the ten (10) attendance policy that issued non-credit for students with ten days of absences. I even stopped enforcing the tardy policy. I would communicate to my teachers’ students are late because there is nothing meaningful, manageable or measureable happening in the first (1st) ten (10) minutes of class. The biggest risk was eliminating homework. I wanted students to work from bell to bell and the teachers to provide instruction and intervention strategies in the classroom and to stop giving homework to students that was either being completed by someone else, was frustrating parents like me that couldn’t help their child, or wasn’t being completed at all. At the end of one school year our attendance improved and was the highest attendance rate in the entire district, our tardies decreased significantly, our referrals decreased. Our school went from a “D” Rated low performing school to a “C” Rated proficient School. The following year we missed a “B” rating by six (6) points. This was all done with a decrease in budget, reduction in force, and declining enrollment. The difference was focusing on making school more inviting, enjoyable, engaging and most importantly FUN!

Reimaging the Campus

Early in my career, I recognized it wasn’t very fun to work in the education profession. The staff was lacking compensation. The state and federal government continue to place all the woes of an ineffective system on the professionals necessary for effectiveness. The reality is the changes in legislation, the lack of resource and funding are beginning to take their toll on the profession. In the next ten (10) years it is predicted there will be over a million vacancies in the classroom. Nobody is going into the profession and it is one of the major components to the demise of public education. I could see it every day when I was selected to go into failing schools and assist them in re-organization. Many of these schools were being staffed by substitute teachers who most were passionate, caring and educated but lacked the content area knowledge and instructional strategies to be effective or reach the full potential of students.

I find it ironic when teachers and counselors are speaking to students about careers and post-secondary education, the first statement is, “Don’t go into teaching.” Most cite many reasons but the most common is the inability to support a family and the unfunded mandates and accountability that make many educators leave the profession. The average cost of earning a bachelor’s degree in the United States is approximately $36,000.00 to $46,000.00. Many universities are eliminating teacher preparation programs because they aren’t able to apply for grants and obtain Research One dollars. I don’t want to sit around and complain about the lack of funding and the ridiculous mandates that burden the profession. I want to have solutions. I figured I could at least do my best to make school FUN again. I want to make it pleasant to come to work. If the staff is happy, satisfied and serve a purpose, job satisfaction increases.

I hope to share some insight and convince you how easy it really is. I will warn you, before you begin; it is not starting every meeting with an outrageous icebreaker; it is much more. Having FUN, being a risk taker has to become part of the climate and culture of the school. In fact, I hate icebreakers, either they are hilarious and ease the tension for those watching the colleague being humiliated or embarrassed or they have been recycled so many times the lost their grandeur. As the leader or facilitator, we must model what we want emulated and demonstrated in the classroom. If we want students to have FUN in our classrooms, we must create a climate and culture that allows the faculty and staff to be risk takers and have FUN!

First, I had to start by making the school, and facilities look FUN and inviting. I wanted everyone’s initial response, “*Wow, something new, what is going on?*” I walked the facility and grounds with my staff and assistant principal. I made sure to wear my work clothes and bring tools to work from home. I took an inventory of the things that needed repair, groomed, painted, or eliminated. I started with the outside first. I did this so the community, parents, students and staff could see the work in progress and begin the chatter about something new or better. Please don’t tell my governing board or superintendent but I was out there working alongside the grounds and facilities crew. I developed some of the strongest relationships with these amazing people and they grew fond of me. We would set short term goals and targeted accomplishments. When we would meet this goal, we I would reward the staff with barbeque, food, movie tickets, flex time and public acknowledgement. I found it ironic one of the budget saving measures implemented was shutting off the water to the trees and the grass to save time and money on keeping the grass cut and the trees trimmed. It looked horrible, like the Mohave Sand Dunes or Sahara Desert. Once we turned the water back on the grass and trees came back to life. Immediately the school started look more inviting. We went around the school and trimmed the weeds growing along the fence and in the parking lot. We painted the thresholds beginning with the administrative offices. We solicited various clubs and teams to adopt and area and assist us with the painting. I went to the Parent Council and Student Council and adopted and made the school colors official. One of the major issues was the campus had eleven (11) shade of green and nine (9) shades of gold. The facilities looked like a mosaic. In fact, we elected to paint all the thresholds a neutral business office color and only the athletic areas were painted in the school colors. We were even successful in having the local paint shops rename our colors after our school so anyone wanting to purchase paint would have the standardized colors. It is amazing how much the school changed with a little water, and paint. I was amazed how much the students, parents and staff were excited and engaged. I forgot to mention how many local businesses and community members came out to help or contributed money or resources. I couldn’t believe how much FUN I was having. I was also building relationships with the very people I serve.

Once, we finished the exterior of the school we started planning for the interior. We wanted to reorganize, polish the floors and paint the administrative offices since this is the area most frequently visited by parents and the community and every student and staff member has to pass through the area. I paid for much of the materials out of my own pocket, but the staff was enthusiastic to redecorate and make the office more appealing. The floors in the front office were tile and had not been stripped or polished in over twenty (20) years. The walls were painted and decorated, the furniture was re-organized to make it more efficient and the floors shined like glass. Our school was beginning to look brand new. Everyone was excited and when we took breaks, we spent time “*breaking bread*” and eating. A few dollars to purchase hamburgers, hotdogs and veggie burgers goes a long way to build unity and make people feel appreciated. One unintended consequence of making the Administrative Office more professional was the decrease in inflammatory and disrespectful attitudes towards the administrative staff. One parent stated, the changes stated the administrative office was a professional and formal place requiring respect and compliance.

Finally, we moved into the classrooms, instructional and shared spaces. The campus is over two (2) million square feet we had to attack this in phases throughout the next three years. There was a need for resources and material and obviously the staffing to do the labor. We decided to begin in the areas most visited by student, parents and guest immediately outside of the administrative office. Most people don’t visit upstairs, so we focused on the bottom floor. We painted the classrooms and polished the floors one hall at a time. We redid all the thresholds the same colors as the administration building and solicited the help of student organizations, parents, and staff. You would think the entire school was brand new. We worked our tale off with over 100-degree temperatures and our summer monsoons driving up the humidity to eighty (80%) percent or above. We had FUN it was exciting to see the sense of accomplishment and people working together and building relationships.

I wanted the faculty and staff to be excited for the new start to the school year, so I sent everyone a welcome back letter and a motivational book to read over the summer. I asked the staff to read the book. I selected a book that would be FUN and easy to read while at the same time having a practical application. We read the book 212 The Extra Degree by Sam Parker and Mac Anderson. I knew the school was underperforming and so did the community, student and staff. I needed my staff to focus on what was working well and to turn it up a notch. I wanted everyone to work give just a little more effort and to take pride in their work. The book became contagious and everyone was putting it on their doors, the student council had shirt made with 212 printed on the back. The football team had it painted outside their locker room. The staff had 212 shirts made and wore them on Friday’s. It wasn’t long before the school was branded 212 and everyone had a new passion. We even showed the 212 video before every student orientation and parent meeting. Ironically, a few high schools surrounding us adopted the same motto when they took notice of the enthusiasm and excitement.

The school where I worked was fortunate enough to have a state-of-the-art culinary arts facility and program. We would make sure we made food and provided it to the staff at all the faculty meetings. A popcorn machine was purchased and kept running with fresh warm buttery popcorn for the staff to eat throughout the day. I kept the staff walking to the front office and during these brief meetings some great collaboration occurred, and people actually left their classrooms.

The purpose of all the reimaging of the school was to allow the others to see there was a new direction. Inspire the staff to turn up the notch an extra degree and to work together to make minor changes to the image of the school and have a lasting impact. Finally, I recognize early in my career if you take care of your staff, they will take care of the children. If teachers are happy students are happy. This philosophy is contagious.

Encourage or Criticize

Early in my career I recognized I could get much more accomplished and people would be more pleasant if I would encourage, complement and find the positive in people instead of sitting around complaining and criticizing. I was a high school varsity football and wrestling coach. Just like any young athlete when they begin their coaching career, they usually emulate the same behaviors and routines from their previous coaches and their own experiences. My first years was excessive yelling, screaming, criticizing all the things my athletes did wrong. I would belabor their faults with hopes they would want me to stop yelling and screaming and start doing things correctly. There were a few exceptions or what Malcolm Gladwell would say “outliers”, but the vast majority of my athletes hated coming to practice, they couldn’t stand me as a person, and I was the brunt of their roasting in the locker room.

Immediately, I realized a couple important facts. My athletes were not having FUN and I was ineffective as a coach. I was actually modeling behaviors from my days as an athlete and felt the students should be honored as it was a rite of passage to survive my harassment and heartache. I was losing athletes frequently who just didn’t want to stay around and suffer through practices. I also realized I wasn’t coaching or teaching anything. I wasn’t even effective as a coach. I would just scream more when my athletes were not performing. My coaching was really a bunch of clichés’; run faster, hit harder, show more effort, suck it up, tackle, get tough. It is funny, now that I am not coaching anymore, I sit in the stands and watch my son’s and his friend in Pop Warner Football and those same clichés are shouted with just as much and enthusiasm and pride and me in my younger coaching days. The coaches really don’t know what they are doing or how to correct behaviors, so they yell, scream and criticize and pound their chest boosting about their coaching ability and experience.

This self-reflection revealed I needed to fix myself and my methodology. I needed to become enthusiastically and boldly encouraging and stop criticizing. I found a reason to build my athletes and coached them how to improve in areas with concerns. I showed my athletes I cared, I made them excited and everyone around them excited when I pointed out their accomplishments and efforts. I found reason for celebrations and ceremony. As predicted every year following my transformation the number of athletes in my position increased. Everyone wanted to be part of my group and practice was exciting and FUN. Soon, everyone on the field and on the mat caught the bug. I even started coaching different, instead of yelling at my players and telling them what not to do, I started confirming what they were going to do spectacular. In the past if a defensive lineman jumped offside, I would pull them out of the game, I would scream up and down the field upset with my player doing everything in their power to avoid me. Now, I would yell loudly, “*great job, way to be aggressive and anticipating the snap of the football…it is o.k. I am not worried about it because I know you are going to get us the ten yards and more back in the next play.”* I am not psychic but ironically something spectacular would happen to offset or make up for the penalty yards lost; a big tackle for a loss, a forced fumble recovered, a quarterback sack. Needless, to say my players played hard for me and I worked hard for them. I wanted my players to be the best. We had FUN!

Now, I am a classroom teacher and I work with students with Severe Emotional Disabilities. I had students in my classroom with Schizophrenia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyper-Activity, High Functioning Autism, Opposition Defiance Disorder, Sensory Processing Disorder. The list is extensive, and needless to say the students in this program and classroom usually dropped out of high school or ended up incarcerated. Just like my initial years as a football and wrestling coach I filled the room with fear, rules, procedures and regulations. I was angry all the time and because I really didn’t know what I was doing, and I was ineffective as a classroom teacher my resolution was to make more rules and procedures. I was always angry and yelling, I was always kicking students out of the classroom and I really didn’t care if they return back to school or not. I have to say I wish I could write an apology letter to each and every one of these students to apologize for my arrogance my initial years as a teacher. Then something amazing happened, I took the lessons I learned on the football field and wrestling mat and applied it in the classroom. I began attending workshops and professional development so I could learn actual strategies for teaching, English Language Arts, Science, Math, Health, and Social Studies. I started a graduate level program and began learning how students actually learn and think and how to provide interventions and strategies to effectively engage students in learning. I started finding ways to encourage my students and make them excited about coming to school again. We took the standards and concepts needed instructionally and found innovative and FUN ways to teach them without having to sit in straight rows in the classroom and follow along in a book. I reduced my classroom rules and procedures to three:

1. Treat Self and Others with Respect
2. Be Kind and Take Care of One Another
3. Give Your Best Effort

I also made sure that my students knew these classroom rules and procedures applied to me as well. I was a member of the classroom and I was obligated to treat my students with respect, and I would ensure my classroom was free of sarcasm and criticism. I would make sure I was kind by finding the good “great” in everyone. I would also commit myself to providing each and every student the same quality instruction as they would receive from a highly qualified math, English, science or social studies teacher on campus. I don’t know if I ever accomplished this feat, but it was certainly my effort and my student were aware and confident I cared.

My final years as a teacher I am pleased to say my students stayed in school they graduated and I see many of them today happily married, working as professionals and memorializing the FUN they experienced in my classroom. I am still criticized by my colleagues, and other education professionals because they have a mental model suggesting less rules mean unruliness and having FUN means everyone is playing having a grand time and no learning is taking place. In fact, as my year progressed, and I became a high school principal and superintendent of schools this is a struggle I still face in paradigms and mental models. The staff feels we need to force feed very explicit, and cumbersome policies and procedures (rules) to substantiate our effectiveness as an organization. They will even spend more hours trying to make their point with the site-based councils, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Governing Board then the amount of time lobbying for more classroom supplies, smaller classroom size, increases in pay or time for planning. Even more troubling is the belief from the community, parents, and yes even educators; if students are having FUN then there must not be any learning occurring. I would argue the more FUN student have the more engaged and the more they are willing to challenge themselves and push beyond their comfort levels and achieve. I even have the test results and student satisfaction surveys to prove it.

It is the same concept, find what students do well and celebrate it. Be enthusiastically encouraging, be excited about a person’s strengths and accomplishments and teach them how to improve in areas of concern and stop the criticizing. I have never seen a curriculum with any effectiveness advocating for the criticism of student and improve math, science, social studies, or English achievement. In fact, even in sports where we used to believe it worked best it was highly ineffective except for the outliers.

Several years ago, I was in a faculty meeting with everyone shouting and upset about students failing to turn in homework. It was a huge problem and epidemic. In fact, after reviewing gradebook data approximately thirty-three (33%) percent or students were consistently turning in their homework, this is also consistent with the national average. I started to forensically investigate this problem causing so much anxiety for the student, parents and teachers. The teachers wanted me to throw the gavel at the students and find some way to punish. The parents were upset about their inability to help their child with homework and the fact that most of the homework completed was copied or done by another family member or friend. The students were frustrated because so much of their grade was dependent on homework. In high school, many students are involved in other activities like clubs, sports, jobs, childcare, church, and life. Many students would mention to me they could excel and pass their assessments without completing the homework so why should they be failing a class if they could demonstrate mastery on the assessments? I thought to myself, great question. I went back and examined the gradebooks of all my teacher and there was a trend. Students who were passing all their exams and assessments with proficiency were failing classes because they failed to complete homework while in other cases student who turned in all their homework but failed all their tests were receiving a passing grade, in fact, most student had top grades in this scenario. I recognized immediately we had a problem and no matter how I determined to fix the situation someone was going to be upset.

I told the parents, and staff that I wanted to conduct an action research project and eliminate homework. We would focus on teaching student from “bell-to-bell” while students were in class. I would monitor student achievement, grades, and assessments and we would determine, and action plan based on the data. I shared some of the benefits to help ease the resistance:

* Less homework to grade
* Less grades to record
* Students would have to stay focused and pay attention during instruction
* Students less frustrated
* Student attendance would improve
* A reduction in parent complaints about poor grades
* Less grade appeals

I was already aware of the criticism but again, I sold this strategy as action research. I knew I was going to hear achievement was going to decline, parents expect homework (and they do). Students need more practice. The advanced students would backslide. This list goes on and on. Needless to say, I am fourteen (14) years into my action research in three different schools and three different districts and we have a “NO HOMEWORK POLICY” and our test scores continue to increase every year. Our students are performing, the students are more pleasant and happy, and our teachers actually have to be on top of their game and stop relying on homework to teach standards to mastery. All these organizations have incidentally an excessive amount of data to support the policy of eliminating homework. As a result, the teachers feel more satisfied about their instruction, they have less homework to grade, the parents are complaining less, student attendance has improved because too much is missed when they aren’t in school. We have absolutely no grade appeals. The attitudes have improved, and people are gradually buying into the system. Again, this is a new concept and paradigm. American school judge the quality of a school by the amount of homework assigned daily. In some cases, it is a great childcare component in American households. The more homework for a child the less time they have to get into trouble or needing entertainment. Now I am not saying students shouldn’t be reviewing for a test or reading a book, reviewing spelling words. I am saying students doing classroom assignments at home (Homework). I am saying anything done at home should be voluntary, exciting, engaging and FUN. Not always a popular concept.

I would like to share a secret, and it really does work. If you want to improve student attendance, make classrooms more FUN! You want to increase participation of parents at open house? Make it FUN, exciting and encouraging. You want to increase attendance at the drama performance or awards celebrations make it FUN. I don’t know about you, but I am not running anywhere quick to be kicked in the gut. FUN is the “*F Word*” in education and we wonder why students hate coming to school and parents give us disconnected phone numbers. Find a reason to compliment, celebrate, encourage and have FUN and the rest will take care of itself.

If Momma is Happy Everyone is Happy!

I debated if I was going to use this title concerned, I was going to offend someone and appear to be sexist, but I recognize honesty in this statement. I am a huge fan of country music artist Tracy Byrd and one of his hits is “*If momma ain’t happy, nobody is happy, so let’s make momma happy tonight*.” Of course, when I was listening to this song it didn’t make much sense beyond my current lifestyle because in my simple mind, I wasn’t inferencing what it really meant. I knew if my maternal mom wasn’t happy or pleased with me, then I would probably be miserable; but who cares I could just walk out the door and leave. I really didn’t develop the full meaning until I became a school principal and school superintendent. I am constantly being reminded by many of the staff that they are old enough to be my mom and sometimes when I am getting lectured (nagged) I feel like I have an additional ten (10) mothers at work and five (5) wives.

The important lesson from this statement or comment is about job satisfaction, passion and purpose. The teaching profession has always suffered from poor pay, a lack of recognition and criticism but recently there is a mass exodus in the professional. In fact, in the next five (10) years there will be approximately one million vacancies in the teaching profession nationally. In Arizona, while writing this book there is currently a shortage of 15,000 certified and qualified teachers with over 1.1 million students. In California where I am currently working as a superintendent the teacher shortage is over 65,000. I would call this a pandemic not a teacher shortage. If the wages of teachers have always been poor; teachers aren’t being recognized for the value of their efforts and the profession under constant criticism; what has changed? As I go around the travel and speak to current educators across the country there is a common theme. I believe is contributing to folks leaving the profession and a lack of college age students entering the profession. Teaching isn’t FUN anymore. This is either by design at the systematic level and or organizationally with inadequate leadership and no desirable practices. I will attempt to address both.

Systematically, in our “*Race to the Top*” legislators and leadership recognize there needs to accountability established in our schools to ensure teachers are following the standards and providing quality education and services to students. Yes, I say services because anyone in the profession recognizes immediately they are responsible for providing guidance, parenting, discipline, nutrition, hygiene, counseling, encouragement, mediation, financial assistance, tutoring, transportation, the list goes on. Ironically, as this sounds teachers have and are doing whatever they can to make sure students are receiving the best and most beneficial education possible. In fact, I would argue the hidden curriculum is more essential than reading, writing and math. Student have to learn to navigate systems, how to work with others, how to comply with reasonable requests, how to problem-solve and critically evaluate situations. Most importantly, our students need to apply this knowledge seamlessly and consistently in order to survive and succeed in life.

Our current systems often have no way of measuring and labeling what are teachers and educational staff really accomplish every day. I use the term “labeling” loosely. This is what is really happening we are accurately measuring what educators accomplish and their value and importance we give labels to the staff based on subsequent data in reading, writing and math. Our systems don’t even have accountability measures in place to measure science and social studies. Sure, some states give a test or assessments, but the data isn’t used in the labeling system. This practices inadvertently states these subjects are not valuable so don’t include them in the scores. I actually believe this is a fiscal situation. If these content areas are measured for labeling, then we need to dedicate resources (money) and the state and taxpayers don’t want the additional burden. The default in fiscal planning is the things that are measured (accountable) get funded. English Language Arts and Mathematics are accountable to the label therefore money is repurposed and distributed to these content areas and removed from others. Imagine, the frustration from these teachers to experience a decline in revenue and resources to support their areas. Think about the elective teachers in Art, Music, Drama, Physical Education, Career and Technical Education (CTE), Library, Choir, etc. that are being eliminated, downsized or phased out due to a lack of funding. I would argue these elective classes provide an opportunity for students to exercise what is learning in English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies through application. In fact, in the States of Arizona and California, students who complete a rigorous Career and Technical Education Program have the highest test scores and placement scores in Reading, Writing and Math. These classes are more engaging by default, they are relevant and more importantly they are FUN! Due to budget cuts they are being eliminated.

Complicating things even worse is the fact that a teacher is held accountable and labeled with the potential of losing their job and even worse losing their teaching credentials as a result of the test scores of their students. I get and understand the single most important factor in the academic success of a child is the classroom teacher. Believe me when I tell you many of our teachers are doing miracles everyday with these students not to mention they get them as we receive them. The flyer in public schools says, “*Come as you are, come one, come all!*” Teachers don’t get to pick and choose the types of students they educate; they don’t get to cull the classroom and keep only the best. We get students with baggage and miracles are performed daily. For example, in Arizona they passed a law that all third (3rd) grade students must pass the AzMerit our version of the Common Core Examination for English Language Arts and Math. Students must pass the reading portion of this exam at grade level or above or be retained in third (3rd) grade until they can pass it. There is also part of the law that requires strict consideration in the teacher evaluation for the lack of adequate success rates and student achievement.

Despite this horrible accountability measure we still have brave young teachers needing a job to pay off their expensive student loans who tackle this classroom head on. Unfortunately, there isn’t any accountability for the Kindergarten, First (1st), or Second (2nd) grade teachers who prepared this student for third (3rd) grade. I am not advocating for these teachers to be accountable in this fashion. There is a better way. We should be measuring progress and one (1) academic years’ worth of growth. If you get a student entering third grade with a first (1st) grade reading level, then we should see at least one year’s worth or growth by the end of the year or at least some fashion of progress and growth. We should make sure our staff have all the resources and professional development to properly provide this level of instruction and we should have interventions and supports in place. Again, with constant cuts to our budgets and increases in costs these resources, training, interventions and supports have been downsized or eliminated completely and yet we are going to hold the teacher responsible. I have a novel concept lets hold the legislation and law makers responsible for the lack of achievement in school and their inability to fund schools appropriately.

This is only the tip of the iceberg systematically but now why would anyone want to join or stay in the profession. Educators are extremely frustrated, and their hands are tied. The solution from our legislatures to fix our lack of progress and achievement is to continue creating unfunded mandates and assigning unreasonable and illogical accountability measures. Lastly, all these labels and frustrations are posted all over the local media and not only are people leaving the profession and less people entering. Parents are pulling their students out of schools in masses and moving them into makeshift schools in store fronts being taught by people who don’t even have teaching credentials. Many would say this is a viable solution, but I say it is an economic solution for those who are greedy that want to hold on to every dollar they earn and lack to support public services, education and infrastructure.

I find it ironic there are schools touting they have teachers with master’s degrees in mathematics or doctorates in physics teaching in their store front schools. I would question why they would take a job at one of these schools without science labs, equipment for experiments, no textbooks or curriculum and lack of resources to even make copies, when they could work in large firms and make four (4) to five (5) times the amount of money they are currently seeking. This is another discussion for another day. I would say we are probably in agreement teachers are not having much FUN and don’t look forward to the kick in the gut they are going to receive. This alone is responsible for our teacher shortage pandemic and our educators how little or no control therefore, it probably won’t change.

Compounding the concerns and frustrations mentioned above is the organizational problems leading to poor job satisfaction, a lack of respect and simply the absence of FUN as a professional. If you read the newspaper or watch the local news on your television there are stories of violence at schools, drugs, weapons, vandalism and a general lack of respect on our campuses and in our schools. One may argue there may not be a general increase in the number of incidents in these areas, because we have recording devices and social media, we are just witnessing these incidents firsthand. Needless to say, this is a significant problem and should not be occurring at all.

Concerning frustrations at school is the fact somewhere throughout the country, someone made a horrible decision and acted inappropriately and instead of holding that individual accountable we make everyone pay the price. I like to say, “*One person messed their pants, and we all have to wear a diaper.*” Ironically, the same holds true for students. One student wears an inappropriate shirt to school and the next day there is a rule about wearing T-Shirts with letters or graphics. Two students are caught sagging their pants and the school implements a policy that all students have to wear uniforms with a belt and shirts tucked in. We do the same things to the people we employ (educators). I once worked at a large urban high school what had a site based decision-making counsel who bullied the principal. It was an attempt in theory to be transparent and share decision-making in the school by having a governing body directly over the principal, but it didn’t turn out o.k. The council was voting on the vending machines elimination on campus or to fill the vending machines with health snacks and beverages to meet the nutritional guidelines for students. During the conversation it quickly turned from the nutritional guidelines for students to implementing the policy on an individual level for the staff. Their argument was we need to make the nutritional guidelines fair so if student have to follow the policy and guidelines and they have a lack of access to junk food while on campus the same should hold true for the staff. So, the vending machines were removed from the faculty lounge and dining room and the faculty cafeteria even had strict guidelines for the staff who brought their lunches from home. Only food approved by the nutritional guidelines set for students was allowed in the faculty dining areas and break rooms. I absolutely, disagreed and contested this invasion of privacy for the staff and the lack of professional courtesy. I also wanted to know if this mandate was going to be funded because there wasn’t enough staffing to mandate (I wasn’t going to enforce it, but we will keep this private). It is this type of stuff forcing people out of the profession. It even gets worse, there are teachers on the Site Based Council arguing in favor of the practice because of the obesity problem in the teaching profession. In a single swipe of the gavel the school became the Nutritional Nazi’s for the staff, and they based their decisions on fairness and a responsibility to curb obesity amongst the staff. I also like to mention it was an unfunded mandate needing resources and staffing to implement and enforce. Honestly, we have better things to be doing with our time. How about the Site Based Council discussing ways to increase student access to technology, setting up professional development labs for teachers, finding ways to increase Career and Technical Education Classes on campus. If you watch carefully, school committees, Site Based Councils, and Parent Teacher Organizations spend a considerable amount of time focusing on taking vending machines out of schools, whether to have Coke or Pepsi product (bottled water), if the athletic uniforms should be allowed to use black as an accent color. I would argue those are decisions for the administrator, the classroom teacher the coach. Why aren’t we discussing how we can support teaching development, job satisfaction, student achievement. If we spent as much time taking about academics and teacher recruitment and retention as we spend on cell phone policies, dress code policies, and student pick up and drop off we wouldn’t have such dysfunctional schools and a lack of job satisfaction for our staff. I am not trying to blame outsiders either, there are parents and community members on these committees but at the end of the day the vast majority of participation and membership is the school staff who have bought into this mental model and drink the punch. They are contributing to their own demise.

The solution in these areas or to these types of examples is for the principal and leaders in the school to put a stop to it immediately. I am in favor of shared decision-making and transparency but there the leadership must put limits and outline the decisions that need to be made and the process for making these decisions. I know I may have offended some Site Based Councils and Parent Teacher Organizations but if you don’t sound like the examples, I provided you are an “*Outlier*” and you are rare and going extinct. See, in our profession everyone thinks they can run and manage a school because they have attended a school. Heck, I thought I knew how to be a principal and superintendent until I became one and after nine (14) years as an educational leader I still have much to learn and some days I have no idea what is happening. In fact, schools are very complicated organizations with many rules, procedures, guidelines and accountability systems. They require working with humans that come in many shapes, sizes and abilities. Many come from very different homes with values and beliefs that are just as unique and diverse. I would argue I have been on many airplanes and traveled much during my life. I wouldn’t consider myself capable of flying and airplane just because I rode on one.

There isn’t a person out there who should believe they can run and manage a school just because they attended one or serval. I also believe this is why we are having the mass changes in legislation, our law makers, Parent Teacher Organizations, School Boards, and Site Based Councils believe they are experts on public education and should be making decisions based on their experiences as a student or they listen to a friend who probably isn’t someone you would want teaching kids but they don’t get all the information. The same happens in our schools, the staff feels they can do a better job in someone else’s department and everyone thinks they can do a better job than the principal or superintendent. I have an open-door policy where anyone can come into my office and share a concern. I have only one rule they have to provide a possible solution if they are going to voice an issue or concern. I am willing to sit and work through it with them but when I start sharing policy, law, practice, trends and consequences they usually leave stating as they walk out the door, “*I am sure glad I don’t have your job.*” Things are not as they always appear. I don’t want anyone thinking this is a cesspool or black hole there are solutions and I hope after getting a sense of the problem you will understanding the sense of urgency restoring the FUN back into my organization. It is essential, other than hiring and retaining the quality staff I believe it comes in a close second (2nd).

I don’t stand at the door and gate looking to find the staff coming into work late. I try to bring snacks and goodies to share in the morning. I play the music loud and I make it a point to walk around smile and greet people. I do the same for the parents and students, it is contagious. Some of the best conversations are in the parking lot in the morning and after school because I get to see everyone coming into the school; parents, staff and students. It is always a smile. I make it a point to recognize the outfits people are wearing, if they bought a new car or truck, even if they got a haircut. I always find something positive to mention about my staff, how nice the field looks after the grounds crew groomed it or someone’s test scores from Friday. I have the staff monitor the press and newspaper for any articles that recognize the staff or students. If it is a parent, I seek them out in the parking lot, or I find their child at school and let them know I read the article and to take congratulations home for me.

In every school I lead I build professional development into the workday with either an early release day or late start schedule. I make sure we have food for every meeting and music playing as everyone enters. Again, I find positive ways to acknowledge people for their efforts. I always embed hilarious and FUNNY videos, graphics and or messages into the training and professional development. I love that may staff actually races to be their first, they would tell you they are first in line to eat the food, but I have heard side bar conversations predicting how the professional development is branded for that week. Either way, they are excited, they can laugh, they can have FUN and can eat. In fact, this year I am installing disco lights and a professional multi-media center with high definition screens and a digital sound system. If I can find the money, I am going to install a fog machine. I want my trainings and professional development to be like a Rock concert.

I cover for teachers as a substitute, I implemented an Educator of the Month and Educator of the Year program and we make a big deal out of it in the newspaper. In Arizona I was a superintendent in a rural cowboy and agricultural community and instead of giving a plaque or trophy for the Educator of the Year Program we have a custom belt buckle engraved for the teacher. Belt buckles have to be earned in my community and are prestigious. It is awesome because my staff now comment they can earn a belt buckle and wear it with pride around town without having to ride a bull. The last educator who a buckle stated, “being a teacher is dangerous and tough enough, I don’t want to have to ride a bull.”

I find one of the best tools at making school more enjoyable is bring in food to share. I will often cook a huge roast or bring in fresh chips and salsa. I even stop frequently to buy donuts or bagels. This practice is contagious because now the staff is doing it voluntarily. Food is social, I find if I want teacher to collaborate and share ideas, provide food and as they are standing or sitting around eating, they are smiling, they are talking, and they are building each other up. It also helps to build relationships with my staff, and they recognized that I care.

Part of having positive items to acknowledge and discuss it being in classrooms. I get to see the great things happening for teachers. This also serves another purpose I am obtaining data to offset the accountability requirements aligned to testing performance and student achievement. I can document and demonstrate the efficient, effective and miraculous ways teachers are reaching and helping students. I can also show the critics of the school and teachers’ data of our effectiveness and care for their children. Initially, the staff is reserve and suspicious of the constant visits to the classroom but after they realize you are there to support and you look for the positive, they begin to invite and comment when you missed a great lesson or student demonstration. I don’t believe the same results would occur sitting in the office all day, writing grants, completing paperwork. All this can be done when the students and teachers are gone. This being said, good leaders must invest time and work long hours but this shift in organization of time will greatly benefit the school and teacher satisfaction.

I would argue, I also have data to support the principal being in the classroom, daily, unannounced, and consistently will improve teaching performance and student behavior. The students and staff see instruction is a priority and valued because of the investment of time from the principal and superintendent. Unconsciously, no matter how much the education leader is liked, or disliked student are always on their best behavior as well teachers will always do their best. Since, they have no idea when I will show up, but I will show up some point during the day the great lesson must always occur and cannot be rehearsed. In the end everyone wins and when I acknowledge their efforts and provide the supports necessary job satisfaction improves. School is FUN again, and with teachers have FUN and the staff has FUN the result is students having FUN regardless of the challenges, obstacles and rigor.

Schools don’t need more rules, procedures, guidelines, or accountability measures, we have enough, and they are effective. We need teachers to be treated professionals and respected, student and parents need to be valued as customers and everyone needs to experience FUN during the day.

All About Climate and Culture

A few years ago, I took my truck to have it an oil change and maintenance. I worked in rural community and lived in a large urban city, but my work schedule doesn’t allow for routine repairs of maintenance on anything now a day. I have to plan around days off. I have to flex my schedule, or I have to drop vehicles and items off for repair the night before and pick them up several days later. I am not being critical because it has caused me to become more organized and patient in my personal life. I am also conscious about the care of my personal belongings. While walking me to my truck the service tech was having a conversation with me and was fascinated by my profession. In fact, I found out I was both of her son’s principal at a local high school in town. She was also trying to encourage me to purchase a new truck and was commenting how much money I must make as a Superintendent with a doctorate degree. She was also amused that I was so young, and I was almost ending my career with over twenty-four (28) years of service in public education. After a long discussion and me explaining that I live paycheck to paycheck as a result of my student loans and expenses I would not be able to buy a new truck. She then went on to share with my she cleared $120,000.00 for her fourth (4th) year in a row. I am certain she saw my amusement and shock in my eyes. I communicated I have been an administrator running large urban organizations with multi-million-dollar budgets and I don’t make anything close to that amount. I also went on to tell her I had over $145,000.00 in student loans and I would never make that amount of money in my lifetime. She proceeded to tell me she would never complain about her salary again. She told me she had her first child at sixteen (16) dropped out of high school to work and care for baby. She then returned to school to complete her General Education Degree (GED) and had her second child at eighteen (18). She started working at the service department at a local car dealership at nineteen (19) and never made less than $40,000.00 a year. She also shared she took the job even though it was low paying because she could get medical, dental and eye insurance for $25.00 a paycheck for her entire family.

This was humbling, and I went on to explain that average teacher in Arizona enters the profession requiring a bachelor’s degree, passing a test, certification and fingerprints. The average bachelor’s degree exceeds $35,000 in loan. The certification process is approximately $80.00, and the examination is approximately $180.00. I told her in many districts it costs approximately $350.00 a paycheck to add the family to medical insurance alone and doesn’t include vision and dental. So, this is approximately $700.00 a month and our plan are not 100% it is an eighty (80) twenty (20) plan. I also stated my district pays 100% of the employee contribution but in my former districts we had to pay about $70.00 a paycheck to supplement the amount not covered by the district. She almost fainted and began to cry. The only thing she could say was how terrible she felt because her son’s lives were impacted and changed in a positive way because of their interactions with teachers thought their schooling. She knew teachers were always asking for raises on the news, but she had no idea how little educators made. She then went on to say one of her son’s girlfriends works at a fast food restaurant and made $50,000.00 last year and is only eighteen (18) years old.

I knew I would never make the money of many other professions requiring advanced level degrees. I knew educators are underpaid and have horrible benefit packages. I know many people would argue we get off the summers and we have the holidays off with our families. I also know you can’t get another job over the two (2) week winter break and most educators can’t afford gifts for their families over Christmas or don’t have enough money to do anything substantial. During the summer almost the entire staff get a summer job or take on small jobs making less than minimum wage writing curriculum or developing pacing calendars. Educators also have one hundred and eighty (180) hours of recertification hours every six years done during their own time and paid for out of their own pocket. Since, I have always been one of those teachers who just came to work every day; stayed late in the evenings, and knew I could pay my bills and loans if I just was more frugal with my money and took on all those small below minimum wage duties on campus. My compassionate service advisor held back her emotion and tears only to bring to my attention how my staff must feel every day when they can’t make a car payment or afford to add a spouse or child to their insurance. Then these amazing educators go home to turn on the local news to hear the legislators criticizing the profession for advocating for better wages and benefits because they only work nine and a half (91/2) months a year and have off all the holidays. I would argue teachers would love to work all those days if they could get their pay increased per diem. Teachers would argue they would love to get paid when they go home to work every day in their kitchens or in their dining rooms preparing lessons for students. Teachers would argue in most other professions when you increase your credentials you could argue for increased incentives or merit pay. I would even like to go a step further and detail the hourly employees who don’t get paid at all for vacation days or summers. These individuals and staff members are educating students and are essential to the functioning of the school.

Now that I set the tone and the sense of urgency. It is safe to say this is one of the reasons the profession is dying, and people are leaving in mass. They can’t afford to pay their bills including their excessive student loans. I would certainly offer to any legislator wishing to fix the teaching pandemic; offer discounts for anyone wishing to enter the profession. Forgive student loans or at least provide incentives. The same holds true for any other hard to fill professions. One of the most logical ways to give teachers raises without increasing budget is to make benefits more affordable or at least identical to any other state or government work, at minimum, it would save educators an additional $150.00-$800.00. Why do other state and government employees have better rates and increased benefits? Why can’t educators be put on the plan? If teachers had less student loans, they would have more liquid assets to manage their budget and live comfortably. We need to make it worth their while. Adding insult to injury, our teachers are overwhelmed at work with unfunded mandates, buying supplies out of their own budgets, long commutes to work, licensing requirements, additional certification requirements, and if their students test poorly it is all in jeopardy. How is that for a recruiting video?

Here are a couple simple solutions I believe help at the local and site level. Make work more rewarding and allow the staff to have FUN. I certainly don’t have money to give raises or mitigate the medical, dental and vision insurance cost but I am pounding at every door looking for the best plan and more affordable plans for my staff. I coach my governing board about recruitment and retention of teachers and how the salary and benefits package contribute. I even show how simple things can help make the climate and culture more rewarding and FUN. I worked with policy and contract to allow food at faculty training and professional development. I make sure no teacher has to buy classroom supplies and neither do the student. I allow teachers to attend professional development and training out of town and during the school year. I believe community-based instruction and field trips are essential. I found the resources to make sure all the staff has laptops and tablets the same as the students so they could become familiar and have access to their instructional materials and curriculum no matter where they are. Each year, I work with student council and the parent teacher organization to provide staff t-shirts. It amazes me that our education staff and public schools are under attack something as simple as a gift card, t-shirt, food at meetings, new paint in a classroom, a laptop to do their work makes them smile and they charge forward with a charismatic attitude.

Again, I choose to be an encourager and not a critic. I remind everyone daily they are awesome, and they are the reason we have doctors, lawyers, engineers, pastors, poets, musicians, and artists. I remind them daily they are the most noble profession in the world and they seldom complain about their treatment and their inability to pay the bills. They come to school and deal with amazing student with unique gifts as well as baggage that would make anyone shed tears and cry.

I bring a sense of humor without being unprofessional, I smile, I complement, I laugh, I show my humility and vulnerability. I build good relationships with my staff. I let all of them know how much I care and respect them, their families and the work they do. I imagine a world when someday this same attitude and voice will be conveyed across our local and national media. We have legislators who come on campus and help teachers set up bulletin boards. We have parents who volunteer and help our students and teachers. Finally, communities that entice and recruit quality employees instead of criticizing and condemning; running away the best teachers. There is hope and a simple solution is to make our organizations FUN.

Daddy Issues

For the sake of our conversation I am referring to our federal, state and local governments, legislations and the folks who elect them into power. Instead of referring to “*Big Brother*” I chose to call them Daddy be we rely on their wisdom, affection, guidance and support. In our case I believe Daddy divorced us a long time ago and has become a dead-beat dad.

The implication of this absence and lack of wisdom, guidance and support is a profession with “*Daddy Issues*.” Educators for a long time have went out of their way to prove their worthiness, their value and demand recognition and respect. Over time the lack of success in these areas leads to discomfort and educators are leaving the profession to find meet their needs elsewhere.

There is much frustration in our profession, much I have discussed in previous sections. I will attempt to provide an analysis and evidence educators created much of the policies, procedures, guidelines and practices that cause them so much frustration. Let me begin by stating that not one textbook, curriculum guide, pacing calendar, standard, concept, or skill was created by a legislator, governor, president, governing board, or voters. There is usually a push to improve instruction or increase academic achievement in our schools. More recently, society is calling for increases in math, science and technology skills in our schools to help prepare students for 21st Century careers. We are lacking medical professionals and scientists. Unfortunately, the Baby Boomers and Generation X didn’t keep up with the current technology are falling behind in their employability. As a result, we are losing ground to other industrialized countries, like the European Union, China, India, Brazil and even Russia. There is even an upswing in Russian economy. This is a threat to our economy and standard of living in this country. The public and society are calling for great changes in the way we educate our students.

The practices in our states is to bring large groups of educators together to collaborate and develop processes and plans to update and create new standards, and curriculum that align to the necessary changes in 21st Century careers. This is a perfectly and logically accepted practice and it has been the standard prior to No Child Left Behind and started with the Space Race with the former Soviet Union launched Sputnik into orbit. Unfortunately, because the many of the educators in the room suffer from “*Daddy Issues*” there is a great effort to prove to those outside of the room how hard educators work, their passion and intelligence. Therefore, we have very complicated systems in place and ways to assess and evaluate mastery of the standards and academic achievement. Additionally, we have tied school report cards and grades to the results of these high stakes tests as well as tying these same scores into teacher evaluations and accountability.

I love to sit around the faculty dining room or in my graduate level classrooms and listen to the conversations and frustrations expressed by current educators blaming Former President Obama, President Trump our governors, our legislators and the governing board for creating the Common Core Standards or No Child Left Behind. The staff is frustrated, anxious and tense about the outcomes of student scores and the implications of the school report card and personal accountability. The president and his advisors, the governor and legislation and society did not attend one of those planning meetings and asked the professionals to create a viable solution including setting up standards and writing curriculums. They relied on our expertise and once we certified our acceptance, they voted on it as policy. I even hear people blaming textbook companies; I have news for you. The same practice occurs with textbook companies. In fact, if you observe or take notice these companies hire experienced public educators to facilitate the process and market their materials. The only people to blame for this complicated, unrealistic and unfunded mandates are the educators who are trying to prove the profession deserves more respect. Educators created a scenario or scenarios so complex and systematic we many never recover from the downward spiral. At this point nobody is ever going to allow us to regroup and back track our current testing and assessment criteria and rigor as well as the accountability measures for schools and educators.

I hate to say it, but we created our own frustrations, anxiety and tension. We started a system that is snowballing and becoming more critical and complicated. All of this because educations have become an unfunded, poorly respected and expendable profession and we have “*Daddy Issue*.”

Every five years or so, there is a call for education reform. There is certainly a call for change as our leadership changes at the national, state and local levels. Everyone quickly recognizes there is a problem; students aren’t attending school, the test scores; though are improving are disappointing and alarming in some cases, and now there is a teacher exodus pandemic. The solution isn’t making things more difficult or reforming education by creating some ridiculous assessment. The solution for education reform is taking your baby boy and baby girl out for a scoop of ice cream, showing up to a couple dance recitals or even taking a family vacation. We have to address the “*Daddy Issues*” before we put all the dysfunction into a room together and ask them to create something new and different.

In summary, we have a bunch of disgruntled, angry, hurt educators that have self-fulfilled their own prophecy. Again, we have to address the underlying problem and quit trying to remedy a symptom.

Use the “F-Word” in Schools

There is very little we actually control in our schools and our systems. We can facilitate the climate, culture and environments of our schools. We have little control of legislative decisions except when we exercise our democratic and constitutional right to vote. Unfortunately, even when we elect officials who say they are pro-education or are empathic to our current national teacher crisis and the mass exodus of students from traditional public schools. Many of these passionate and dedicated individuals still suffer from archaic mental models. Research based practices would also demonstrate these mental models are extremely primitive even 20-50 years ago. We shouldn’t compare our success personally with our school systems as times have changed and the economy have changed. We have demonstrated we are the outliers in society, and we were able to endure the practices from years ago. Not to mention, many of the schools are operating with budgets from 20-30 years ago while costs and expenses continue to increase. Our economy from 20-30 years ago could support someone who was not successful in school and chose to leave. This is no longer the case. If you don’t believe me look at the operating manual as a mining dump truck used in open pit mining. It is a decent paying job but very technical needing a person who can read, write, navigate, problem-solve and communicate.

I hope this serves as a calling to bring the “F-Word” back to our schools. Make schools more FUN, exciting, welcoming and engaging. If your school is struggling from declining enrollment, high teacher turnover, poor attendance, chronic suspensions and student discipline. Examine, your climate, culture and environment. What are you doing that makes everyone exodus?

I would offer the one area we can change and bring as an innovation it to have FUN in our schools. Model it, teach it, expect it, reward it, and share it. I would argue the best way to rebrand your organization is to make it FUN. When is the last time you read a mission or vision statement that had the word FUN? Do your school improvement committees have a charge to discuss FUN? What are your students doing to have FUN in classrooms?

If you are much like me, being an event planner or decorator isn’t my forte, as you can imagine I am trying to make my professional development like a Rock Concert. I know there are people in your organization who would love to wow your audience. I invite parents, employees, students and community members to plan events and develop themes for professional development. We are always seeking ways to celebrate achievements and accomplishments. This is becoming a new paradigm in our organization. We are seeking and embracing FUN. Students are beginning to laugh, smile and joke. Teachers are able to be risk takers and think outside of the box (innovative). More importantly, schools that have FUN will see a shift in declining enrollment, teacher and staff turnover, disgruntled parents and families. The face of the organization will change dramatically.

Lastly, I tell my graduate students in the classes I teach at the University. “Whether you are a pretender or a believer, the results are still the same.” Be brave, Be a risk taker and Be bold. You have nothing to lose but you will have FUN.