

Background

In response to multiple data sources (i.e. Staff Climate Survey, Superintendent evaluation survey) indicating growing concerns about morale among school staff, the Office of Human Resources developed a protocol to solicit feedback from staff at district schools about primary district- and school-level drivers of low morale. All schools were invited to participate in the discussions, and 55 schools were effectively scheduled and visited between March – May 2019. Twenty-two pairs of district leadership team members administered the 30-minute protocol. First, school staff were asked to respond individually to four questions:

1. What is one thing the District can do to value me as an employee (not resource related)?
2. What is one thing the District can do to help me be more effective at my job (not resource related)?
3. What is one thing my school can do to value me as an employee (not resource related)?
4. What is one thing my school can do to help me be more effective at my job (not resource related)?

School staff then prioritized their individual concerns in each of these areas on a worksheet in groups of 4-6. Roughly 127 worksheets were collected across schools, and de-identified of school and staff names.

Theme Analysis Methodology

Four staff in the Office of Accountability each analyzed one-quarter of the worksheets to sort comments into major themes (e.g., “Compensation”) and subthemes (e.g. “Increase pay for teachers” and “Better equity in technology across district schools”) across the four questions. They then compared categories and came to consensus on common and consistent themes across sets, summarizing these into key findings.

Results

The following is a summary of the key findings across all questions:

- **Morale issues primarily stem from tensions between Central Office and schools, not within schools.** Across worksheets, a large majority of school staff left the “school-level concerns” blank, used the space to add complaints about the district, or indicated morale was positive at their school, and issues stemmed from the district. Comments about the school district were overwhelmingly negative.
- **Majority of complaints are behaviors district staff can control.** Although school staff listed some concerns like state mandates, class sizes, and teacher pay largely beyond district control, the majority of complaints included factors that are within district control to change. Staff asked for careful planning for efficient rollout of policy changes, programs, and initiatives, positive recognition of school staff, better customer service by district departments, effective district policies and procedures, transparent communication, and frequent inclusion of school staff in district decision-making.
- **There are common complaints about District and School Administrators.** Teachers’ concerns about school-level morale issues paralleled complaints about district-level morale issues. Specifically, that both Central Office and school administrators did not spend enough time in classrooms, did not provide enough positive recognition to staff, did not trust the ability of teachers to make professional judgements, and did not communicate transparently.
- **Resources are a major concern of school staff.** Although school staff were directed to omit resource-related concerns from their priority lists, these comprised a large majority of themes across worksheets. Concerns center around need for increased teacher pay, requirements falling outside of contract time, need for better incentives, and layoffs of staff (librarians, deans).

The below tables describe specific themes within questions and are arranged by frequency, such that themes at the top of tables were most frequently mentioned across worksheets.

Question 1. What is one thing the District can do to value me as an employee?

Positive recognition

- Acknowledge hard work and successes of school staff and schools;
- Promote more positive media of schools through multiple modes (e.g., billboards, events, online, newspapers);
- Spend more time in schools to see schools' hard work and accomplishments;
- Acknowledge the contributions of veteran teachers.

Professional respect

- Treat school staff as professionals, with integrity, and with trust;
- Micromanage schools less;
- Visibly include school staff in all major district decisions and committees and communicate when decisions are made with teacher input;
- Increase protection for school staff against students/parents;
- Use the data and feedback that educators provide (esp. from district surveys like Climate Survey, superintendent evaluation, calendar survey, etc.);
- Provide school staff opportunities to discuss concerns without fear of reprimand.

Compensation/incentives

- Provide teachers with pay raise;
- Incentivize extra work/off contract hours/difficult tasks;
- Provide veteran teachers with opportunities for extra incentives like new teachers receive;
- Prioritize school/in-class positions for funding (e.g., fewer instructional coaches when teachers have large class sizes or substitutes are short; prioritize funding for librarians/deans over district positions);
- Provide incentives for longevity, such as paying out for unused sick leave;
- Reduce money spent on salaries and benefits for district leadership.

Time

- Provide more time in school day for planning, class preparation, reflection, collaboration;
- Reduce requirements scheduled during off-contract time;
- Reduce requirements that require excessive time spent on paperwork, compliance, non-instructional activities.

Less negative media about schools

- Reduce negative media about schools that is demoralizing; district should work harder to reduce negative media;
- Acknowledge that star ratings/testing data are demoralizing, over emphasized, and do not tell a school's full story.

Question 2. What is one thing the District can do to help me be more effective at my job?

More focused and effective initiative implementation

- Reduce number of initiatives so that teachers are not overworked, can focus on teaching, and implement initiatives well.
- Focus on core, manageable set of initiatives and plan fully for their rollout, including:
 - Timing (especially avoiding mid-year rollouts)
 - Implementation
 - Adequate resources and materials
 - Support
 - Communication plan
- Allow staff sufficient time to adequately implement initiatives and digest new policies before expecting changes;
- Set priorities by starting with teacher input (more ground up, less top down). Make policy and program decisions only after considering educator input;
- Reduce time spent on testing;
- Reduce time spent on compliance activities with heavy paperwork burdens, especially the following:
 - SLOs
 - Nevada Kids Read (esp. Aimsweb)
 - Attendance Policy (esp. TEP tracking)
 - SafeSchool training

Communication

- Provide more advanced communication of all initiatives, processes, state/federal guidelines;
- Provide honest and transparent communication: Alert staff to changes in policy/practices before news media does;
- Provide more responsive, respectful customer service to schools.

Professional development (PD)

- Differentiate PD;
- Time PD to be more sensitive to staff (late at night, inconvenient, too late in year to be useful);
- Improve quality of PD (i.e. appropriate, efficient, and timely) and provide follow-up support;
- Limit "one-off" trainings that occur only once and without sufficient support;
- Ensure all schools have access to all PD;
- Elicit and enact school staff input about PD and acknowledge their expertise;
- Reimagine Early Release Wednesdays: Current structure does not allow enough time/not effective approach for all PD;
- Provide opportunities for PD outside of the district.

Resources

- Reduce class sizes;
- Provide support around student behavior, especially difficult student behavior;

- Develop larger pool of more qualified, better paid substitute teachers (or require non-instructional district or itinerant staff to substitute);
- Ensure equity in resources across schools, especially equitable technology across sites;
- Provide support for special education processes and think through placement of students in programs.

Question 3. What is one thing my school can do to value me as an employee?

Positive recognition

- Provide positive recognition of teachers and school staff;
- Make personal connections with staff.

Professional respect

- Reduce micromanagement by administrators;
- Reduce requirement of completion of burdensome initiatives;
- Include teachers in site-wide decisions;
- Provide teachers with autonomy to make decisions in their classroom;
- Allow teachers to hold students accountable for behavior and academics.

Time

- Provide time/ protect current time allocated in school day for planning, prepping, reflection, and collaboration with colleagues;
- Require less time needs to be spent in committees;
- Require less time spent in off-contract hour requirements.

Question 4. What is one thing my school can do to help me be more effective at my job?

Communication

- Effectively communicate reasons for site decisions;
- Communicate decisions about school budget and school programs transparently.

Staffing

- Prioritize allocation of staff in classroom positions/positions that support teacher growth over district program staff;
- Provide teachers choice in the grade, subject, location in which they teach;
- Prioritize promotion/movement opportunities for in-district, in-school teachers first.

Resource allocation and equity

- Improve support/training/guidance for behavior and special education at site level;
- Distribute technology equitably across classrooms;
- Review student placement into support programs more thoroughly to ensure appropriateness;
- Review location of special education support programs at schools to ensure appropriateness;
- Pilot programs before wasting time/money on ineffective initiatives.

Recommendations for Improving Protocol

School staff provided various notes on worksheets about how the process of gathering feedback through Listen to Learns could improve in the future. Concerns about the process included the following:

- Not enough time was provided to discuss issues.
- Staff felt frustrated certain topics were described as “off limits” for conversation but are central challenges affecting morale.
- Selecting only a few priorities to record glosses over wide breadth of challenges school face.
- Morning Listen and Learns were scheduled off-contract time and conflicted with duty obligations, limiting attendance.
- Staff did not receive enough advanced notice or explanation of what Listen and Learn meetings were to adequately prepare or promote attendance.
- Process duplicated other efforts to solicit feedback (WEA meetings, Staff Climate Survey), which have not yet produced change.