



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS:

HOW DO YOU CREATE A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE?

By Dr. Jerry Thacker, Superintendent, and Lucha Ramey, Director of Communications of Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation



Dr. Jerry Thacker



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The Socratic Method is a common tool used in education to help students dive deeper into a subject. Questioning helps students gain a deeper understanding and comprehension of a subject. Asking questions of your employees can be just as useful to your organization. Effective questioning leads to unlocking the full potential of an organization because it helps create a healthy supportive environment that encourages the exchange of ideas and teamwork. Asking the right questions sparks critical and creative thinking, innovation and performance improvement. Creating a Culture of Excellence does not come about by chance, it happens by design. It is something that has to be practiced, and it begins by leadership asking the right questions, and then leading the way when you have the answers.

As author John Maxwell wrote, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” In a school corporation it is imperative to have effective leadership at the Board, Superintendent, Administration and building levels. The Penn-Harris-Madison Board of School Trustees has played a crucial role fostering and supporting a Culture of Excellence at P-H-M.

When I was hired by the Board of School Trustees in 2006, the district was facing major challenges. The deficit of the General Fund was \$3 million. The district had not had a teacher contract for three years, academic school performances were down, the graduation rate was 79%, and many of our facilities were in desperate need of upgrades. These numbers needed to be turned around. We knew we had to create a Culture of Excellence, but how could we make that happen?

In collaboration with the Board, we posed the following questions of our teachers, staff and community members: Where are we? Where do we want to be? And how do we get there? The answers to these questions



Editor's note: This is the second in a year-long series featuring Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation.



P-H-M teachers participating in and learning how to conduct a restorative practice Community Circle during a SEL professional development session.



Above: P-H-M Board of School Trustees: (left to right) Larry Beehler, Jim Garrett, Superintendent Dr. Jerry Thacker, Chris Riley; (second row) Angie Gates, Gary Fox, Jamie Woods and Jaye Galloway

Left: Every year Dr. Thacker visits all 15 P-H-M schools during the first few days of school with Board Members. Penn High School Principal Sean Galiher (middle), Dr. Thacker and Board Member Larry Beehler tour visit with students in an engineering class on the first day of school August 22, 2018.

led to establishing our goals. The goals that we established in 2006-2007 are the same goals that we maintain today. Over 14 years, we have remained consistent in these goals even with changes to the Board and Administration. Our Vision of Excellence includes:

1. Providing a safe environment for our students and staff
2. Providing relevant and focused professional development
3. Advancing academic achievement
4. Partnering with parents & the community to support student success
5. Valuing and celebrating diversity
6. Providing exemplary customer service
7. Marketing positive images

SAFE WORK & LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In today's times, it is imperative that school leaders create a physically and psychologically safe environment for both employees and students. The climate should be free of violence, bias, harassment, bullying, etc. Organizations need to create an environment consistent with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs so employees and students can self-actualize. Teachers need to feel supported in their jobs and students need to feel secure in their classrooms.

After the Sandy Hook tragedy in 2013, safety clearly became the number one priority of the P-H-M Board of School Trustees and the P-H-M Administration. We implemented a three-layered security approach at all 15 of our schools. All visitors must be buzzed into our schools by front office staff. Cameras allow the office staff to see who is requesting access to the building. The first entryway into the schools is a vestibule area with no direct access into the main school access area. Visitors are buzzed into the schools' front offices from this vestibule area where they must also register through our Safe Visitor Registration system. Visitors supply their driver's license which is then run through the State Police database as well as the National Sex-Offender Registry.

2018 P-H-M Reading Lab Classroom at Meadow's Edge Elementary provided the opportunity for elementary teachers to observe a guided reading lesson.

A lot of our elementary schools had common areas with no closed off classrooms. We added doors and walls to these areas. All of our classroom doors in 15 buildings now have windows and thumb latches on the inside of the door. 3M™ Scotchshield™ was added to all interior and exterior windows. While not bullet-proof, this film makes it harder for bullets to penetrate or for the windows to be smashed by an intruder. As part of our safety drills, we train our staff and students (age appropriately) in the A.D.D. defense: Avoid Deny and Defend.

Our security measures have garnered us many safety recognitions and awards. P-H-M's Director of Safety and Security Mike Seger has been named one of the "Most Influential People in Security" in 2018 by *Security Magazine*, GOV 30 Award Winner, and has been featured as the cover story in *Security Today*.

Under the guidance of psychologist Dr. Jennifer Sears (Director of Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health), the district has also implemented a formal social-emotional learning curriculum and restorative practices, as well as expanding alternative initiatives for middle school and high school students. Securing a safe work and learning environment is our number one priority, and all our other goals hinge on achieving this goal first!

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providing for the psychological and physical safety needs are the first steps that must be met in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs ultimately leading a person to self-actualization. The next steps in the process are for people to feel a sense of belonging and self



esteem. As a school district focused on excellence, we knew we had to provide a supportive environment for our teachers enabling them to provide the best education to our students. We found that providing relevant and useful professional development helped give teachers that sense of belonging and the esteem they needed to become the best teachers they could be.

One of my first recommendations to the School Board was to create a Director of Professional Development position. My first hire was to promote Dr. Heather Short to this position (she now serves as our Assistant Superintendent of Instruction). By having a position dedicated to creating ongoing professional development programs for our teaching staff, we have been able to adjust and give our teachers the tools they need to be successful in the changing landscape of Indiana's formative assessment.

Engineer, statistician, professor, author, lecturer, and management consultant W. Edwards Deming advocated focusing on continuous improvement and instituting training on the job. It is a value add to invest in ongoing professional development. Training that is relevant, focused, and supported by feedback will result in higher performing employees. In fact, 100 percent of current P-H-M teachers are rated as “effective” or “highly effective.”

By engaging our teachers in ongoing learning and improvement opportunities, they in turn are helping our students become top performers. Our teachers model a growth mindset for our students. According to Dr. Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset*, a growth mindset emphasizes that intelligence can be developed versus a fixed mindset that is cemented in the belief that intelligence can't be changed. A fixed mindset assumes one's lot in life, while a growth mindset aspires to stretch oneself. A growth mindset philosophy lends itself to embracing challenges, persisting despite obstacles, and seeing effort as a path to mastery and success. The obvious advantages for students who have a growth mindset is that it creates a passion for learning. For our teachers, there's always room for improvement and advancement.

When teachers have a growth mindset, they become multipliers. In her book, *Multipliers*, author Liz Wiseman writes that multipliers create an environment that stretches people and requires their best thinking and work. One example of how we put the concept of multipliers into place at P-H-M is the establishment of the Teachership Leadership Teams (TLTs). It is a professional development initiative that deliberately works to increase opportunities for teacher-led PD. By highlighting many of our already amazing teachers, we are encouraging



A Teacher Leadership Team in action.



2019 PHM Secondary Teacher of the Year & Indiana TOY Top 10 Finalist Jeanie Mitchell leading a class discussion in French class at Penn High School.

more professional collaboration. Dr. Jayson Snyder, Director of Talent Acquisition and Development, explains that TLTs have given teachers time dedicated solely to exploring and discussing research-based teaching methods that are aligned with state standards. The teachers then share this information among their peer groups sparking further collaboration. It's multiplication in action!

Great examples of developing talent are the following selected state and national awards won by staff and faculty:

- Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST)
- Seven Indiana Teacher of the Year Top Ten finalists, one who was Indiana Teacher of the Year
- Indiana Middle School Principal of the Year
- Indiana High School Principal of the Year
- Indiana Support Professional of the Year
- Indiana School Business Official of the Year

ADVANCING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Highly effective and well trained teachers are the drivers behind a high performing school district. If we provide the foundation in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, our students will self-actualize. To advance student achievement, students and staff must reach their fullest potential. P-H-M is now an “A” rated school district by the Indiana Department of Education. We rank 12th in the state for combined ELA & Math ILEARN scores in grades 3-8. One of the keys to consistency has been the integration of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Among the state’s public elementary schools in grades 3-5 (507 schools), P-H-M has four elementary schools that rank among the state’s Top 15 schools in combined ELA & Math Proficiency:

- #1 Northpoint, 81.9%
- #4 Prairie Vista, 78.5%
- #8 Mary Frank, 74.5%
- #11 Horizon, 73.1%

Mary Frank’s 3rd grade English/Language Arts ILEARN scores are also the highest in the entire state! Among the state’s public middle schools grades 6-8 (219 schools), Discovery Middle School is ranked #5 in Indiana. And Penn High School was 12th among public schools for combined ELA & Math scores in grade 10.

Penn High School’s graduation rate is 97% with more than

85% of Penn’s students graduating with High Honors, Academic Honors or Technical Honors. Penn was ranked 13th, the only Top #20 high school in the Northern Indiana area, in US News & World Report’s 2018 “U.S. News Best High Schools” listing.

To help us reach this level of achievement, it again came back to questioning. As Christie Heerschop, principal of Mary Frank Elementary School explains, “We asked the questions, ‘What do we need for students to know and how will we know when they know it?’ That helped teachers to align tasks and their own classroom assessments to that evidence. Student learning, and evidence of their learning, realigned how our teachers taught. Instruction was adjusted to the needs of students.”

Under Assistant Superintendent Dr. Heather Short’s guidance, P-H-M’s Instructional Model includes informed planning, differential delivery, ongoing formative assessments, followed by individualized response. We use formative assessment to constantly adjust instruction to fit the needs of the students. As part of differential delivery, there’s been an intentional shift to guided reading and guided math. This shift to small group instruction has allowed for better learning and increased time for remediation.

P-H-M also takes a strong, systematic approach to RTI. Principal Tressa Decker explains how it works at Horizon Elementary, “We purposefully and routinely review student data to ensure that all students in need of interventions are receiving them. We ensure teachers have any instructional resources

needed to provide these interventions. Teachers have become more savvy, efficient, and independent with knowing how and when to start a Tier 2 RTI plan, documenting classroom interventions for struggling students. After eight to 12 weeks of research-based Tier 2 interventions, if students are not making significant progress, we move students to a Tier 3 RTI plan with more intensive interventions. The Tier 3 RTI plan is developed by our Intervention Team (principals, resource teachers, school psychologist, speech/language therapist, Youth Development Specialist, ENL teacher, and classroom teachers). Tier 2 and Tier 3



Elementary students using VR goggles.

RTI students are progress monitored weekly by teachers.”

As a 1:1 technology school district, the integration of technology for remediation, enrichment and acceleration bolsters and supports what we are doing. Northpoint Elementary Principal Lorraine White explains our use of formative assessment tools. “Teachers use this data to reteach and assess students according to how they perform on benchmarks and interim tests. Students who perform below the expected mastery receive interventions and additional instruction opportunities. We also invite those students to participate in after school tutoring sessions to further prepare them for the ILEARN test over a 12 week period in the spring before the ILEARN test.”

PARTNERSHIPS

Students’ academic success is directly related to the instruction they receive in the classroom and the support they receive at home. The excellence in the Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation is directly related to our ‘Triangle of Success.’ The ‘Triangle’ connects students, teachers and parents to bring about student success. This collaboration creates a synergy that focuses on ongoing teamwork to achieve at the highest of levels. Principal Keely Twibell describes how the Triangle works between parents and teachers at Prairie Vista Elementary School, “We believe communication between home and school is another key ingredient to student success. The staff communicates to parents on a regular basis on student progress and suggestions on how to support their child. We use planners, student work, report cards, communication folders, standardized tests, emails, phone calls, and conferences to communicate with students and parents on student progress. Teachers are not just teaching students strategies and skills, they are teaching them how to build stamina and a mindset of perseverance.”

The Triangle expands beyond parent involvement to include community involvement and partnerships. In 2019, P-H-M wanted to find a way to expand upon the School Improvement Committees and provide our constituents the opportunity to learn more about and to have input into district wide issues of student safety, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Restorative Practices. We formed the Superintendent’s Advisory Council. The SAC is made up of parents, students, community experts and P-H-M educators; it’s an excellent way to include and inform those not normally involved in important initiatives.

With full Board support, our community partnerships have grown to include naming rights fundraising through the



Mary Frank Elementary School third grade classroom.



Horizon Elementary 4th grade math class.



Northpoint Elementary students on their Chromebooks.

Penn-Harris-Madison Education Foundation led by Executive Director Mari Linn Wise. Through the Education Foundation’s naming rights fundraising initiative, partners have donated as much as \$400,000 at various levels over a five to 12-year period to name classrooms, music rooms, one of our athletic fields or concession stands. 80 percent of the donation goes into the Foundation’s endowment, which in turn provides alternative and additional funding for various co-curricular and extracurricular



Prairie Vista Elementary mother with her son on the first day of kindergarten August 22, 2019.

programs at P-H-M schools. The remaining 20 percent goes into our district’s professional development initiatives for P-H-M teachers. The Foundation was cited in the Washington Post as a leader in the nation for naming rights. Another major partnership is the Corporations for Education which has produced over \$500,000 to fund teacher creativity grants and innovative projects.

Another great example of how partnerships have helped stabilize the district. With the support of the School Board, we were immediately able to implement initiatives after I became Superintendent in 2006 that helped turn our district around. One of the first things we did was to commission a Task Force to address the disparity in state funding for P-H-M and the state; it included all of the district’s employee groups, our families, service clubs, booster organizations, community members, and business leaders. We branded the Task Force “Families for Fair Funding.” Our teachers, staff and parents sent branded “Families for Fair Funding” postcards to Legislators. We, of course, also scheduled meetings with legislators. This ongoing campaign was quite successful and ultimately resulted in all Indiana schools receiving the same financial amount in the foundation tuition support.

TCU Freed Field at Penn High School was named in June 2015. TCU donated \$400,000 payable over 12 years to the P-H-M Education Foundation.

VALUE AND CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

Great organizations value and celebrate diversity. School systems are a microcosm of society and reflect their communities. Therefore our schools’ teachers, staff and school administration should reflect the diversity of the community of which it represents. In 2006, P-H-M had no administrators of color; we now have six. Diversity makes for a stronger and richer learning environment. When diversity is embraced, it becomes a strength. When diversity is resisted, it becomes a weakness.

Diversity doesn’t just mean racial or ethnic diversity, it also means cultural, sexual, and intellectual diversity. The value of celebrating diversity goes back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. If people’s physiological needs are met, they feel safe, they feel like they belong, and have high self-esteem, they will self-actualize. Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect that they deserve. That’s our goal as a school system, both as an employer and an educational provider.

Diversity in a classroom and school setting opens the doors for exploration of vast topics, discussions and experiences, ultimately leading to more creativity. At Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation, we practice inclusion. By intentional design, our classrooms are a blend of special education and general education students. We meet each child wherever they are, providing individualized instruction in a group setting that is supportive and conducive to meeting every student’s needs, whether they are below grade level or high achieving. Our teachers have embraced the diversity of our classrooms finding success using teaching





General education and exceptional education students partner up as part of Penn High School's Unified Track team.



Dr. Thacker with Walt Disney Elementary students.

methods such as differential delivery, small group instruction and multi-sensory instruction methods.

For more than 40 years, our district shared special education services with neighboring School City of Mishawaka School District. In 2015, that co-op was dissolved and we formed our own Exceptional Education Department led by Director Gena Todd. We embrace the philosophy and practice that all students are exceptional and have extraordinary things to offer. Under Ms. Todd's leadership the department has received "Meets Requirements" rating, the highest category under the IDOE/ OSE's assessment. Through Exceptional Education, we have employed many different types of inclusion/universal methods from co-teaching models (where a general ed and a resource teacher collaborate and share teaching in the same classroom) to incorporating more life skills training into the curriculum for Ex Ed students.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

If a school district can achieve excellence on every level, they must also offer excellent customer service. A school district cannot continue to excel if it doesn't have good relationships. Our goal is to build strong, trusting relationships with parents, students, community members, and our staff. All of these groups are considered our "customers," both internal and external.

In the time period of 1998-2006, the district saw a 34.7% increase in state funding, but had laid off 165 teachers and eliminated several programs during that same time period. While we've only had modest increases in state funding in the years after 2006, we have successfully settled teacher contracts and P-H-M has not had any layoffs. We did not cut back on programs, but

instead expanded AP classes, foreign languages, and summer school programs.

We also currently have the highest starting base salary for teachers and new hires in our area. P-H-M is experiencing a period of the highest level of academic achievement, while at the same time having among the highest rate of Free/Reduced Lunch students in the district's history. Our budget is balanced and we're not operating at a deficit. We have also completed more than \$100 million in facilities improvements and lowered property taxes. These accomplishments and milestones show our staff, families, and community partners that we are not only good stewards of taxpayer dollars, but that we also care for our teachers and staff. This is a form of customer service. Cabinet members Director of Human Resources Mike Lureman, Chief Operating Officer Aaron Leniski, and Executive Director of Business Services Jerry Hawkins are leading these efforts.

Customer service also applies to how well we respond to our students and families. Customer service applies in good times and the bad. It means that when mistakes are made that we accept responsibility and learn from the mistakes putting into place corrections to prevent further mistakes from happening. People respect and appreciate organizations that provide good customer service in the bad times as well as the good. That's how to create and keep great ambassadors.

MARKETING POSITIVE IMAGES

A Culture of Excellence is one where people are able to self-actualize. Penn-Harris-Madison's goals are aligned to helping our students and staff be the best they can be using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a guide. The process of aligning our

school district to these goals has created a Vision and Culture of Excellence. This philosophy gives everyone permission to go for the gold, win awards, and achieve excellence. When people feel safe, have a sense of belonging, and have high self-esteem they feel a great sense of pride and show support when others succeed. Great organizations embrace a belief that “When one of wins, we all win” because the tide of success also raises everyone else to the same level. People are proud to be a part of P-H-M making our best ambassadors our students, families and staff.

In an era of more and more competition for students and teaching staff, it is essential that public school districts market positive images. Employees, students and families should speak with pride about the accomplishments of their schools. We are known for providing excellence; excellence has become our brand. Director of Communications Lucha Ramey created the social media marketing campaign, “Excellence Happens Here,” to highlight student and staff stories, along with examples of classroom excellence through videos, pictures and online news

stories. We use the hashtag #PHMExcellence to tag these stories. Everything we do internally and externally supports our Vision of Excellence.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Finding your organization’s Vision of Excellence won’t happen without leadership taking the first steps to ask the right questions. You have to do a careful examination and an honest assessment. Through questioning, answers reveal a vision and a plan/path to excellence. Organizations must have enough fortitude to follow that path. Because if we do not create a vision of excellence, we will never achieve it. If we fail to create a safe climate, we will not self-actualize. If we fail to develop others, we will never advance. If we fail to create partnerships, we will fail to create a community. If we fail to embrace diversity, we will lose talent and synergy. If we fail to provide exemplary customer service, customers will choose other options. If we fail to market positive images, we will become unknown and irrelevant. 🏠



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