“Urban Principal” Online Community

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Introduction

The role of a school Principal has evolved over the years. Principals today are not only instructional leaders; they also have a key role as community leaders. The Principal builds partnerships with community based organizations, higher education institutions, families, businesses, faith-based organizations, among others to address the needs of their students, families, and the community. Together, they form the school-site leadership groups that are responsible for planning, implementation, and continuous improvement of the community school strategy.

The differences in our roles as a Principal is in the communities in which we work, the students that we serve, and the adversities that we face inclusive of students and staff. The challenges faced are stressful and can sometimes lead to a loss of faith and hope unless mentorship and coaching, and/or collegial support is provided to make on the spot executive decisions for the assurance of student/staff safe and the overall improve teaching & learning.

Although one may think the role of the Principal is similar across the country, it is actually unique and custom pending the assignment of the school or district. Some of the toughest challenges that Principals in urban communities face are as follows:

* **Social Problems** -Urban school Principals face and must recognize the effects of violence, drugs, homelessness, joblessness, and mental health issues that make teaching and learning difficult. In most cases, instructional leaders are not trained to handle the student responses to traumatic events.
* **Lack of Resources**- Most urban schools receive inadequate funding from local, state, and federal government agencies. With the lack of funding, an urban Principal is limited on purchasing curricular materials, technology, and the additional academic/extracurricular resources needed to improve teaching and learning. Students in urban districts various disadvantages due to social issues of homelessness, joblessness, and possibly mental health issues, which often makes these children “At-Risk” due to circumstances beyond their control. Without inadequate funding, the investment in social-emotional programs is not a priority.
* **Political pressure** – The pressure to raise test scores comes with the pressure and micromanagement of district politics due to federal and state mandates.
* **Intervention-** Intervention is not a one size for fits all approach.
* **Stress/Burnout** - Stress levels are higher in urban schools and Principals and their staff absorb the stress from the students.

The noted need and support that Principals in urban districts lack has resulted in the creation of the "Urban Principal", <https://mannyfn.wixsite.com/website> , an online community to collaborate with a network of leaders who share the day-to-day challenges, issues, and triumphs encountered in urban districts .

**Design & Theory**

The Urban Principal online community is based off the support and insight community model. This community strives to offer its members a platform to voice their opinions and concerns, as well as support with questions and answers to situations that may arise during daily encounters. It will also offer descriptive feedback from experts, consultants, and veteran leaders in the field. This communities’ niche was identified due to the lack of a community of this type and the lack of a forum or platform to support for Principals in urban school districts.

This online community was designed on the basis that consistent discussions will take place and be encouraged as members exchange dialogues of daily experiences in their encounters as an instructional leader in an urban school district. They will also have the ability to share resources and custom templates/designs through individualized focused forums (Kraut &

Resnick, 2011).

As identified in communities of practice (COP), students/learners and instructors/facilitators benefit and learn through authentic practice and engagement that allows for an easier transfer of learning in the specific context or area of interest (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The design of this community is aligned to the connected learning framework, which is peer-supported as daily social interactions with colleagues, and friends allow individuals to share, contribute, and provide feedback in through social experiences that promote authentic engagement. Vygotsky (1978) refers to social interactions having a key role in the development of higher order thinking skills. He mentions that cognitive development cannot be fully understood without considering the social and historical context within which it is embedded. It is also interest-powered as members have a personal interest in specific topics they find relevant, which results in learners achieving successful learning outcomes. The ‘Urban Principal” is also academically oriented as the member’s realize their possibilities and potential when they connect their academic studies and career opportunities to their personal interests and social experiences.

This community has also established foundational norms that members must abide by to ensure that their opinions and ideas will be respected and supported by the overall community (Paloff & Pratt, 2007). As identified by Kraut and Resnick (2011) community rules must be initially posted to ensure members’ knowledge. Inappropriate posts will be removed and trolls will not be acknowledged (Kraut &

Resnick, 2011, p. 132-136). Clearly posting the community norms on the site will provide assurance and secure buy-in to all current and future members by eliminating any surprises (Paloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 150).

Comparison

As I conducted my online community scan, I attempted to seek communities for Principals that deal with challenges in an urban district inclusive of the digital divide. I found it difficult to find online communities that focused specifically on this overall category. While I identified several Principal/Instructional Leader communities that discuss everyday issues that faced in schools, I did not find any that were in the east coast area or that that were relevant to urban school districts. All of the online communities identified were in rural districts. For this reason, I decided to link this website to a well-known and reputable established platform for online communities called, edweb.net.

EdWeb.net is a representation of a community of practice as their sole objective and priorities are shared by the community (Wenger, et al., 2009) .This community currently has 500,000 members worldwide and 300,000 additional educators who have registered and/or attended edWebinars. EdWeb anticipates growing to five million members within the next decade. Community members are passionate about connecting with peers and learning new ideas to improve teaching and learning. EdWeb hosts 300 webinars a year, striving to provide authentic engagement for educators globally through shared collaborations and interactions so that members become leaders and experts in their communities (Wenger, E., 1998).

Conclusion

Although The “Urban Principal” online community is in its primary phase, it strives to be the voice to all instructional leaders that work in urban districts and face the many adversities that are normally silenced or not prioritized. As educators, we want all students to succeed as our students are the future leaders of tomorrow, but without an equal balanced playing field, how can we assure they are prepared to compete in a challenging and competitive global workforce. The “Urban Principal” communities’ goal is to make an impact in closing the gaps and divides in education through the collaboration of intellectual, committed, and dedicated members in support of disadvantaged students.

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