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How Engaging Is Your Library (Media Center)

Several years ago I was mentoring a young superintendent and as soon as I entered the high school I smelled coffee. Really, I smelled “Starbuck’s.” While touring the building with the superintendent I asked where the coffee scent originated. He told me the library. We visited the library and to my amazement it was full of students. I do not know for sure if the attraction was the opportunity to buy and drink coffee (including specialty coffees) in the library but that was the conclusion I made.

Recently I was talking to the new Streator Township High School superintendent Matt Seaton and I asked him if coffee was still sold and consumed in his library. He said it was and I asked him to write a guest article for my blog. Matt’s article follows:

Partnering with Food Service to Create a Positive Learning Environment

Matt Seaton

In the Spring of 2014, I was appointed as the new superintendent at Streator Township High School District #40 in Streator, IL. At the very same meeting where I was appointed, the Board of Education approved a five-year agreement with their new food service company, Aramark. Streator High School (SHS) is a 9-12 building located approximately 90 miles southwest of Chicago in the rural city of Streator, IL. SHS had seen and continues to see changing low-income demographics, much like many other districts in Illinois. Between the years 2012-2015, the percentage of low-income students in the district rose from 39% to 63%. During the 2014-2015 school year, we qualified for the first time for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the National School Lunch Program. The CEP allowed for all students at SHS, regardless of household income level, to receive a free breakfast and lunch daily.

When I began my superintendency at SHS, I was intrigued by the layout of the Commons area, which also serves as our cafeteria. The Commons was designed with four separate food service lines, a rarely-used ticket booth, and a concession stand for evening events. Also attached to the Commons is our Library Media Center (LMC), which is equipped with comfortable furniture and collaborative learning centers. Immediately outside the LMC is a courtyard with outdoor patio furniture. This space is open on nice weather days for students to eat lunch or classes to have an outdoor learning experience.

Immediately after meeting our local managers for the newly-appointed food service company Aramark, we began collaborating on the best ways we can offer the needed food service to our

students, while continuing to expand our offerings. The previous food-service set up only had one line out of the four serving lines that served a qualifying meal for students who received free or reduced lunches. Aramark changed that immediately but offering qualifying meals out of each of our four serving areas. Aramark branded each serving line individually, with stations for building your own cheeseburger, a deli-style cold sandwich line, a line specializing in Mexican food, and a line that had a rotating entrée, but also serves pizza daily.

During the 2015-2016 school year, we looked for new avenues to deliver food to the students in a timely manner, while still expanding options for our students. We wrote and received a Federal NSLP Equipment Assistance Grant and purchased movable equipment to create a serving line in the middle of the Commons specializing in “grab and go” items. Our Art Department designed the logo, and the new line was officially entitled the “Bulldog Café”. Aramark arranged for signage to be created for the new line, giving it an identity separately from the other four lines.

The Bulldog Café offers various coffees and grab and go items for breakfast, and hot and cold sandwiches and side items for lunch. The items are prepackaged, so the line is self-service. In order to staff this new line, we asked Aramark for permission to use student workers who were already involved in our building work program. Our coordinator for our work program, in collaboration with Aramark, designed a work schedule for two students that included the responsibilities of arriving at school early to set up the line, stocking and inventorying the line, and managing the point of sale terminal at the end of the line. It is a cash-less line and all al-a-carte purchases are made through an iPad after the students enter their ID number on a keypad. The Bulldog Café is currently open from 7:30 in the morning through the last lunch period. It is not uncommon to see classes and students come to the café during the morning, receive their free breakfast items, and either return to class or work collaboratively in the Commons or LMC space.

About this same time, the teacher that runs the Library Media Center (LMC) began opening the doors to the center during breakfast and lunch hours, and having special events during those times to encourage students to visit the LMC. His efforts were greatly successful. Rarely does a day go by without the LMC full of students during breakfast and lunch. Some may be working on homework, some may be taking in the eclectic movies that are frequently shown in the LMC during these times, or some may just be visiting with friends and socializing. The teacher that runs the LMC asked me if he could allow students to bring food and drink – GASP – into the LMC. I advised him that I supported all of his efforts. Surprisingly, after nearly two school years, we have not had one instance of food and drink spills ruining and furniture or carpet. The vibe found in these spaces has become one of busyness and activity. Students frequent these areas all day long. Teachers are using these spaces as collaborative learning environments more frequently. Through Aramark’s help, we have increased the number of breakfasts served by 30%, and the number of lunches served continues to rise. On days when the students are released at noon, free sack lunches are prepared for any student who wants to pick one up as they leave. We are giving the students the nutrition they need and frequently cannot get at home more effectively.

Financially, when the district began implementing the CEP, we were unsure how the lack of “paid” students would affect the bottom-line. We were assured though that we would not lose

any revenue. We ended up in a win-win situation. Not only did we not have to chase down students and families that had outstanding lunch balances (because every meal is free), we saw a significant increase in Federal revenue from the increase in meals served. The margin of reimbursement over Aramark's cost per meal was enough to pay our student workers and then some.

What's next? Well, we have been in discussions with Aramark on how we can open a smoothie line and an iced-coffee center. Aramark has been excellent in working with us to find recipes for smoothies and coffee drinks that not only are allowable under the NSLP, but are also student-approved.

We also continue to evolve our LMC. We are investigating ways to hang more TVs and monitors to display student work and positive social media posts about SHS, incorporate more furniture for collaborative work spaces, and continue to make the Commons and the LMC the place to be at Streator High School.

Lessons Learned Concerning Board-Superintendent Relationships

Doug Eadie, publisher of www.boardsavvysuperintendent.com recently recorded and released a podcast with Superintendents Jose Espinoza and Illinois Superintendent Nick Polyak of the Leyden Township High School District. I was especially interested in this podcast because of the title and also because I had mentored Nick during his first year as a school superintendent in Illinois. You can listen to the podcast at: <http://www.boardsavvysuperintendent.com/superintendents-jose-espinoza-nick-polyak-getting-ready-work-board/>

I jotted down several notes from the podcast that I would like to share with both new and veteran superintendents. The comments I have bolded below are from the podcast and then I offer my interpretation of the comments after the bold words:

- **Not the owner** - Jose reminded fellow superintendents that they are not the owner of the school district; they are the chief executive officer. This is an area I have written about before but is worthy of a revisit. I have seen superintendents get into trouble when they think their idea is the only one that counts. The board members are the elected representatives from the community and they represent the owners of the school district, the taxpayers. Jose mentions that the superintendent will be the loser if he/she gets into a power struggle with individual board members. I agree with this statement. No matter how great you might think your idea is you need to remember that leadership includes others in the decision-making and implementation processes.
- **Lunch with board members** - Nick talks about having lunch with individual board members on a regular basis. I wrote about this suggestion earlier this year. Superintendents need to get to know the board members as persons, as parents of their own children, as workers in their own occupations, and as members of the community. There are many positive reasons to develop relationships with school board members but one of the best way to explain this building of

relationships is through a metaphor I have used in the past. When building relationships with people I liken it to adding pennies into a large jar. Each time you form good relationships with a person you are depositing pennies into the jar. There will be a time when you will have to recommend an action that the individual does not like. You just hope when you make the decision the individual does not turn the jar over and dump out all the pennies. Your hope is that a few pennies are left in the jar so you can continue to deposit more pennies in the future. If there are no pennies in the jar to begin with or just a few pennies, when you make the unpopular decision or recommendation there will be none left after they turn the jar upside down. This might be the time you will need to look for other employment.

- **Actions speak louder than words** - Both Jose and Nick commented that it is imperative that the school leader be authentic and proper in both their personal life as well as their professional life. How you treat others will be very important to your long-term tenure in a position. This includes employees as well as community members. You must have strong character and always exhibit proper behavior.
- **Keep your team of 8 together** - Both Jose and Nick offer several positive suggestions for forming a team with the seven school board members and the superintendent. Nick suggested answering to all board members when one board member requests specific information. Jose talks about measuring success as a superintendent and remembering that it is not individual success it is a team effort.

Time Management

At the AASA conference this year I attended a session on time management titled Level 5 Time Management for School Leaders. The presenters talked about three types of addictions; 1) to paper; 2) to electronic communication; and 3) to power and control. The key to being more efficient is to find solutions to the addictions you have to free up more time to work on important tasks like improving student achievement, or spending more time with family and friends. The following are some of the tips I made notes of while in the session:

1. Use your secretary/administrative assistant better. Many functions of an administrator could be delegated to other personnel or your secretary could help you complete them. For example, if a high school student requests that you write a letter of recommendation for college acceptance, the secretary could obtain the student cumulative file and draft the letter. The secretary would then give you the letter to add any personal information you want added then you cansend the letter to the student. The same process could work for a request for a letter of recommendation for an employee.
2. Modify how you read and react to email. The presenter suggested that all emails automatically go to your secretary as well as you. Your secretary views and reads the emails first. She deletes all junk or non-useful emails. She then answers all emails for you that are routine and do not need your response. She

then forwards all emails to you that you need to respond to. You only check your email twice a day. Once in the morning when you arrive to work and once in the evening prior to leaving. Your secretary checks back with you daily to see if you have responded to the emails that she has forwarded.

3. Touch paper only one time. Again, your secretary could be a good help by going through your mail and other papers that come to your office and dividing it into different piles for action. Some paper could be disregarded, some the secretary could take care of, some could be delegated and some will require your attention. You would set aside time in your daily schedule to take care of all paper coming to you from the secretary and the secretary would make sure at the end of the day in a meeting with you that you have completed all of your required responses.

Tip of the Week

Write a positive note to an employee every day. Actually, write the note using a pen and paper, do not send it electronically. Mail the note or better yet give the note to the person yourself. This will help you put pennies (see article above) in your jar.