Managing COVID-19 Anxiety When the School Bell Rings

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Leading in a school setting is never easy. Now, as fall approaches, there are more questions than ever before. While there are numerous considerations to balance in preparing for COVID-19, one you may not be fully considering is fear. Underlying almost all planning being done, and present in every decision being made, are questions that speak not to the physical issues, but the fear and anxiety that resides in all of us but often goes unexpressed.

- What if there is an outbreak with the children?
- What if I bring COVID-19 into the building unknowingly?
- What happens if someone I care about gets sick and maybe even dies?

The truth is that will be asking many people to return to school in the fall; and for many this will be their first experience being around large groups of people, for a significant amount of time, since the pandemic began. That will be an anxiety provoking situation, and as leaders, we need to be prepared to lead through that anxiety. Failures of leadership will engender more fear in everyone, including teachers, parents and students. Great leadership, however, will engender confidence and commitment.

With that in mind, here are some tips to be mindful of as your school resumes in-person learning amid the pandemic:

**Making Decisions With Anxiety in Mind**

When making decisions, particularly around COVID-19, think about how that decision will help those who are fearful. Some decisions may seem straightforward but can have unintended impacts on people's comfort level. You may even want to make decisions that are directly aimed at reduction of anxiety. For example, allowing for optional use of masks in situations where they are not required; or placing more hand sanitizing stations than are required. Being safe (objectively) and feeling safe (subjectively) are both important in a work environment.

Part of this process involves solicitation of feedback. Helping those who may be fearful requires getting their input on how things are done before they are put into place. Leaders are likely not aware of the nuances of particular jobs/situations. That feedback will inform better decisions and show your staff that you value their input and safety.

**Communicate Openly & Often**

If there is only one thing taken away from this piece, it should be this. Communication is the most important tool available to support your school staff (not to mention students/parents). An absence of communication (information) can create a sense of increased fear and uncertainty. Staff are left to fill in the blanks left by lack of leadership communication. There is a saying that “fear loves a vacuum.” In the absence of data, the human mind will create its own reality and, most often, that reality skews to the most negative possibility. An absence of communication also tends to reflect that leadership does not care or does not have a clear plan. Both of these are going to have a negative impact on the employee’s outlook, performance, and dedication.
Communicate often. Daily may be appropriate in many schools. Regardless of the school, communicate no less than once per week. This communication should address any changes to the school setting or changes to safety protocols. It should also take time to address staff on a personal level. The pandemic has affected everyone personally. Recognition of this, at some level, needs to happen.

To the extent possible, *do not communicate solely in writing.* Communicate verbally in a setting where they can see you, and vice versa. Ideally, this should include an opportunity for attendees to provide feedback or ask questions. Staff should, at the conclusion, feel informed, valued, and as if their safety is a priority. If possible, consider sharing some personal experiences. People are more likely to trust you as a leader if they can also see you as a person.

This applies equally to communication with parents. In particular, the ability for parents to engage and ask questions. Do not rely on e-mail alone. Take the time to talk, in whatever forum is feasible.

**Be Flexible**

The ability to change horses mid-steam is going to be important. Realities on the ground will change. And decisions that seemed appropriate may not be as effective as once thought. Many things are much more difficult in execution than expected, especially in such a large and complex setting as a school.

Making changes shows the ability to problem-solve on the fly and shows a willingness to adapt to keep people safe. This, in turn, helps to manage individual and collective anxiety and fear.

**Listen**

Communication is important, but part of communication is listening. Checking in with staff periodically is crucial. Not only surrounding what is not “working” in terms of the school’s response to COVID-19, but how they are doing personally. After all, fears surrounding COVID-19 are really personal ones that have personal consequences.

**Show Appreciation**

It is important to show appreciation to your staff. While basic, it can get lost in the shuffle of all the other things that need doing. Small and specific encouragers make a big difference. Your staff, by returning to school, are risking exposure to an illness that they have, thus far, isolated from. Returning to work, for some, comes with the fear of exposing their family to the virus. Even the smallest of tasks (e.g., touching things and talking to people) carries a large potential health risk.

This pandemic is, and will continue to be, complex. The above information is not meant to encompass everything you may encounter in managing your staff’s anxiety/fear surrounding returning to school during this pandemic. It should, however, provide a solid framework by which the anxiety can be addressed in a meaningful way. Leading during this time is not easy, but it has never been more important.
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