

Case Study 1: Buchanan Middle School

Can School Culture Get Better Than This?

In Either Case, What Do You Do Next?

Buchanan Middle School is located in a transition area. It was once in the center of a rich agricultural region, a community with a proud pioneer history and rich rural flavor. More recently, rapid population growth in a nearby city of one million had turned Buchanan's attendance area into a suburban school. Where once there was productive farmland, there were now expansive single-family homes, leafy green subdivisions, luxury townhouses, gated communities, and even a senior retirement complex. Where once there was a general store with dry goods, grocery staples, hardware, and farm supplies, there were now big-box discount stores, boutique specialty shops, fashionable restaurants, and hair salons and day spas. Where once there was a Grange Hall, barbershop, and blacksmith, there was now an eight-screen Cineplex. Where once there was a modest county fairground, there was now a modern auto mall. There was a new and expansive town hall and a huge new regional high school in the planning stage.

"Doc" Lamonica had grown up in the old community. He still owned a sizeable parcel of valuable farmland on the periphery of town that he had inherited from his father. However, he never acted like he was wealthy, and he certainly was not pretentious. He had been a town hero, starring in football and baseball in high school and at the local college, and then a nationally known quarterback on a championship NFL team. Now in his late 50s, everyone knew Doc. He had served a term on the City Council. He was still active in the Rotary Club. He had frequently been discussed as a candidate for mayor or even a member of the state legislature. He had moved back to this community, after his active NFL playing days, become a high school coach, obtained an administrative credential, enrolled in an executive-style EdD program, been mentored by the popular former school district superintendent, and assumed the principalship of Buchanan Middle School about 10 years ago.

Buchanan Middle School was relatively new physically, having been totally reconstructed four years ago. The school board had torn down the old school and constructed a new one in a more central location that naturally integrated students from the shiny new subdivisions

Note: This case study, as with others associated with other chapters, is about an actual school, actual people, and actual conditions. Nothing is fabricated. All cases are about situations school leaders routinely encounter. However, in each instance, names of people, schools, and locations have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

with those from the traditional farm worker housing developments and nearby trailer parks. Consequently, Buchanan had about half of its students from financially comfortable middle-class families and another large portion from Hispanic and Hmong families who performed the manual labor in the remaining strawberry fields, truck farms, and vineyards.

The school board did not destroy all of the old Buchanan School. Great care was taken to ensure the preservation and reinstallation of major symbols from the old building. These included the school bell, the Spartan mascot, the Depression era Diego Rivera wall murals, the trophy cases recounting the old school's past athletic and academic glories, the disciplinary bench from outside the principal's office, and even the goalposts from the football field. The symbolic essence of the old Buchanan School had thoughtfully been preserved and integrated into its new physical successor.

The new Buchanan building was classical in its external appearance but state-of-the-art inside with a great deal of instructional space, many specialty rooms, and loaded with up-to-date technology. It had substantial surrounding acreage for playfields, faculty and visitor parking, and future expansion, if needed. It was well maintained and nicely landscaped.

What took place inside of Buchanan Middle School was just as impressive as its tasteful exterior. Doc was clearly the "Boss." He continued to be proud of his having become the principal of the high school that he had attended and his father before him. However, he knew his strengths and limitations. He handled parental and community relations. He was the link to the superintendent and school board. He attended the weekly Rotary meetings and made sure the mayor, city counsel, and other public officials were well informed, and he handled relationships with the press and electronic media.

Doc enjoyed the partnership of Sandy Quentin, the assistant principal for curriculum and instruction. It was a good team. Doc thought it was "Dream Team." He admired Sandy greatly. He personally made no claims regarding instructional expertise, and Sandy had little taste for either the public or publicity.

Doc did have, even if limited in scope and perhaps motivated by matters somewhat superficial, several curricular concerns. He focused like a laser on a very few things. He insisted that youngsters at Buchanan knew how to read and do math, and their scores on annual state tests *had* to be high. This for him was nonnegotiable. In addition, he made sure that there was always a good school band that could perform at public events. He was obsessed with the necessity of having one school drama event each year to which the public and local dignitaries were always invited, and he required that afterschool sports teams were well coached and well equipped (the latter being the annual project of the Rotary Club). If these criteria were met, then Doc was satisfied, and all else was within Sandy's domain.

Sandy was happy with Doc's public relations priorities, but she had other goals too. She wanted to ensure that all Buchanan students, upon graduation, were well prepared for

college and career success. She knew the high school faculty well, having once taught there herself. She knew that simply being rated “proficient” on state standardized tests, and meeting all benchmarks imposed by No Child Left Behind and other legislation, would not suffice to meet the rigorous college expectations they would encounter later. She knew that just reading for acceptable state test scores would not enable her school’s graduates to attend college, a goal she held for all Buchanan students. There was hardly a subject about which she was not enthusiastic. History—local, state, national, and world—was important to her. She lived and breathed classical literature and thought her teachers ensured students felt the same way. She believed poetry was glorious and spontaneously recited it to students and colleagues. Buchanan’s field trips were to museums, ballet performances, and art galleries, not to bottling plants, auto dealerships, and livestock shows.

Buchanan Middle School had little need for new teachers and no shortage of applicants when there was a rare opening. Partly, this condition was a result of the school’s quite favorable pay scale. Buchanan operated larger-than-average class sizes, a tradeoff imposed to ensure that teachers were well paid, better by far than in surrounding districts.

The Buchanan base schedule for salaries was augmented by a performance pay plan. This was an artful blend of individual teacher and instructional team awards. Performance targets were set so as to avoid individual teacher competition. The bonuses were for reaching predetermined and measurable goals. The amounts of money at stake were not trivial. A highly successful teacher on a successful grade level or subject matter team could enhance her annual salary by up to 25 percent by successfully meeting goals. Teachers in untested subject areas (e.g., art, music, and drama) were creatively blended into teams so that they too could contribute to school goals.

Another part of the teacher recruitment and retention mosaic was that Buchanan’s veteran teachers were well treated, felt privileged, and quickly proselytized their able colleagues from other schools when a Buchanan position opening was on the horizon.

Sandy interviewed all prospective new teachers. She was remarkably careful in her review of applicants. Also, others from among the school’s Master Teachers always participated in these hiring endeavors. Doc had the final say, and he was the last to interview all finalists that Sandy recommended. He had veto power, but Sandy knew he would not overturn her. What was important is that in his interview, Doc reinforced the notion of how fortunate one was to be selected as a Buchanan teacher and how high the expectations were for those who taught there.

Candidates were almost always anxious about this final interview. Sandy had told them that impressing Doc was a crucial component of being hired. For his part, Doc told them the school’s history, emphasized its commitment to the Greek ideal of a sound mind and strong body, explained the school’s Spartan mascot, and made clear that candidates understood the school’s exalted place in the community. When the interview was completed, however, finalist candidates were thrilled and felt as though some deity had anointed them.

Teachers were accorded status as “Apprentice,” “Instructor,” and “Master Teacher.” The Buchanan salary plan did not reward years of service or college credits in pedagogy courses. Rather, it rewarded mastery of instructional skills, added evidence of subject matter prowess, and the assumption of added responsibility. Master Teachers were not given a lifetime title. It had to be renewed, through rigorous appraisals, every four years. Buchanan teachers routinely chose not to unionize.

Teachers were not the only individuals to be given careful attention. Students too came in for close scrutiny and plentiful personal attention. Buchanan Middle School had a student (as well as teacher) dress and behavior code. Students were required to wear the simplest of uniforms, and a discretionary fund existed to assist families who had financial difficulty purchasing the required white shirts and blouses and khaki or black long pants. Shirts were always to be tucked in, and pants were to be worn at the standard position on one’s hips. Shoes were oxfords or loafers for both boys and girls. Girls could wear colorful scarves around their necks, if they chose. Most did. Boys were required to have their hair cut so that it was above the collar of their shirts and did not cover their ears. (The American Civil Liberties Union had sued the school a few years back in behalf of a plaintiff family whose son had wanted to wear long hair or a ponytail. After Doc appeared in court and explained the school’s philosophy and the fact that the community and parents convened annually and reaffirmed its support for the dress code, the judge threw the case out of court and suggested that the plaintiffs had engaged in a trivial suit.)

The school had many internal student competitions involving spelling, mathematics, science, intramural athletics, geography, and on and on. Almost always these were team efforts and grade level or classroom competitions. Trophies, awards, plaques, outstanding performer lists, team photographs, and gold stars were to be found in large measure in every hall and every public space in the school. To walk through Buchanan Middle School was to witness a celebration about seemingly every significant human activity that could take place in a school.

There were disabled students enrolled at Buchanan, and even two self-contained classes. However, steps were always taken to ensure that these students were also included on the various teams that competed unendingly throughout the school year.

The time came, perhaps inevitably, when Doc would leave to become the district superintendent. It was expected, and he thought it a good thing to do. He had assumed that Sandy Quentin would be his successor as principal. To his, and many others’, surprise, however, Sandy declined the offer.

This led to a dilemma in the community. No other successor had been groomed or even contemplated. What was to be done? No one wanted to place Buchanan at risk. It was decided that the popular school board president would head the effort to identify a successor. Everyone knew that this would not be an easy assignment.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What components of the Buchanan school culture do you identify as contributing to its longtime academic success and community popularity?
2. Did Buchanan Middle School seem to do some things to excess?
3. Was Doc Lamonica crucial to the school? Might an argument be made that Sandy Quentin was the secret to the school's success?
4. Why do you suppose Sandy did not want to be principal? Was she to be faulted for lacking professional ambition?
5. What, if anything, would you want to do differently if you were to become the principal at Buchanan Middle School?
6. What counsel would you give the school board president as she set about identifying a principal as successor to Doc?

