Board Report for Kodiak Middle School

Monday, February 20, 2017
The Growth of Kodiak Middle School

This month, I would like to talk to you about the growth that we have experienced at Kodiak Middle School in the (almost) three years that I have been the principal of Kodiak Middle School. It has been an amazing opportunity, and I am excited to explain some of the things that we have accomplished since I came here.

We have improved the School Experience in many ways here at Kodiak Middle School. We have improved the teacher experience, the student experience and the parent experience.

Student Experience

Looking at the School Climate and Connectedness Survey results from the years previous to 2014-2015, we learned that students’ perceptions of caring adults in the school was declining. What a sad state of affairs for our students. We immediately began working on ways to show students that the adults do care about them and that they matter. We started sending a daily
email listing who was absent the day before, encouraging teachers to say hi to the students that were absent. We started saying we meet the needs of each student, rather than every student. When we say “each” we indicate that we recognize that each student is a unique individual, with his or her own unique strengths, abilities, weaknesses, and interests. When we say every, we speak collectively, and make generalizations. We made a conscious decision to value each of our students for who they are.

Home Visits

Perhaps the best indication to let students know that we care is the home visits we do before school starts each year. Visiting the homes of each student the day before New Teacher Orientation actually improves the experience for teachers and for students. New teachers are paired with veteran teachers and get to see the island and the homes where their kids live as one of their first opportunities as a teacher. It is a very powerful experience.

One of the most moving examples of showing that we care for our students occurred in August 2016, when there was a student who did not have a home, yet and was living in a camper in the Coast Guard camping property. We visited this student, who had driven all the way across the country from Florida, and made sure that he knew that his school cared about him and knew where he was, even though he didn’t have a home yet. I’m sure you can imagine how scary it would be as a middle schooler to travel across the country and start school at a new place, only to not have a home, and then to have your teachers show up at your camper t make sure you know you are cared for!

Tutorials

While the home visits are a once-yearly event, the tutorials are a daily occurrence that improves education for our students. In the 2014-2015 school year, a team of teachers, Mr. Hargraves, and myself attended the RTI conference in Anchorage. After examining our system that we had in place at the middle school we learned three important things:
• We had no time in the schedule for Tier II interventions
• We had overloaded time with Tier III interventions, which were not needed for every student
• We needed more math support for the kids who came to the middle school without the prerequisite skills.
• Our only source of enrichment was electives, and those were limited to STEAM and Music. In order to fix these issues, we had to make some intentional changes. We met with our building leadership team to discuss what possibilities existed. Working with the teachers, we
figured out how to solve all three problems listed above. We created tutorials and foundations classes to support students who needed the support.

Students use the tutorial system for Tier II intervention or enrichment. Community members come in to help teach different experiences for students. Here are some of the enrichment opportunities that could not have existed without the tutorial system.

- Long-line fishing
- Painting classrooms and offices
- E-Cybermission
- Identifying fake news
- Welding
- Advanced AutoCAD
- Exercise
- Basketball
- Yoga
- Handball
- Dodgeball
- Volleyball
- Drawing
- Alutiiq bead and craft
- Calligraphy
- Various food making opportunities
- Mt. Edgecombe High School Application

Below are some of the intervention opportunities that would not have been possible without tutorials:
- Division basics
- Fractions
- Math Facts
- Multiplying and dividing rational numbers
- European countries and capitals
- Ratios
- Rates
- Proportion
- Percentages
- Linear Equations
- Yearbook
- Imagine Learning
- Writing for success.
Flexible Seating

The furniture at Kodiak Middle School has not been updated in many years. Many of my principal friends in other states have talked about how powerful changing seating has been for their students. We have made great strides for our students. In each classroom at Kodiak Middle School, there are at least three seating options, where there was only 1 before: a regular table and chair (or desk), a standing desk, a stationary bike desk, or a wobble stool. Some teachers have decided to offer even more seating options, like couches, chairs, balls, and elevated stools. Why do we do all this? Because it helps the students have a better experience in their school.

We have also updated the library and commons furniture which kids enjoy.
Elective Opportunities

At Kodiak Middle School, students are able to take a multitude of different classes that allow them to pursue their interests and build up to the programs at the high school.

We now offer culinary arts, robotics, computer coding, student broadcasting, WIN (Whatever I Need) Study Skills, and an inquiry class. The inquiry class is a self-directed, student-driven class that teaches students how to meet the standards in their own way. It is very powerful to watch students determine their own course of learning and determine the standards they need to meet.

One student knew that her family was being transferred to Cape Cod Massachusetts and they were planning a trip there over Spring Break. In her inquiry class, she decided to focus on the standards in US History, and learn about the revolutionary war and focus specifically on Boston. She researched where she would go when the family was visiting, took pictures, and made a presentation of the experience using 360 degree pictures that she took in Boston.

Trauma-Informed Strategies and Student Safety

Trauma-informed strategies is the name that we sometimes give to “Student Experience.” There are many things that we do to support students, and I’ll try to do my best to describe how this has grown over the last three years.

It is really easy to take the handbook and determine that a student’s actions warrant a specific action, according to the handbook. It is much more difficult and important to the student that we take into consideration their history and home life and serve them in a way that is sensitive to their needs.

We also implemented Fidget Boxes at KMS. Not only did every classroom receive a Fidget Box, but every adult in our building was given a Fidget Box (this included secretaries, aides, custodians, etc.). Every adult plays an important role in our school, and this was a way to emphasize that belief.

Each box contains tools to help our kids focus in class, be it with giving them something to “fidget” with or help them to self-regulate. Our boxes include:
• Stress balls (the squishy, sea anemone ones are the best!)
• Rubix cubes
• Playdough or silly putty
• Water timers (visual aides)
• Colored pencils and crayons
• Mandalas
• A feelings chart (there’s power in identifying our feelings – it drives our behavior)
• Pipe cleaner

Fidget boxes may seem like a small thing, but it truly keeps kids in class longer and helps them to be more successful. Instead of annoying the teacher and other students, they are able to focus and regulate their own behavior. Kids don’t want to be disruptive, but sometimes they just don’t know how to deal with the stresses that exist.

Trauma-informed care is really about empathy, respect, and understanding for the students in our school.

**The Teacher Experience**

When we think about the teacher experience at Kodiak Middle School, we need to understand some history of the middle school. When I first told people I was coming to the middle school, many stated that it was a “rough school” and that people could be difficult. My first day back, I started scheduling interviews with teachers asking them what we should start stop and continue. Their answers varied, but what I heard loud and clear was that they wanted to be supported in their jobs and treated as professionals. That was an easy yes. We have wonderful faculty at our school and they work hard to care for our kids. The descriptions of a rough school were greatly exaggerated. Assistant Principal Damon
Hargraves was pivotal in maintaining a positive, future-focused transition from the previous principal to me. He repeatedly stated that the middle school was ready for the future, and we just needed someone to guide us there.

**Professional Development for Teachers**

Before Kodiak Middle School, I served in a Title I school and in the instructional support office of my previous district. We had a major focus on being in the classrooms and supporting teachers. In 2014-2015 the Assistant Principal and I logged over 900 observations in classrooms to fulfill the district goal of 3 classroom observations per day. Observations without feedback and professional development are essentially useless. We then took the data we were seeing and provided professional development specifically to support the needs the teachers had. Instead of pulling something out of thin air, we gave development opportunities specifically tied to where teachers needed help.

Those observations and conversations with teachers helped us see the other areas we needed to improve. This year, teachers have been asking for professional development opportunities that allow them to have more choice in their own professional learning. In monthly professional development opportunity, we have differentiated the learning opportunities so that teachers could have more control over what they personally are learning.

**Common Planning Periods**

The value for teachers to collaborate together is well documented in the research, and in practice. There are two main ways to adjust the schedule for collaboration, depending on your focus as a school.

If you are focused on teachers as dispensers of knowledge, you schedule planning periods so that teachers can collaborate around their content area (i.e. all social studies teachers share a common planning period). If you are focused on the student experience, as KMS is, you schedule planning periods so that teachers can collaborate about kids. Our core teachers (Math, ELA, Science, and Social Studies) have common planning periods so they can focus on the needs of their students specifically.

When teachers can collaborate about students, rather than about content, they are able to focus on what those students need and find ways to help them. We continue to see great growth when teachers use this time to collaborate with their peers and create the special environment that they meets kids where they are.
Shared Leadership

Our teachers at KMS have vast experiences and want to be able to share the burden of leadership in the school. In 2014-2015, we established a building leadership team to support the vision of the school. The principal doesn’t abdicate his responsibility of leading the school, but rather uses the leadership team and committees to help make the best decisions possible. We created the structure listed below, and it has largely stayed consistent since that time. Teachers serve on various committees and the committee lasts until it is no longer needed. For example, the Tutorial Committee was needed to start up tutorials, but it is no longer needed. There was a scheduling committee that met and helped guide as we made changes to our schedule, but that committee does not need to meet anymore. The beauty of shared leadership is that it can be flexible and fill the needs for a time, and then move on to something else. One of the committees we are forming this year is a committee that will focus on the student experience.

CoTeaching

One benefit of shared leadership is that two teachers approached me at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, and said that they would like to try reaching the special education students in a different way. We have pulled students out of their core classes so they could get below-grade level instruction in Special Ed Resource classrooms. If we are always teaching them below-grade-level, then how can we expect them to ever reach grade level? So, we followed the lead of these two teachers, and then others quickly joined on. We don’t believe that coteaching is the best thing all the time, but, like many other services at the middle school, it is one more thing that we can offer to make the experience better for everyone.
Parent Experience

Parents are an integral part of our school community. They have great influence over their kids and their love for their kids knows no bounds. We are honored that parents entrust their kids to us for so much of their lives, and we strive to be partners with parents so the kids are successful.

PTSA

Soon after I arrived at KMS, I realized that that we didn’t have a functioning PTSA. We announced a PTA meeting and hoped that parents would attend. In the past, there had been a PTSA, but it had fallen by the wayside in recent years. Gratefully, Tracy Chandler stepped up to the plate and became the president of our PTA. We are grateful for her hard work to get it back up and running. Through her efforts and the efforts of many other great parents, Friday Night Live events and other activities for students were created. We are grateful that Leilani Olivar has succeeded Tracy as PTSA president, and recognize the importance of a parent group at KMS.

Social Media

Kodiak Middle School did not have a social media presence when I arrived in 2014. We started a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and an Instagram account. Social media is not the goal, but it does give us another avenue for sharing the success that we have at KMS with our parents and students. It helps us portray a good image to potential teachers and future parents. Because of the social media, we have been able to connect with potential parents and potential teachers who have seen what we are doing through our social media posts and come to Kodiak with a more positive expectation. One parent commented that she was excited to have her daughter at KMS and looking at the Facebook page was one of the selling points of getting her to look forward to moving to Kodiak. We have 138 followers on Instagram and 680 likes on our Facebook page.

Home Visits

During our home visits last year, one parent shared that she had seen our post on Facebook that we would be coming for home visits. She shared how the family had just gotten in on the AM jet after red-eye flights on the east coast. She told us that they were determined to stay up until we arrived for home visits because she was so excited we were coming. Visiting the homes of our students doesn’t just let kids know we care, it also lets parents know we care.
These are just some of the amazing things we have done at Kodiak Middle School since I have become principal. It has been an honor and a privilege to work here and move the school so far forward. I am hopeful that I have set the school, teachers, parents, and most importantly, students up for success in the years to come.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jethro Jones