

Staying Connected to Fulton's Teachers: One District's Approach to Boost Teacher Morale

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By: Jennifer Klein

School superintendent Robert Avossa is on a quest to visit all 100 Fulton County schools within a year. He's already been to 70, traversing a 75 mile swath of metro Atlanta, Georgia. His Staying Connected visits, held before or after school, are voluntary, but teachers flock to them. It's part of Fulton's multi-pronged approach to support and encourage teachers, and increase teacher morale along the way, which according to the 2012 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, is at its lowest level in 25 years.



Dr. Avossa's school visits start with a 20 to 30 minute State of the Schools talk, then segue into achievements of the district, and an opportunity to thank the teachers and show early returns on the strategic plan. Then time for a frank Q&A. This is direct access to the chief officer, with a chance to leave a sticky note on the wall, or email concerns to the superintendent's personal email address. Feedback is shared with the Cabinet, which helps top administrators stay in tune with the teachers.

"I have never known a superintendent to take as much time and interest with teachers as he has," says Jennie Scott, a fourth grade teacher and Fulton's Teacher of the Year. "That, more than anything else, is raising morale. My co-workers and I know that we have a voice. We know that the expectations are very high, but our concerns and needs will be considered."

"We will start the visits all over again when we're done," says Avossa, "maybe in a different form or venue, but it will continue to be a priority to have conversations with employees. Many teachers don't understand how we go from a strategic vision to the classroom. These visits make them better able to connect the dots and lessen the stress. That's what keeps teachers going."

Fulton believes teachers are the most important, and the only way to 'move the needle' to improve student learning. Teachers are part of school governance councils, teacher advisory councils, the superintendent's school visits, a teacher leadership forum, and awards programs, and are offered powerful technology tools, customized professional learning, and evaluations that focus on conversation and feedback. Fulton has also scored points with teachers with recent end of year bonuses, then a one-time 3% end of year payment when recent tight budget years precluded raises.

The district's leadership opportunities for teachers are numerous. The superintendent's Teacher Advisory Council is made up of a teacher representative from each school, meeting several times a year. Each school in

Fulton's charter system has a Governance Council which includes up to three teachers, giving them a voice in running the school, creating the strategic plan, and planning the budget. And as a charter system Fulton has a waiver allowing it to create its own compensation system, with teachers as critical members of the design process. Fulton County offers professional development for anyone who is willing to participate, from a joint 2-year math/science program with Georgia Tech, to its EdCamp 'unconference' where participants generate their own topics and share.

Last year, the district implemented Face of Fulton, which is a monthly nomination and award. Ms. Scott won the award last September and as a result got \$50 and was able to take her family to an Atlanta Hawk's basketball game. "In the midst of constant public criticism, it is really refreshing to focus on the talent that our school and district has. I constantly get the impression that only the best can work for Fulton County." Fulton County hopes this message reverberates with all 6,800 of its teachers.

Photos: Fulton County Schools (GA) superintendent Dr. Robert Avossa talks with teachers during one of his "Staying Connected" visits to each school in the system.

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