



FINDING RENEWED PURPOSE

Through Engagement

By Pat Fontana

A new teacher, a new administrator, a new school leader will typically begin their career with great fervor and immense enthusiasm. Their thoughts on their first day of school are filled with “I can do this” and “My kids are full of potential.” Somewhere along the way, they can lose their passion and their sense of purpose. That’s where Jimmy Casas comes in, to help them find their way back.

Jimmy is the founder, CEO, and president of J Casas and Associates, an educational leadership company focused on serving teachers, principals, and superintendents throughout the country.



He is also an adjunct professor at Drake University, teaching courses in educational leadership.

AN EARLY START TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Jimmy Casas knows the world of educational leadership well. Born and raised in Iowa, he began his career in education in the inner-city schools of Milwaukee. A middle school bilingual education teacher, Jimmy took on his first principalship at the age of 26. He served as a building leader for the next 22 years, retiring just a few years ago.

His story is a bit more complex, though, and is the reason he now coaches other educational leaders. Jimmy says that 12 years into his career as a principal, he was “done.” He describes it as an “on the edge of the couch moment.” He was tired, frustrated, and ready to walk away from his career. Primarily, he was “exhausted dealing with people who didn’t want to do their job.” He blamed them for his dissatisfaction.

However, with the guidance of mentors who helped him understand that he was only seeing his school’s culture through his own eyes, he discovered that he was the one who had actually created the environment in which he found himself at that point in his career. He realized that he needed to see it through others’ eyes. That discovery helped him change the way he led. He knew he sincerely did not want to leave the profession and was determined to transform his own leadership.

A PASSION AND A PURPOSE

Jimmy says most people who go into education as a profession “go in with all of these desires and ambitions, a passion to make a difference.” His experience, both from his own career and in working with others in similar situations, has led him to “understand that somewhere along our journey many of us lose our way. We no longer have the same drive as we did when

we first went into the profession.”

Jimmy wants to help those teachers and educational leaders get back their passion and purpose, to help them try to find their way back. He says that after working in the education field for a while, many leaders’ behavior “no longer mirrors their initial beliefs that all kids can be great, that all kids can learn.” His work has led him to find out what happened, what has changed within the educators themselves.



Educators and educational leaders, by the nature of their positions, must invest in their people. Relating this investment to the difference between the culture of a school or a district and the climate, Jimmy explains that “culture is

how we behave in our organizations, how people treat one another. Climate is how we feel.”

As teachers, school leaders, or district leaders, “We don’t get to choose what kids come into our classroom. You certainly don’t get to choose which families move into your community.” However, he emphasizes, “We do get to choose the culture and climate in which we want to serve those students and families. It’s on us as the adults.”

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CONNECTION

The adults are the ones who must set the example for themselves and for their students. Jimmy says that the reason most people lose sight of their purpose is on them, as the adults, and not on their students. The same is true for developing and maintaining engagement. That engagement has to be modeled at all levels by the adults.

He cites the example of teachers who do not want their students on their cell phones during class. However, what do teachers do in faculty meetings? They are on their devices. Up the tier, principals and other education leaders who participate in workshops or meetings are also constantly on their devices during sessions. The

same is true for the requirement for students to show up on time. There are consequences for students, but what are the consequences for leaders not showing up on time and not being fully engaged?

Jimmy says he asks these questions to begin to get people to think, to “try to influence people’s thinking so they’ll change their own behavior to create a culture of investment.” He does this because he recognized in himself, as a school leader, that it was he who had been creating the issues, not the students.

Engagement requires connection and communication. The adults need to reach out, with a mindset and an attitude that engages others. Connectivity is an investment in time, but that connection is powerful in building relationships. What are we doing, as school leaders, to invest time in our students and families?

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH MODELED BEHAVIOR

During the spring 2020 coronavirus outbreak, schools across the country have gone virtual. In New York, teachers and administrators have had to scramble to determine the best methods for students to learn remotely and to put together online classes. Engagement through online sessions presents a new set of challenges, of course, but Jimmy says the core principles are still the same as they were when students and teachers were attempting to engage in their brick and mortar schools.

Throughout the school year, teachers try to create a culture and a climate in their physical classrooms. Now they are online and have to reach out by phone or via virtual platforms to connect. Jimmy believes it’s not any different and that the same social and emotional components are involved. The focus needs to be on checking in, getting feedback, and asking if students are worried and if they have any questions.

For school leaders who are more managerial and less relationship oriented, the new virtual world may be more of a challenge. Principals are no longer able to walk the building

and check on teachers and students in person somewhat passively. They may struggle with making the effort to reach out and connect with people via telephone call or online platform. As Jimmy says, “For some people, that’s not who they are. Different people have a different skill set.”

True purpose and engagement are rooted in the core value system, regardless of whether school is held in a brick and mortar building or online. We “shouldn’t ask teachers to do something we won’t do ourselves. What we model is what we get.”

The building leader has to reach out and engage, to model the behavior. The principal who would normally hold a weekly faculty meeting in person should reach out to teachers and staff virtually to check on them. Essentially, leaders should do the “same things as before, just do them differently.”

A FOCUS ON CULTURE

Jimmy Casas was unusually young when he became a building principal. The lessons he learned from his experience are, in his words, “why I do what I do today.” He says he did the best that he could at the time, thinking that he was supposed to be “great” at leading his school. He soon discovered that “not everybody does what they’re supposed to do,” but he thought it was his job to make them.

The new, inexperienced principal unintentionally created a culture of compliance. His conversations with teachers were frustrating and full of negative tones. He now realizes that it was he, not the students and not the teachers, who created “all sorts of undercurrents – fear, gossip, being upset, no longer invested, just checking the box” – and who caused his teachers to actually want to stay away from him as their principal.

Creating a more positive culture involves physically and behaviorally engaging with people. That requires some relatively simple effort. Smiling with a sincere “Glad you’re here today!” can change the school’s culture from the top down. Administrators need to reach out to teachers and teachers need to reach out to students,

whether in a building or online, to find out what’s going on with them.

Jimmy says he does what he does now, not judging but rather to help people see where they are creating their own issues. In fact, his coaching expertise comes from “recognizing that maybe I was causing the problem” in his own school. Nobody wants to go to work every day hating their job, including the teachers and the principal.

His work with school leaders focuses on culture. He helps them identify “specific skill sets, strategies, and techniques for targeted goal areas.” He and his coaching team help educational leaders understand that “we as the adults are causing all the issues in schools today.” Jimmy uses logic to help them see that and to give them ways to do things differently.

Culture and leadership depend on the concepts of how to treat people fairly and how to make them feel we care about them. Most effective leaders, Jimmy says, work from a core principle. They “always go back to that core.”

Particularly applicable in uncertain times is Jimmy’s statement that “leadership is not how we behave and respond when we know what to do, rather it is how we behave and respond when we don’t know what to do.” He adds that “anybody can lead when everything is going well. True character is leading when things aren’t going well.” He believes that the “most effective leaders will rise in these times.”

LOOKING FORWARD

When students return to their physical schools, it will be the adults who will have to adjust. There will certainly be a “new normal” in the new environment. Teachers and building leaders can no longer “make assumptions that kids have support at home.” In fact, that has been one of the discoveries that have made virtual learning so challenging. It is not appropriate to blame the kids, whether in a brick and mortar setting or online.

The adjustments made during the coronavirus outbreak will “cause us

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to reexamine our scope and sequence, how we look at our curriculum,” Jimmy says. We will need to look at the way we communicate, the way we engage, and the way we invest in teachers.

When we are not engaging, Jimmy emphasizes, we are not taking the time to find out what the issue really is with teachers and students. Inequities happen from different levels. The effectiveness of the leaders in a school and in a district can cause divisions and issues.

FINDING THEIR WAY BACK

Jimmy Casas views his coaching approach as teaching rather than consulting. He works to help the adults in the world of education see that it is critical to see the school culture “not just through your eyes but through the eyes of students, families, teachers, and the community.”

He enjoys his work immensely and says he feels “really blessed” to be able to help others in education. Though his start in school leadership was shaky and almost came to an early end, he was able to turn his thought process around for the benefit of his students and his teachers, with some recognition for himself.

Jimmy was the 2012 Iowa Principal of the Year and runner-up National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) 2013 National Principal of the Year. His school, Bettendorf High School, was named one of the best high schools in the country three times by *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. He was invited to the White House in 2014 to speak on the Future Ready Pledge.

He has written five books, including:

- *What Connected Educators Do Differently*
- *Start. Right. Now. — Teach and Lead for Excellence*
- *Culturize — Every Student. Every Day.*
- *Whatever It Takes; Stop. Right. Now. — 39 Stops to Making Schools Better*
- his latest release, *Live Your Excellence — Bring Your Best Self to School Every Day!*

Using lessons learned from his own career on the front lines of education, including all the challenges as well as the successes, Jimmy Casas now focuses on coaching and supporting others who may have lost their way. He wants all teachers and administrators to “find their way back,” to remember that first day, and to renew their own purpose and passion for education and leadership.

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.



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