

Replicating Building Culture in Remote Mode

BY JOSEPH M. SWEENEY

At my opening staff meeting after being named a first-time principal in May 2019, I asked, “What makes a family a family?”

Staff members at Old Quarry Middle School in Lemont, Ill., responded with *loyalty, trustworthiness, love, respect and honesty*. After we read through the responses together, I said to the staff, “Congratulations, you just normed us as a staff!” From that point on, we referred to ourselves as the #OQFamily and took it seriously. Within months, our school was named a national School to Watch by Illinois Horizon Schools.

In any work environment, culture and climate drive everything. They are the most important components of an organization’s success. Staff need to feel valued, appreciated, safe and loved in their work environment. As administrators, we should not fear using the word “love” with our people, so long as we use it sincerely.

I conducted personal meetings with every staff member to listen and learn about their hopes, dreams, challenges and opportunities. That’s where building a sense of family all began.

The past nine months have put all of that to the test.

A Jarring Moment

There are some days you never forget as a first-year principal. One was March 12, 2020, when we were informed our school district in an outer Chicago suburb was headed into remote learning, likely for the rest of the school year, because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“Wait a minute,” I thought to myself at the news. “We still have so much to accomplish. If students aren’t in the building, how are we going to meet their needs?”

At this point, I realized the relationships that we established and the culture we were building based on family and love would be put to every test within moments. How do



Administrators at Old Quarry Middle School in Lemont, Ill., provided ice cream and other snacks as a feel-good measure in support of teachers and other staff during the pandemic.

you replicate collaboration and support if you aren’t physically in the same space with your staff and students?

Sustained Support

We began the 2020-21 school year with a theme: “Row the Boat.” Time after time, our staff demonstrates the capacity to be flexible and shares that “together we can achieve more” mentality. A boat will only go as far as the people who are rowing will take it.

We are proving that building a supportive learning environment through a global pandemic is possible. We’re living it daily.

Our school operations have been in full remote and hybrid modes this year. As we observed staff teaching remotely, I realized it was up to me as the building leader to sustain the family-like environment. We’ve staged ice cream socials and Food Truck

Fridays and delivered snacks to staff as simple measures to ensure staff members feel connected. It’s the small things that go a long way with our work.

I’ve been substituting daily to help my staff with the load. I’ve been meeting individually with staff to talk about their needs. We call parents periodically to learn how we can better support them. Most importantly, we continue to make connections with our students through daily check-ins and pop-ins to remote classes.

It’s all about listening, learning and adapting to whatever challenges our family faces.

If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that relationships matter and will always be the heart and soul of our profession. The foundation we built last year has enabled our success this year. It may look different and feel different, but we will forever remain “#OQFamily STRONG.”

JOSEPH SWEENEY is principal of Old Quarry Middle School in Lemont, Ill. E-mail: jsweeney@sd113a.org. Twitter: [@joseph_sweeneyC](https://twitter.com/joseph_sweeneyC)



Joseph Sweeney