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Shadowing Students to Shape a School's Culture

By Dr. Anthony J. Mooney and Lauren M. McGuirk



About the Authors: Anthony J. Mooney, Ed.D., is principal of Quaker Valley Middle School in the Quaker Valley School District. Dr. Mooney earned his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Education degrees, as well as his doctoral degree in educational leadership from the University of Pittsburgh.

Lauren M. McGuirk, M.Ed., is assistant principal of Quaker Valley Middle School in the Quaker Valley School District. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree from The Pennsylvania State University, Master of Education degree from Duquesne University and is pursuing her doctoral degree in educational leadership from the University of Pittsburgh.

School administrators face the dilemma of creating a school environment that balances state requirements while creating a culture that supports students' social, emotional and academic needs. In order to meet these, sometimes, competing needs, administrators across the country are called upon to shadow a student in their school via the **Shadow a Student Challenge**. The **Shadow a Student Challenge** is a collaboration between the Stanford Design School's K12 Lab Network and IDEO (a global design and innovation company) with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The purpose of the challenge is for school leaders to build empathy for students by spending an entire day in the classrooms, in the cafeteria, on the playground, in order to gain a student's perspective.

At Quaker Valley Middle School (QVMS), both administrators and teachers participate in this movement as a means to build empathy for our students and to help positively shape the school's culture. In 2018, QVMS joined nearly 1,900 educators from across 60 different countries in this unique school experience. To date, approximately 50% of our teaching staff has spent a day shadowing a student within our school. The **Shadow a Student** experience has provided fantastic insight into the student experience and has afforded the faculty and administration the opportunity to create real and lasting change for our students.

Through the shadowing journey and reflection process, staff at QVMS came to a variety of realizations about our school's culture.

- ◆ We have been **reminded** just how *hard* it is to be a middle school student. Students have opened up to us about just how full their plates actually are and we have responded by providing additional supports to students in the form of supplementary tutorial time, "homework club" and various counseling options. We counsel students about the balance between their course load and extracurricular commitments and work to help students remain balanced and mindful.
- ◆ We have **learned** what students like most about their school day and what they dislike. Students shared with us that while they don't mind summative assessments, they dislike having multiple summative assessments on the same school day. As a faculty, we listened to the students and now utilize a team-based calendar via our learning management system to more effectively schedule summative assessments for all students.
- ◆ We have **listened** as students talked to us about the ways that they learn best, from desired technology integration to preferred instructional strategies. Students have articulated their preferences regarding replacement devices for our school's one-to-one student technology refresh. This feedback is being taken into consideration as we move forward with purchasing new student devices for the coming school year. They have verbalized their preference for hands-on learning experiences, collaboration with their peers and their teachers and choice. Teachers and administrators have continued to incorporate this type of instruction into all instructional and curricular units.
- ◆ We have **forged** stronger and more meaningful relationships with students within our school. Interestingly, we have found that many of our students *want* to be shadowed by their teachers and administrators. They see it as a unique opportunity to be heard – and why wouldn't we want to afford them this opportunity? Students have told us that the shadowing experience helped them see their teachers and administrators as *real people*.

Our school's culture has been positively impacted by the **Shadow a Student Challenge**. We believe this is mainly due to the fact that this challenge fosters the development of strong, positive relationships between students and adults. From these relationships comes a school environment that can best be described as caring, engaging, respectful, safe and secure. For these reasons, the shadowing concept is being expanded to include other stakeholders at QVMS and in the surrounding region.

Continued from previous page

During the 2017-2018 school year, QVMS opened the **Shadow a Student Challenge** to Gregg Behr, the executive director of the Grable Foundation (a Pittsburgh-based non-profit that supports critical programming for school-aged children). Mr. Behr's experience at QVMS initiated a partnership between our school, the Grable Foundation and the Allegheny Conference on Community Development to pilot a new shadowing experience which has been titled, **CEO in the Classroom**. The **CEO in the Classroom** program pairs Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) from various companies with middle school students for an entire school day.

A pilot of this program was held at QVMS in December of 2018. The experience was incredibly beneficial to the students, teachers and CEOs. Students (not only those who were officially shadowed) were exposed to business leaders from a variety of backgrounds for an entire school day. Teachers were able to demonstrate the power of public education in real-time and were able to network with business



A "class photo" with Quaker Valley Middle School students and the regional CEOs.

leaders who can offer support to the teachers' programming and content areas. CEOs provided school leaders with feedback regarding the types of skills and dispositions that will be required of the future workforce and CEOs were able to see, firsthand, the types of educational experiences that students are regularly afforded. When the school day ended, the CEOs and school administrators engaged in a

reflection process that allowed for observations to transform into opportunities which consisted of future action steps. The relationships and partnerships that can be forged between schools and businesses is absolutely crucial as the global economy continues to evolve.

The **CEO in the Classroom** concept is now spreading throughout western Pennsylvania. On March 12, 2019, 30 CEOs from the region shadowed students in seven different school districts. The feedback that the school leaders have received from this experience will assuredly have a positive impact on their school's culture. More importantly, the experience itself

will lead to a connectiveness among students, teachers, administrators and business leaders throughout the region.

For more information, please visit the **Shadow-A-Student Website**: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/shadow-a-student-k12> or contact the authors at mooneya@qvmsd.org or mcguirk@qvmsd.org

Mentor Groups

Continued from page 32

community, and most importantly, the students with their "can-do" attitude. We have a vibrant atmosphere with a positive climate and culture that connects our students to the adults with whom they work daily and to our community at large. As a result of our mentoring program, in combination with the emphasis on social-emotional learning, we have students who not

only perform exceptionally well on their Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams and other standardized measurements, but have demonstrated the ability to be resilient, empathetic, operate with a growth mindset and are optimistic about their future. In these ways, our students are prepared to be productive citizens, have the interpersonal skills to form

and maintain relationships with others and have the intestinal fortitude to fight through any adverse situations. These attributes are the "West Vincent Way," and are a huge reason why the Owen J. Roberts School District is a special place for teaching and learning.

For further information, contact the author at EdSmith@ojrsd.com

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