Crucial Conversation Reflection

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Background

In my current role as Magnet Coordinator and University Connections Liaison, i find myself supporting teacher and students in a way that I have never experienced in my educational career. My position allows ample flexibility to take the time to have meaningful conversations with students and gain further understanding from their teachers as time allows. I have a handful of students who venture to my office on a consistent basis to receive advice or to just vent to an unbiased adult who is removed from the particular situation. One eighth grade student, in particular, has communicated that she views my space as a place of solace and a place she feels comfortable to voice her opinions and concerns. She is a student who has been labeled with behavioral challenges and learning disabilities and many teachers have stated that they do not feel that she desires to do well in school and on her assignments and does not take her school work very seriously.

One day in November, an eighth grade Science teacher came to me stating that this particular student was using highly inappropriate language and disrespectful gestures after being handed her interims. Interim reports are sent out to students every three weeks to ensure that students and their families are given adequate feedback about their performance in classes. This eighth grader chose to lash out on her teacher, causing a classroom disturbance and was sent to in-school suspension for the rest of the day.

Crucial Conversation

The day after the incident, I had my crucial conversation with this student. She came into school disgruntled and appeared to still be quite agitated about the situation. I asked her if she would like to come to my office later in the day, prior to her having Science class. She obliged and was in a slightly better mood when she entered my office during her advisory class period.

I initiated the conversation by asking her about her day and what she had done in her morning elective classes as well as her English Language Arts class. I allowed her to further the conversation by asking me a few questions about a recent retreat I had been on and what I had been doing that morning. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked her about the incident from the previous day. I stated what I had heard and observed. I mentioned what the science teacher and administrator told me that afternoon about her behavior and why she had received a consequence. I asked her to read a quote that had been written on the board in my office. The quote “I am here to learn, lead, and thrive” was written by one of her friends and I often refer to it, like a mantra, for students to consider as they interact with each other and their teachers. I asked her what the quote meant to her and how it related to this situation. She was not very receptive and began to roll her eyes, a similar response to other times she has entered my office after a classroom incident. She reluctantly stated that she was not leading because she was setting a bad example for others to follow. She then crossed her arms and made a statement about how she hated “that teacher” and did not want to go to her class later that day because the teacher was “out to get her”. Reading her body language, I then moved to asking her questions like “How did your grade make you feel” and “How could you have handled those emotions differently”. This was my way of shifting the conversation away from the teacher and toward the reaction to her grade. She stated that she was very upset by her grade and frustrated because she thought that she would have had a higher average since she had recently turned in a few of her missing assignments. She also mentioned that she felt that the teacher did not like her so when she saw the grade she automatically took it out on her teacher out of frustration hoping to upset her just as much. After hearing these concerns, we talked about the breakdown of grades and the importance of turning assignments in on time. I showed her how her grades would have changed if she turned in the assignment on time by adding back the 10-20 points that were taken off for being handed in late. After going through that process, she understood that while it was beneficial for her to turn assignments in, it is increasingly important to turn assignments in on time. We then made a plan to utilize her agenda more. I offered to remind her as often as possible and check that she was writing assignments in her agenda each week. She mentioned that setting reminders for herself on her cell phone may work and suggested that I may need to send her teachers an email to ensure that they knew that if she has her phone out that she would not get in trouble for inappropriate phone use. I then told her that I was proud to see her making the effort to improve her grades and would continue to support her to ensure she continues to make positive progress.

Crucial Conversation Analysis

This particular student tends to move toward silence when I speak with her about topics that require a crucial conversation. In this situation, I saw that beginning to happen when I mentioned the quote on my board. She immediately crossed her arms and made some hushed, defensive statements about her teacher. There was clear frustration in her tone, but she did not show acts of violence or make statements toward me, within the conversation, that would suggest violence.

On my side, I tried to remain calm and consistent while taking the time to observe her body language to gauge the level of safety and direction and of the conversation. When discussing grades and classroom behavior with students, I tend to lean more in the direction that they are being given the skills to be a leader and advocate in the classroom and should know to handle the situation appropriately. This is simply a story I am telling myself knowing that I send leadership lessons to teachers each week for implementations and the fact that teachers are expected to review PowerSchools with their students on Friday of each week to check for missing assignments and track their grades. With these systems in place, my thought tends to be that students should know better, meaning they should not be in this situation. However, I am not teaching the actual leadership lessons where advocacy strategies are discussed, nor am I in the classrooms each Friday when grades should be analyzed. Therefore, I am just making an assumption that all students have the tools to adequately review their grades when they are received and know how to discuss their concerns with their teachers. However, I feel that I was able state my facts that I knew going in to the conversation and was able to  guide the discussion away from how the student felt about the teacher and talk more about the feelings the student had about their grade and a better way to respond to that feeling in the future.

Together, we were able to come to a mutual understanding of how important it is to submit work on time. We came up with strategies to better handle this situation in the future. In hindsight, I could have done a better job discussing the stories she was telling herself about the teacher being “out to get her”. My focus was mainly on the reaction to the grade because that is what lead to the classroom disturbance. However, I feel there could have been some powerful discussion about how our stories can perpetuate themselves in different ways and the stories that she is telling herself about this teacher may cause her to treat her more negatively, causing even more issues within the classroom. I try my best to have honest and real conversations with my students as often as possible and that could have been something stated that could have made even more of an impact than the grades discussion. In all, I felt that the conversation ended positively and we came up with next steps that have proven to be beneficial for her since this conversation a few weeks ago.