

Spotlight Strategy: Be Intentional and Systemic about Change

Monroe Career and Technical Institute

As Monroe Career and Technical Institute (MCTI) experienced significant changes in the demographics of its student population, the leadership team realized the administration and staff needed to refocus its mission and approach to learning to best meet the needs of all students. Since approximately 2002, the student population at MCTI has become more culturally diverse, as there are greater numbers of students whose primary language is not English and an influx of students who used to live in more urban areas. Director Mrs. Patricia Moyer notes that with these ongoing changes, the leadership team “identified a need for change in the school climate.” She explains that as a whole, the school needed to implement changes that would “appreciate who we are, what we look like and what our needs are.”

In an effort to involve key stakeholders in the change process and to implement the process through a thoughtful and systematic approach, the MCTI leadership team conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. In a SWOT analysis, participants identify an organization’s internal strengths and weaknesses and the external factors which present opportunities and threats to the organization. As independent groups, each set of stakeholders (the leadership team, instructors and parents, students, business representatives, employers, Workforce Investment Board and community college personnel and administrators and guidance counselors from sending schools) each conducted a SWOT analysis of MCTI. The leadership team examined the results of the analyses and identified several common threads that related to changing the school climate. The leadership team then developed an action plan and timeline which incorporated the findings from the SWOT analysis and focused on creating what Mrs. Moyer describes as a more student-centered “environment of safety and acceptance so kids could learn.”

In the action plan, the leadership team identified several strategies to implement to help build a school climate that focused on meeting the academic and emotional needs of students. The strategies, some of which are identified below, involve key MCTI stakeholders including administrators, instructors and parents. They were implemented over a six-year time period.

Learning Support Facilitators – MCTI staffs three learning support facilitators who provide support for special education students (who account for about one-third of the student population). As certified special education instructors, the facilitators monitor the progress of special education students and facilitate contact with parents and with the sending schools. The facilitators use a “Career Action Plan” to communicate to parents what the career and technical education (CTE) programs at MCTI require of students. At IEP (Individual Education Program) meetings with parents and sending school faculty, the facilitators use the “CAPS” form to provide details on CTE program curriculum and to help guide a discussion of whether MCTI and the student will be a good match.

Career Facilitators – Beginning when students enter MCTI, career facilitators conduct career planning activities with students to help them identify career goals and determine how to achieve those goals. To

begin the career planning process, the facilitators administer the Keys2Work inventory. This program contains an interest inventory and an assessment tool that enables students to determine if they have the necessary math, reading and graphic interpretation skills necessary to be successful in their chosen career. Keys2Work also has a remediation component that allows students to work at their own pace to improve these skills. Using the SkillsUSA Professional Development Program, the career facilitators help students to strengthen their employability skills. For example, activities may center on creating resumes and developing portfolios which highlight their interests and accomplishments. The facilitators also host a “Career Carnival” featuring mini seminars on dressing for success, interviewing techniques, resume writing, etc. Due to the positive feedback regarding the Career Facilitator initiative, MCTI has received requests from its sending districts to begin the program with eighth graders.

Hire Instructors Who Believe in the Mission – The MCTI leadership team believes that “teachers are an important part” of the change process. They are “careful in hiring” instructors that will embrace the student-centered philosophy at MCTI and the goals of the strategic plan. To help ensure they hire such instructors, the leadership team asks teaching candidates various questions, such as:

- What is your philosophy of discipline?
- How would you work with students who have special learning needs?
- What would you do if a child is not being successful in your program?
- What would a graduate of your program have to say about you as an instructor?

Participate in TAP – During the change process, MCTI joined the Technical Assistance Program (TAP). (A Pennsylvania Department of Education initiative, TAP provides technical assistance to help schools focus on improving student achievement. The program emphasizes student performance on the math and reading PSSA and on the NOCTI assessments.) The leadership team finds the program especially supportive in helping to plan effectively for school improvement and believes it complements the change initiatives already underway at MCTI.

Improve Communication with Parents – Mrs. Moyer emphasized to instructors that to make the school environment more student-centered, they needed to communicate effectively with parents. MCTI wanted to encourage a “team approach to student success” and the buy-in and support of parents remains a critical component of this approach. To strengthen communication efforts with parents, MCTI faculty host a parent orientation in the Spring, prior to the beginning of each school year. During this program, instructors review course requirements, grading policies and behavior expectations. The leadership team believes that having this “positive contact” with parents before possibly having to contact them about negative student behavior is important to secure their support.

Raise Awareness about CTE Programs – One of the goals of the MCTI leadership team is to educate the sending schools about the learning experiences of students at MCTI. The team believes there remains a misperception about the academic rigor required of students in their CTE courses and that MCTI is viewed as a less rigorous alternative for students. As a result, students may be encouraged to enroll at MCTI by their sending schools, when MCTI may not be the best fit for them based on their strengths and needs.

To raise awareness about MCTI, the school hosts a “Spend a Night at MCTI” program for faculty from its sending schools. During this program, participants pick one of two programs to observe. The course instructors teach an actual lesson to participants to demonstrate the level of learning occurring in their

classes. The leadership team has received positive feedback about this program, with many participants stating they did not realize how demanding the programs were at MCTI.

The leadership team and instructional staff at MCTI continue to implement strategies that focus on improving the school culture to best meet the needs of all students. The leadership team cites the commitment of instructors to this mission and the support of the administration and the Joint Operating Committee as key factors in achieving their goals for a student-centered approach to learning.

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Monroe Career and Technical Institute (MCTI) is located in Bartonsville, Pennsylvania. As a part-time career and technical center, it enrolls approximately 1,050 students in grades 9 through 12 and provides 26 career and technical education programs. MCTI serves four school districts.