

Dr. Peter Licata, Ph.D.

1. Efficient Operations

Walk us through a time when you had to revise procedures and policies to improve efficiency and transparency. What led to the revisions and what was the outcome?

Prior to my appointment as Assistant Superintendent of Choice and Innovation for the School District of Palm Beach County, the process through which the 32,000+ annual Choice applications were processed was inefficient and costly. The application process was difficult for parents, especially non-English speakers and low-income families. The paper application for the Choice Lottery was lengthy, time-consuming, and required four to five staff members to manually input the massive quantity of information into a database. This was repetitive and redundant, and the labor costs alone exceeded \$500,000 per year.

In an effort to modernize the outdated and expensive process, the Choice team researched several Tech startups that were looking for a partner to expand their products to a large District. Our goal was to automate the entire lottery process. Along with the District IT team, we worked with several companies to determine the capability and compatibility to serve a District with a very large volume. We presented the proposed system at a Board workshop where we were given full support by our governance team. Once the process was finalized, we became the largest District to fully automate a lottery system processing over 32,000 applications every year.

This cutting-edge system cost approximately \$80,000 with a small annual maintenance fee. The savings realized over the years has been several million dollars and continues to grow. We were able to reallocate several positions no longer needed for data entry and moved those staff members into positions that helped grow additional programs and serve more students directly.

Most importantly, this innovative change in process had an additional significant return-on-investment that went well beyond cost effectiveness and efficiency. The new system enabled the district to decrease the socio-economic divide in Choice applications as access for all families was provided through a computer or a mobile phone app. Any family with a mobile phone was now able to apply, change, and communicate through the app rather than the tedious paperwork process. To further reduce inequities, a mobile application bus was deployed into traditionally underrepresented neighborhoods to assist families with the process. Although the initial action started based on streamlining a system in a process it also led to an equitable solution for our students and stakeholders.

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2. Engaged and Invested Community

Specifically discuss how you have aligned the community to promote, advocate, and advance support for teachers, staff, students, and public education.

Upon my promotion to Assistant Superintendent of Choice and Innovation, the first directive I received from the Superintendent was to “make it equitable”! He was referring to our career academies and choice schools. Those words stuck with me while completing my first year in this leadership position. That year became all about asking, listening, and learning.

To begin, we conducted an analysis of the number of programs, locations, and specific program offerings along with the enrollment of each by demographics. What we found was a disparity in program locations and enrollments based on zip codes and socio-economic status. Through structured conversations with business leaders, chambers, and local colleges we learned that many of our programs were not targeting the future talent workforce needs.

The team's next step in the action plan was to hold several town hall-style meetings inviting business leaders, Board members, colleges, principals, teachers, parents, and students. We presented our findings openly, honestly, and transparently and had an open forum for feedback on what was needed to create more relevant and equitable programming to prepare students for higher education and/or employment.

Utilizing the input from the stakeholder's meetings, we created a plan for expansion of new programming in all regions of the county. This expanded programming gave all students the opportunity to attend specialized and career programs without traveling hours daily on school buses. We added relevant programs such as cybersecurity, digital graphics, and gaming. Every middle school was equipped with a technology academy and the number of medical academies in middle and high school were doubled. We were also fortunate to acquire three new Marines JROTC units bringing the number of JROTC schools to 15. In all, over 100 new programs were added in all geographic regions of the county. For teachers, we partnered with several industry leaders such as Microsoft and Adobe to lead professional staff training for teachers. Our teachers became better equipped with the skills to be the leaders in their classroom in these innovative fields

Our final step was to market the new programs to increase awareness that our schools were the best choice. Working with the Communications Department, we advertised and expanded our Showcase of Schools where schools marketed their unique opportunities to potential students and families. This event became so successful that attendance reached over 20,000 parents and students annually.

Two years after that first town hall meeting, Palm Beach became the leader in the state for Choice and Career Academies. We surpassed larger districts in Industry Certifications but most importantly we now had more equitable access for students

across the district. Through the master plan of regionalization, we as a team worked directly with the community, promoted and advocated public education, and made sure that teachers were equipped with the skills they needed. In recognition of our work, the School District of Palm Beach County was honored by Magnet Schools of America as the Nation's Best Magnet School District in the Country.

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3. Positive Climate and Safe Environment

Describe how you have balanced stakeholders' needs in the ongoing improvement of school culture and safe working environment?

Education has changed significantly during my 30-year career. The challenges we face today were virtually nonexistent when I began my life journey as an educator. I believe schools and districts can no longer act in the best interest of a child unless all stakeholders have been actively engaged and communicated with throughout the duration of the educational process.

The last few years have taught us that schools across the country are more than buildings that facilitate learning. Schools have become a meeting place, a sounding board, and epicenter of community focus. School leaders and teachers are called upon to support children's educational, physical, and emotional well-being. The safety of our school environments will continue to be challenged and as a school district, we must be unified in our approach in every action regarding school culture and a safe learning and working environment.

Our Region operates under a system of processes that allows for two-way communication while maintaining a clearly defined set of standards. Research is very clear that teachers are the most important people in relation to student learning and principals are the most important factor in teacher effectiveness. I use this fact-based evidence when approaching all leadership actions.

The pandemic and recent school violence has forced us to rethink our approaches to what really matters in successful schools. School culture has now become the single most impactful attribute for successful schools. The culture has to start with the leader and continue at all levels from district leaders, to school leaders, to teachers. The culture that I support and project is transparent, empathetic yet embedded in clearly defined goals and expectations. We are focused on student and staff growth and safety.

In the recent release of 3rd grade scores from the State of Florida, I was proud to see that my region not only surpassed the state average of 54% proficiency but saw a 3.2% increase while proficiency levels in most districts across the state remained flat or declined. I strongly believe this was a result of creating an atmosphere of student learning first with focus on supporting teachers in a safe environment.

Educational leaders can no longer operate with a "gotcha" approach to what we know is the most important factor in student learning. Teachers are our most valuable resource and current data shows teachers across the country are tired and frustrated by increasing mandates that may not be directly related to student learning. I believe the success in my region and in our district at large is directly related to the culture we have created where all staff are respected and valued. I will always utilize that leadership perspective knowing full well, we need everyone's voice and commitment to achieve a safe working and learning environment that results in continued student growth for all students in these challenging times ahead.