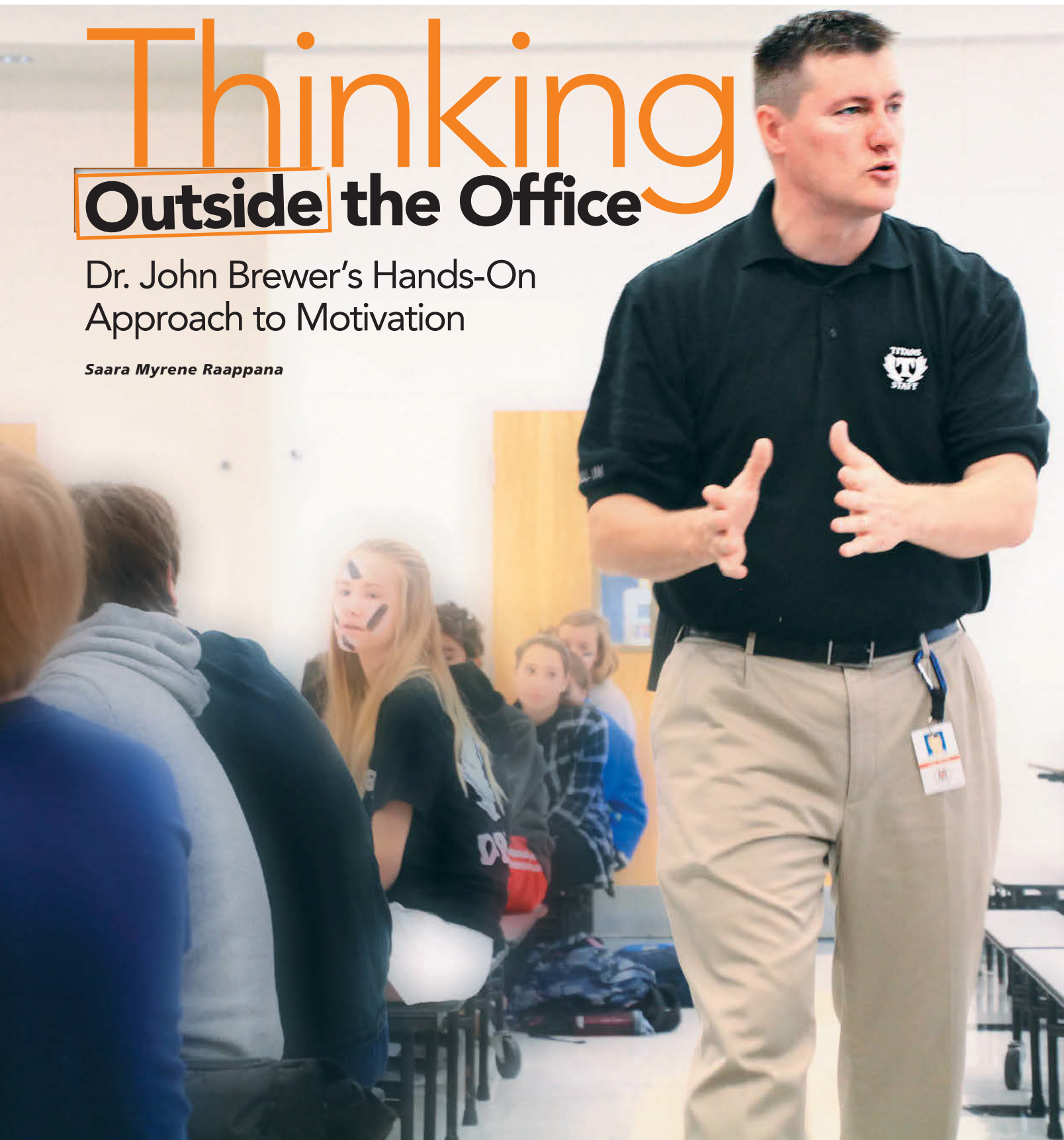


Thinking Outside the Office

Dr. John Brewer's Hands-On
Approach to Motivation

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Motivating students to build the skills they'll need to succeed both before and after graduation is one of the primary challenges every principal faces,

and it's a complicated one. According to a National Research Council report on motivation, around 40% of US high school students are operating at a critical low in school motivation. *Forbes* reports that a 2013 series of papers compiled by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) found that schools see an increase in students' academic motivation—and, thus, their success—when they're working with at least one of four factors. The more factors a student has, the higher his or her motivation will be. Those four factors occur when students:

1. See themselves as capable of completing the task
2. See a direct connection between their actions and an outcome and have some choice in the way they undertake the task
3. See the task is interesting or valuable
4. Believe that completing the task leads to social rewards (e.g., "a sense of belonging to a group or approval from someone they care about") (Crotty, 2013).

When Dr. John Brewer signed on as principal of the then-fledgling Dominion High School of Sterling, VA, in 2002, he had to motivate more than just students: He had to motivate their families to invest in the new school he and his staff were trying to build. Dominion opened to handle the school district's rapid population growth, but Brewer knew that he was going to have to work to convince families that were long-happy with the two highly respected extant area schools that a new,

untested school with a first-time principal was the best place to educate their children. Having been assistant principal of Broad Run High School in Ashburn, VA, one of the schools whose students would be attending Dominion, Brewer already had a sense of the community; but he was keenly aware that he couldn't rest on his laurels.

He recalls, "Our staff went on a mission to meet our new students and their families to recruit them for our 'dream team': the transition committee that was going to plan for the opening of the new school. That effort was so successful, with hundreds of future students, staff, and community members contributing to the [dream team's] planning process, that we decided we should keep visiting after our first school year. Over the past 13 years, the entire community has come to expect a visit from the 'Titan Welcome Wagon' when their eldest child prepares to make the transition from middle school to high school."

Brewer has built a reputation for unorthodox methods of community-building, including unrivaled attendance at athletic events and directing traffic into school during inclement weather. Brewer, who taught math and served as both dean and assistant principal before becoming Dominion's first principal, is known to bike through the area to maintain community ties and spend hours studying student photos so that he can greet each Dominion student by name (Geddie, 2010).

Ben Radomsky, a junior at Dominion and an editor for the Dominion High School newspaper, says, "Dr. Brewer knows the names of nearly every Dominion High School student. ...The task may seem menial at first, but



with a Dominion High Student and a Teacher

How is Dr. Brewer involved in ways that most principals aren't?

Ben Radomsky, Dominion High junior and an editor of the Dominion High School newspaper:

Dr. Brewer attends countless Dominion High School sporting events. When I did cross country, very few people would show up to cheer the team on, but Dr. Brewer was often there, and encouragement from someone such as your principal is really something else. Our meets were sometimes up to 45 minutes away, but even then, he came. (It is probably worth noting that his daughter was on the team both years that I participated, but he still attended far more often than most parents.)

Nicole Rubloff, Dominion High School English 9 teacher: Last summer, he asked staff to engage in something that was out of our own comfort zone so that we could understand how the vulnerable learners sometimes feel here at school. His experience was going to play Bingo, which he had never done before, with a group of people he had never met. He had to ask for help with the rules. I chose to ride my bike over a very tall bridge to combat my fear of heights. I learned that it is easy to just say that you won't do something, but it is so much more rewarding when you do put yourself out there, even when it's uncomfortable, and just do it. I also realized how hard it must be in those uncomfortable situations when you are young and vulnerable and do not have the resources you need to succeed. At least I had a good bike and a good riding partner while students may have nothing at all to help them in their uncomfortable situations.

How do Dr. Brewer's motivational methods affect student/teacher performance and attitude?

Radomsky: Dr. Brewer is constantly encouraging his students to attend Dominion sporting events in order to promote school spirit and cheer on fellow Titans. His enthusiasm often does spread amongst the students, getting them to go to events they did not even know were being held. It would be great, though, if Dr. Brewer publicly congratulated educational merit a bit more. It seems as though every day Dr. Brewer is congratulating some athlete or team via the announcements, or just recapping what happened at their game. Accomplishments in the field of education are acknowledged usually only at the end of the quarter on the announcements, or at the occasional Hall of Fame induction ceremonies. More balance would really go far.

Rubloff: He (or other administrators) actually goes to students' houses in the mornings when a student who is having attendance issues does not show up at school. It makes the students realize that someone is watching over them and cares about where they are.

Do his motivational methods make your job as a student or teacher easier? If not, what other motivational methods do you think would make your job easier?

Radomsky: For me, being someone who has participated in Dominion extracurriculars in the past, Dr. Brewer's lack of formality and his acknowledgment of me—by knowing my name, saying "hi" to me in the hallway, or asking how the school year is going—makes me feel accomplished as a member of the Dominion community. Dr. Brewer often learns people's names once they have participated in a Dominion activity, and this encourages participation, but it also leaves those who don't participate feeling like less than those who have. The reason for their lack of participation is not always apathy; it could be prior obligations or the inability to get a ride. The only solutions I can see to this are the memorization of everyone's names (which is a huge task), regardless of their involvement in the Dominion community outside of school, or having conversations with those who do not often participate.

Rubloff: I find the autonomy and trust that we are given as teachers to be very motivational. ...He has extremely high standards, communicates them clearly, and truly believes that every student can succeed. Everything he does is grounded in research and common sense and everything we do fits with that model.

once [you think about] such an undertaking—the memorization of thousands upon thousands of names—his eagerness to accomplish it is really quite flattering. Knowing many students' names enables him to interact with many of them, whether it be just saying 'hello' or starting a conversation."

It may seem like Brewer is just a friendly guy, but there's methodology in his sociability. "Greeting any person by name completely transforms the relationship from acquaintance to something more—friend, mentor, or guide," he says. "Visibility at the events in which our students

participate communicates the message that the entire community values their efforts and prioritizes the activities about which they are passionate." If the community is invested in students and believes they can succeed, the theory goes, students will be more likely to believe in their own abilities,

see their activities and studies as worthwhile, and gain that sense of belonging that's vital to building motivation.

Brewer and his staff visit the homes of new students to, as Brewer puts it, "invite students and parents to fully engage in the high school experience and build trust with the community we serve. The overwhelmingly positive feedback we receive about these visits indicates that this investment is well worth the 60 hours we invest in it each summer."

The more engaged the whole family is, the more likely students are to truly invest in the school as a community. According to Dominion English 9 teacher Nicole Rubloff, "He spends 10–15 minutes there getting to know the student and engages the parents with questions about their student. He then takes those answers and makes suggestions about ways the student can get involved." Students who engage in student activities are more likely to feel the sense of belonging that leads to increased motivation. Brewer says that "building a community [and] establishing a positive school culture" are among his many duties as a principal. Knowing each member of his community goes a long way toward building that culture. Rubloff continues, "He also makes it a point to learn every student's name before they walk through that door. ...He really knows his students, their interests, their background, and their personalities."

Of course, one man alone doesn't make a culture. Brewer credits much of his success to his team: "We have an extraordinarily hard-working staff. Our teachers consistently go way above and beyond. ...Some arrive every morning before the sun comes up to work with students on



science research projects, volunteer late after school each day to provide extracurricular opportunities that other schools do not offer, while others spend countless hours reading student writing and providing them with critical feedback."

Rubloff talks about how Brewer's respect for and trust in his staff translates into inspiration for teachers: "The intrinsic motivation that comes with being the CEO of your own classroom cannot be replaced by smaller extrinsic rewards." She goes on to explain Brewer works to ensure his extremely high standards are communicated clearly to all teachers and staff, with methodologies that are based firmly in extensive research, allowing all teachers to work as a team, all bringing their unique strengths to a common, research-based philosophy and set of methodologies. Not only does this improve the motivation, autonomy, and accountability of teachers, it also allows students to benefit from both the consistency and individuality of each of their teachers and mentors.

Brewer's model is about motivation. There are incentives for students who've done well, from posting expansive pictures of students who've gotten a perfect score on the SATs or broken an athletic record to calling students out during morning announcements for great acts of citizenship like returning a lost wallet or volunteering at an event. Radomsky indicates that students may not perceive accolades as being handed out evenly across disciplines, however, saying, "Dr. Brewer publicly congratulates educational merit less often than he does athletic merit. It seems as though every day Dr. Brewer is congratulating some athlete or team via the announcements, or just recapping what happened at their game. Accomplishments in the field of education are acknowledged usually only at the end of the quarter on the announcements, or at the occasional Hall of Fame induction ceremonies."

Brewer says that he doesn't want to leave out any students: "For those students who have not



yet discovered or unleashed their passion, we must strive to help them find it.” In the case of vulnerable learners, Brewer encourages staff to accompany them to college fairs or educational seminars. Rubloff says, “On his advice, I took two of my more vulnerable learners through the college fair last year. To see their eyes open and realize that there are actually opportunities out there for them was incredible.”

Brewer also initiated a study hall system called “Titan Time” that pairs academically challenged students with mentors who help them find success in their classes, a one-on-one system that’s led to tangible improvements in both academics and in struggling students’ sense of capability and mastery, allowing them to forge a connection between targeted work and success. Brewer states, “Our most vulnerable students do not innately possess the academic habits

necessary to fulfill their academic potential. Consequently, during Titan Time, we offer a tiered system of interventions designed to meet students at their point of need and work deliberately to empower our students with those lifelong learning skills.”

According to Rubloff, Brewer isn’t unnecessarily rigid when working with challenging situations: “One student...had a one-on-one teacher [working] with her during the 90-minute Titan Time. Her grades still weren’t improving, so our team recommended her for the alternative school. Her guardians refused, so at the suggestion of the history teacher on our team, we doubled her up on history and English and had her drop math. She not only passed the Standards of Learning test in history but also ended up raising her grade from an F to a B in English. Dr. Brewer was open to and supportive of this unique set-up.”

Even with a vital dose of flexibility, though, it can be difficult to reach all students. Radomsky points out, “Dr. Brewer often learns people’s names once they have participated in a Dominion activity and he has seen them do so, and this encourages participation; but it also leaves those who don’t participate feeling like ‘less than’ those who have. The reason for their lack of participation is not always apathy; it could be prior obligations or the inability to get a ride.” Rubloff mentions that some at-risk students don’t take well to Dominion’s motivational methods: “Most students respond well,” says Rubloff. “[But] it isn’t easy. Some of the more at-risk students might get resentful at first, but I have watched several students turn around their behavior.”

She continues, “[Brewer] models every behavior he expects to see, so he isn’t asking them to do anything that he isn’t doing himself. He holds

them accountable, which is not happening at home for some of these students. He is visible and accessible. And more importantly, he listens and he cares. The same is true with teachers. He models instructional practices in staff meetings. I see how well it works and usually cannot wait to take it back to my classroom.”

In fact, Brewer’s method for managing inappropriate student behavior, based on the work of David Perry and Jean Anastasio of APL Associates in Camillus, NY, is all about modeling and reteaching appropriate behavior. Brewer explains, “Fundamentally, we believe that adult, independent, responsible behavior can be—in fact, must be—taught; and that manners and professionalism are almost certainly our most important curriculum. Detention, in the traditional sense, has rarely, if ever, been used to teach anything. Therefore, during a ‘clinic’ our staff empowers students to develop into mature, responsible young adults.”

Brewer considers monitoring student and staff behavior to be part of his job as a principal: “Doing this work myself fits into the old-fashioned work ethic I try to bring to the job every day; never ask anyone on the staff to do anything I am not willing to do myself.” This often takes him out of the office. He says, “The major responsibilities of the principalship (building a community, establishing a positive school culture, serving as an instructional leader, evaluating teachers, managing student behavior, and overseeing school operations) are best accomplished in the spaces that our students, staff, and community occupy, rather than in the office. The natural contexts...are the classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, parking lot, neighborhood paths, and school events. As principal, I have to

“The major responsibilities of the principalship are best accomplished in the spaces that our students, staff, and community occupy, rather than in the office.”

be present in those places in order to exert the influence that the position requires.” You’re more likely to find Brewer in the common spaces of Dominion High, “huddling” with groups of teachers regarding student progress, observing in classrooms, reteaching appropriate behavior to students who’ve engaged in misconduct, visiting the homes of truant students, or even directing traffic when the parking lot gets congested during inclement weather.

It’s this kind of boots-on-the-ground principalship that has allowed Brewer to create a culture that expects investment from all parties—principal, staff, and students alike. Students who see that everyone engages equally in the maintenance of the school community—who are called by their first names, helped by teachers and mentors, celebrated, and checked on at home—will feel accepted and develop that “sense of belonging” that’s vital to developing motivation. They’ll also learn to see value in devoting themselves to a task, community, or goal. Since engaging with teachers and mentors builds mastery of tasks and problems, students are building capability every day at Dominion.

According to Brewer, academic achievement is only one component of a larger model: “Our mission statement is built upon five pillars, only one of which—the pursuit of excellence—can be primarily reached within the walls of the classroom. The remaining four—respect, integrity, character, and leadership—depend upon extracurricular engagement for their full manifestation in the life of an

adolescent making the transition to young adulthood.”

In an age when many school administrations feel pressured to concentrate largely on improving test scores, Brewer builds motivation and, thus, high academic standards through a variety of means, including what he calls “character education”: “Many of the 21st century skills that kids need to be developing are not things we traditionally think of as things schools ought to teach. ...Can you treat other people with respect? Can you pull your weight? It’s crucial to be able to do these things in a global workplace” (Williams, 2013).

The system at Dominion works because building student confidence, ownership, and mastery is part of the very culture of the school, allowing them to take risks, celebrating success or learning from failure, while developing the character that will make them truly engaged citizens of a global workplace. **PL**

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