

Culture Is Contagious:

# How Happiness Saved Our District

The superintendent of a small Iowa district on using the parable of an orange frog to squelch a system's defeatist attitudes

BY JOEL C. PEDERSEN

**T**oxic. Underperforming. Negative!

I can still hear the words used to describe my school district back in 2010 when I applied to become its superintendent. Expectations about the Cardinal Community School District from mentors, friends and family were decidedly low. People questioned whether I could be successful.

In honesty, the feelings were mutual. Many of those I encountered around Cardinal, a district serving five small communities in southeast Iowa, from staff to teachers and students, had adopted the minimalist belief that *We're just Cardinal*. That negative outlook shaped how they saw themselves. It formed the lens through which everyone viewed both expectations and outcomes.

## Positive Mindsets

Being hard-headed helped me to ignore all such feelings of defeatism and low self-esteem. So I accepted the challenge. Being hard-wired for positivity led me to apply what I instinctively knew about the research and science behind positive psychology, which would be our path to creating a high-performing culture and a significantly better-performing school district.



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Our school district educates 630 students over 130 square miles in Wapello County, recently named the poorest county in Iowa by *The Wall Street Journal*. Cardinal was ranked in the bottom 10 percent of schools nationwide (in terms of academic performance) when I started as superintendent. Our students' ACT scores averaged 16, six points below state average. Enrollment was dropping as families left our school district. There was little to be proud of.

I knew if I could change behaviors, by demonstrating more positive ones, mindsets would follow. I realized top-down messaging, problem solving and mandating were not going to change the well-established belief system that *We're just Cardinal*. Changing culture is more a matter of doing rather than saying. We needed new skills put into action.

### Revelatory Book

My wife Jamie and I were at Barnes and Noble in 2011 when I first spotted Shawn Achor's book *The Happiness Advantage*. I joked that the bright

orange cover spoke to me like a blueberry scone at the coffee bar. The subtitle mentioned "fueling success and performance at work," and I considered the work we do at Cardinal to both advance the education of our students and support the well-being of our people and the community. They are interconnected.

I bought the orange book, not the blueberry scone.

Achor not only discusses principles that made sense to me in accessible language, he also pushes for developing new habits and investing in others as the path to greater well-being. For me, that was the hook. I knew we all could make small positive changes and those behavior changes could cast a positive light on how we thought and worked together.

We didn't have a formal training program to begin with so I did the next best thing. I looked to key staff people who were already positive leaders, the ones who had influence anywhere in the district, "positive outliers" as Achor calls them. They learned the principles with me and took more intentional actions, including actively sharing positive stories from the success we generated. We made a social investment.

### A Joint Effort

My initial team included members of administration, teachers, support staff, secretaries (notably, our attendance secretary Brenda Stevens) and even our maintenance man, Les Shepherd, who now writes poetry to express his positive outlook and gratitude (see related story, page XX.) We shared the good news with teachers, support staff, students, parents and the entire community. Each of us, and all of us, began to apply the principles and form new positive habits in our daily work routines (and life).

That had a big impact. It became contagious. Changing the prevailing social script — to positive first — caught on, and after awhile everyone wanted a piece of the action.

So it wasn't me having to inspire the troops to new heights or find the right motivational techniques. It was all of us learning to incorporate a positive mindset in our personal lives and work at Cardinal as we pursued the Happiness Advantage principles (see related story, page 43).

What has happened since is that we have

**Superintendent Joel Pedersen (right) and a high school freshman flank a cutout of Spark, the mascot tied to Shawn Achor's parable *The Orange Frog*, copies of which were provided to every student in the Cardinal school system.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OTTUMWA COURIER

## About the Happiness Advantage

Our most commonly held formula for success is broken. Conventional wisdom holds that if we work hard, we will be more successful, and if we are more successful, then we'll be happy.

If we can just find that great job, win that next promotion, lose those five pounds or raise our test scores, then happiness will follow. However, recent discoveries in the field of positive psychology have shown that this formula is actually backward.

Rather, happiness fuels success, not the other way around. When we are positive, our brains become more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient and productive at work and in the classroom.

### Reprogramming Brains

This discovery has been repeatedly borne out by rigorous research in psychology and neuroscience, organizational manage-

ment and educational studies, as well as the bottom lines of proprietary groups around the globe. In *The Happiness Advantage*, best-selling author and positive psychology expert Shawn Achor (who spent a decade researching and lecturing at Harvard University) draws on his own research in 42 countries — including one of the largest studies of happiness and potential at Harvard — to fix this broken formula. We can reprogram our brains to become more positive to improve our performance and maximize our potential edge at work and in education, including our classrooms and communities.

Among the principles Achor outlines are:

► **THE TETRIS EFFECT:** how to retrain our brains to spot patterns of possibility, so we can see and seize opportunities wherever we look.

► **THE ZORRO CIRCLE:** how to channel our efforts on small, manageable goals, to gain the leverage to gradually conquer bigger and bigger ones.

► **SOCIAL INVESTMENT:** how to reap the dividends of investing in one of the greatest predictors of success and happiness — our social support network.

### Personal Discoveries

To create a culture of adaptive, proactive leaders at all levels, the power of positive is among the biggest learning opportunities available to create and sustain success. In short, I have made these personal discoveries by investing in this work: (1) Happy is a choice; (2) Happiness spreads; and (3) Happiness is an advantage.

— JOEL PEDERSEN

a whole new level of learning going on inside the Cardinal Community School District. I call them teachable moments. For example, Brenda Stevens in her role as attendance secretary, now feels empowered to challenge random students to add the positive to the negative situations they may face. She asks them to scan for the positive in their days and to learn to cultivate a positive mindset in the face of everyday challenges, such as making it to school on time, being productive outside class and being “present” in class.

We've communicated two things to staff, teachers and students, which are reinforced everyday by actions:

- What you think matters, and
- What you do matters.

So by changing our culture to positive, we've seen pretty amazing results in terms of improved financial and educational outcomes.

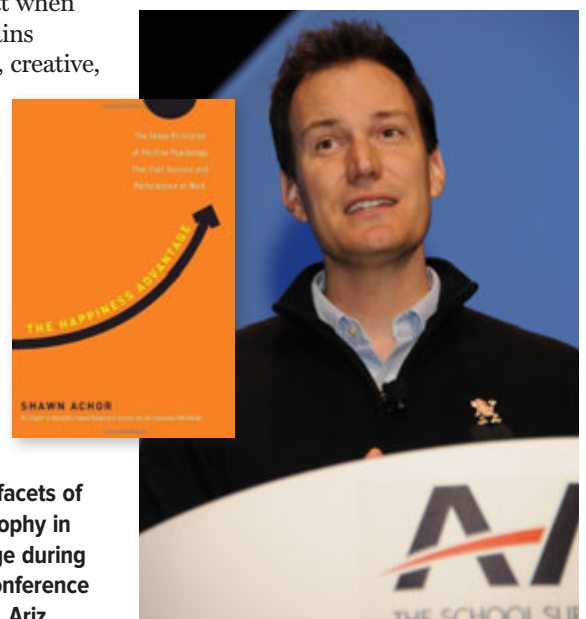
### Spreading Positivity

Cardinal School District usually is awash with red and white, the traditional colors, but lately there has been an orange streak running through the school. Once we adopted happiness as our guiding force, our next step involved bringing in The Happiness Advantage's Orange Frog Workshop, a two-day experiential workshop that teaches the science of sustainable peak performance. It has enabled us to raise the level of engagement.

*The Orange Frog* is a parable by Achor about a frog named Spark who turns orange the more positive he becomes. Eventually, Spark spreads his positivity to all the other frogs — which is the same thing we've done in our school district. We now have teachers and support staff completing the workshop, and we ensure all students receive copies of the book and a stuffed version of Spark. This makes it not only fun but effective because all of us know the metaphors and speak the same language.

Research shows that when we are positive our brains become more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient and productive. Just look to the Gallup Student Poll released in March, which indicated high school students who are engaged and hopeful are about 1.6 times more likely to report that they

Shawn Achor described facets of his organizational philosophy in *The Happiness Advantage* during AASA's 2016 National Conference on Education in Phoenix, Ariz.



## Profiles in Positive in Action

How does the Happiness Advantage manifest itself among our staff?

Consider Les Shepherd, director of buildings and grounds in the Cardinal Community School District. He is a poet. After Cardinal schools introduced their Orange Frog program last December, which encourages people to think more positively, now everyone knows about his passion.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I have always had a talent for making up songs and rhymes," Shepherd said. "I grew up with Dr. Seuss, and it really stuck with me."

He now e-mails poems to his coworkers at least once a week.

"If we do not have a poem in the morning," said curriculum director



Les Shepherd

Cindy Green, "many staff members will be e-mailing him, asking him where the poem is."

Shepherd even penned an Orange Frog motto for the schools. The poems cover topics that inspire him: It could be the sunrise or an academic event. He's always scanning the environment for something positive to share.

"I am just happy knowing that I could help put a smile on someone's face because I know it's contagious," he quips.

### Attending to Positive

Cardinal students are coming to understand the power of positive through the school's staff. A prime example is attendance secretary Brenda Stevens, leader of Cardinal's Positivity Challenge. She decided she would select students throughout the week and challenge them to improve their personal outlook.

Ninth-grader Jadelyn Jones was having a bad day. She had woken up late, almost missed her bus and was counting down the hours until she could go back to sleep. She made a stop by the school's attendance office to talk her problems out with Stevens.



Brenda Stevens

"She gave me one minute to get all of my complaints out," Jones explained. "After that, she challenged me to be more positive the rest of the day."

Jones had her doubts, but she gave the challenge a shot and immediately felt an impact.

"Every time I started to say something negative, I would catch myself and try to reexamine the situation with a positive outlook," she added.

Stevens checked in with Jones and her teacher throughout the day to see how she was progressing. At the end of the day, Stevens gave Jones a stuffed orange frog to celebrate her accomplishment.

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are headed to a two-year or four-year college after high school, compared to disengaged and discouraged students.

### Proven Impact

I believe we've proven the impact of positive belief and action in K-12 education, and I'm proud of the results. ACT scores of Cardinal students have increased by three composite points since 2009, a 15 percent increase. Average daily attendance has moved up from 92 percent to 95 percent. Retention is up, too.

In addition, we have had a net change in funding exceeding \$1 million since 2005 from gains in student open enrollment. Our community passed a \$5.3 million bond this past February for school facility improvements, something unimaginable during the days of wide negativity. We were

named by the *Des Moines Register* as one of the Top 150 Workplaces in Iowa in 2015.

People look to leaders to solve an organization's problems. I acknowledge and own the challenges the school district faces, but now I always approach students, faculty and those real challenges with a positive mindset. By ensuring we have a positive environment for students, we can influence the community today, while setting the stage for the future.

Ultimately, I want students to look back and think about what a great place Cardinal was, how it helped them grow as people and how it was so much fun being there. ■

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