

Cultivating a Cooperative Culture within a School Leadership Team

The challenge: Coordinating efforts and overcoming silos in school leadership

Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) serves a diverse student population of more than 131,000 students from rural, suburban, and urban areas around the Washington, DC area. PGCPS includes 198 schools and nearly 20,000 employees. It is one of the 20th largest school districts in the United States and has an annual budget of \$2.3 billion. About 20% of the PGCPS student population are learning the English language in school, and 66% of the students qualify for free or reduced meals. With such a large organization, it can be difficult to efficiently coordinate efforts, [navigate conflicts](#) in schools, and meet the various needs of school leadership, teachers, administration, support staff, parents, and students.

One PGCPS administrator reflected, "With a district as large as ours, it's very easy to get stuck in a reactive process because there are daily crises." Another employee from a school leadership team noted the ease with which silos form different staff groups band together with a focus on the duties, policies, or changes that impact them directly.

Other challenges include ensuring effective communication among school leadership and helping team members to feel appreciated in a demanding profession with relatively limited financial compensation. To tackle these challenges and make good on their commitment to advance student achievement and

help prepare students for successful lives, PGCPs took a proactive approach by engaging Arbinger to provide solutions that would drive [cultural transformation](#).

The solution: A proactive approach to a collaborative school leadership culture

An Arbinger facilitator consulted with the senior leadership team of PGCPs, providing training and coaching geared toward improving the school leadership team's capacity to positively influence and develop others. Like all Arbinger training, this process first focused on enhancing individual self-awareness regarding the counterproductive tendencies of a self-focused, inward mindset. Because mindset ultimately drives the behaviors that create results, any lasting change efforts depend on a fundamental change in mindset.

The school leadership team of PGCPs, supported by the Arbinger facilitator, realized ways they had inadvertently been inhibiting progress by seeing others as objects rather than as people. They were also equipped with tools to help cultivate and operationalize an outward mindset in schools by focusing on people and results. These steps laid the foundation for cooperative culture in schools at PGCPs.

Arbinger also worked with the school district's talent development team, focusing on ways to cultivate growth and improvement for PGCPs employees, including examining hiring, onboarding, and promotion practices. These training efforts included helping employees hold themselves more accountable for their impact on others and eliminating much of the existing conflicts in schools.

To scale the impact of the training, PGCPs identified 70 employees located strategically across the district who became

trained and certified to deliver Arbinger workshops to employees in both district administration and within the school leadership.

One area of conflict in schools and recurring tension was when high school teachers felt that their students weren't leaving middle school with the necessary knowledge or skill set to succeed. Where previously accusation and resentment would have flourished, Arbinger principles helped reorient a collaborative atmosphere focused on student progress.

Kristi Holden, a high school principal, said, "Since the Arbinger training, I no longer blame the middle school for what the students don't know." By helping implement a shared vocabulary and orientation towards workplace accountability, Arbinger enabled a dramatic change within the school district.

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-Kristi Holden, High school principal

The results: PGCPS fosters collaboration and student success with an outward mindset in schools

Implementing Arbinger principles to create an outward mindset culture had a meaningful impact throughout the PGCPS. One employee recalled how her supervisor's proactive approach. "My supervisor approached the disciplinary conversation in an outward way that respected my humanity...I'll follow her to the ends of the earth because she saw me as a person... That's the person I want to work for, and that's the person I'll give 110% to."

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This shift in interpersonal interactions was felt between peers as well. As one employee stated, "There has been an intentional focus on changing the way we treat each other," which has fostered collaboration across departments or divisions that would formerly have been siloed. "The Arbinger framework's proactive approach has helped to better integrate new hires into the district," one administrator stated. "This shift in mindset has helped us to adjust to bringing new people in. Last year was tough. This year is a lot better."

Another faculty member, when asked about the impact of Arbinger's training expressed how "relationships have just flourished" because of the increase in mutual concern for one another's success. [Outward mindset in schools](#) fosters an environment where faculty and staff are more aware of and responsive to the goals and challenges faced by their colleagues."

Arbinger methodologies provided a shared language and framework to unlock a cooperative culture in schools at PGCPS. "Though on the surface, focusing on the mindset and behaviors between employees may seem separate from the project of developing student potential," one employee reflected, "However, through these conversations that we're having, we're accelerating the work, even though we're not concentrating just on student achievement."

By offering a more profound understanding of the [mindsets at the root of behavior](#), Arbinger has helped administration, faculty, and employees across PGCPS improve their ability to work together to teach and uplift their students.