



**CARDINAL**  
COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

## Staying the Course

### How A School District in Rural Iowa Keeps on Winning for Students, Staff, and the Entire Community

By Shawn Achor

#### FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AN ORANGE WAVE APPEARS

What an honor! Joel Pedersen, Superintendent of Cardinal Community School District (Cardinal), was named a finalist for Superintendent of the Year by the School Administrators of Iowa. Unfortunately, he didn't win. However, on the positive side, the organization noted several favorable outcomes far more important than any individual award: "Under Pedersen's leadership, Cardinal Community School District has seen significant gains in its graduation rate and K-12 student achievement, and the district has invested in a number of major infrastructure improvements over the past eight years."

I know from first-hand experience that this commendation only scratches the surface of what has been happening at Cardinal; the district has been "winning" for years through culture change and positive empowerment. For me, that's the story that keeps on getting better.

Notably, back in 2010, Joel was warned by his friends and colleagues to not apply for a position in the district. Why? Well, it just wasn't a positive picture; culture and performance were both

suffering. Cardinal was listed in the bottom 10 percent of schools nationwide in 2009. It also had ACT scores six points below the state average, as well as dropping enrollment. Plus, Cardinal is located in Wapello County, the poorest county in Iowa, according to a report by 24/7 Wall St. The unofficial motto of Cardinal seemed to be, "We're just Cardinal." "The people that cared about me the most said, 'This is not where we want you to start. We don't think you'll be successful there,'" Joel recalled.

#### THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE & THE ORANGE FROG

Fast-forward to the 2016 National Conference on Education, hosted by AASA. In my keynote address, I explained the happiness research I conducted at Harvard, which led to my best-selling book *The Happiness Advantage* and its companion parable *The Orange Frog*. I described how decades of research show that when the human brain is turned to "positive," virtually every performance indicator that we know how to measure improves. This effect has been recorded across many contexts, including the workplace and school classrooms.

To show how *The Happiness Advantage* plays out in the real world, I presented the story of Joel and Cardinal, explaining the dire situation the district was in and the incredible results the district achieved by using positivity to change their culture and empower district staff, educators, and students alike. Here are the key results they were able to achieve:

- 15% increase in ACT scores.
- Higher daily attendance and retention.
- Change in funding exceeding \$1 million, due to gains in student open enrollment.
- Passed a \$5.3 million bond for school facility improvements.
- Named by the Des Moines Register as one of the Top 150 Workplaces in Iowa in 2015.

By using principles from *The Happiness Advantage*, and then from the Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog workshop, I explained how Joel was able to spark a change that flipped the culture of Cardinal from negative to positive. To do this, he modeled not just positive behaviors, but a positive mindset. “Joel’s focus on positive culture transformed our district to a positive place,” one district employee recalled. “Our culture and attention to organizational health has recruited positive team members, students, and families that want to be part of a special place.”



In the Orange Frog parable I present the principles from *The Happiness Advantage* in a narrative format. This story chronicles how a protagonist frog named Spark, and a clever group of frogs living on a remote island, discover the steps necessary to instill a positive mindset and overcome a myriad of problems related to culture, engagement and innovation *recognizably similar to those challenges faced in our districts.*

To accomplish this effort they first had to embrace being orange which is the metaphorical equivalent of sustaining a positive mindset. Initially being orange was simply seen as being different and caused fear and resistance *as does any significant change.* But eventually these frogs realize the benefits of having a positive mindset and ultimately show the reader how to implement this approach in their own school culture and beyond.

## SPREADING ORANGE & STAYING THE COURSE

Systematically, Joel empowered certain members of his staff (who were already “positive outliers”) to model positivity and spread it throughout schools, buildings, and the community. These individuals developed a mantra which guides their efforts:

### **Cardinal Positive Pledge**

We are radically changing the school experience by starting a movement with the power of positivity!

#### **We will:**

- Embrace positive outliers
- Encourage people to "Think Orange"
- Ensure everyone matters

These words guide the actions of this team and can be found in their email signature lines. These positive outliers made a habit of sharing good news and making social investments. They include

a variety of staff and faculty, such as attendance secretary Brenda Stevens and the now famous Les Shepherd, a maintenance man who began writing poetry each day to kids to express his gratitude and positivity. “If you want to have a great school, you have to have a great culture. And happiness is the best place to start,” Joel emphasized.

Now that Cardinal is several years into the process of transforming their culture through the principles of *The Happiness Advantage* and *The Orange Frog*, Joel has some unique and sobering insight into the difficulty of long-term, sustainable culture change. “Orange Frog made a big splash in our district and led to some great changes and improvements,” Joel remembered. “But *The Orange Frog* parable warns us about the ‘thrall,’ which is the natural, day-to-day regression away from staying orange. For us, it was a lot of little things that started to chip away at our success. Our state cut some funding, we had occasional social media problems from parents or students with concerns, and we had some dips in teacher retention.” Indeed, it is all too easy for the Orange to fade when things get tough.

However, Joel had some helpful examples of how to stay Orange, even during challenging times. He connected with peers on the Orange Frog Education Council, a network of like-minded districts and superintendents that believe that positive culture and leadership are key drivers in achieving educational outcomes and happiness in their schools — and beyond. He also emphasizes the importance of focusing on where big wins are happening while also addressing areas that need improvement. “We always try to Fall Up, which is one of *The Happiness Advantage* principles. When things get rough, it’s always good to go back to what you know and focus on increasing the positives,” Joel said.

## LEADING INDICATORS

Despite these challenges, Cardinal has even more good news to share! According to Cardinal’s April 2018 ‘Engage survey’ results, key results have sharply increased since January 2017, including a 19 percent increase in engagement and a 21

percent increase in Cardinal employees agreeing that they have not considered searching for a better job in the past month.

In addition to these outstanding survey results, Cardinal gained 12.9 percent in their reading proficiency during the 2017-18 School Year. Out of 400 schools, Cardinal’s Kindergarten through 3rd graders ranked 8th in the state with a 12.9 percent proficiency gain, according to the state’s FAST literacy assessment. Superintendent Pedersen credits the district’s culture with improving literacy proficiency. “From our experience, engaged educators at all levels enhance educational outcomes,” he stated.

“Our teacher’s great dedication and enthusiasm for learning has impacted our student achievement,” said Heather Buckley, Cardinal elementary principal. “We are proud of our gains and we will continue our efforts to further our reading proficiency. We are devoted to providing our students the necessary skills, knowledge and environment to assure they are successful lifelong learners. Developing proficient readers, while also instilling a love for learning, continues to be a priority and a daily focus.”

The district’s open enrollment figures also show promising improvements; after shifting to a positive figure (\$94,128) for the first time in 11 years in 2012, things steadily improved from there. The district had over \$1 million in open enrollment in 2016, which was cause for huge celebration. However, this figure was dwarfed in 2018 when open enrollment totaled just over \$2 million, with 521 resident public students attending the district! “Honestly, the state of Iowa has a hard time explaining us,” Joel commented. “Although some other state districts typically perform better than us, we are very proud of the fact that we went from negative to positive – that’s very difficult to do.”

## ***MORE ENERGAGE SURVEY RESULTS:***

- Alignment (up 35%), which includes:
  - I believe Cardinal is going in the right direction. (up 49%)
  - Cardinal operates by strong values. (up 46%)
- “My Manager” (up 39%), which includes:
  - My manager helps me learn and grow. (up 39%)
  - My manager cares about my concerns. (up 41%)
  - My manager makes it easier to do my job well. (up 38%)
- Effectiveness (up 39%), which includes:
  - At Cardinal, we do things efficiently and well. (up 45%)
  - Senior managers understand what is really happening at Cardinal. (up 39%)
  - Cardinal encourages different points of view. (up 44%)
- Connection (up 37%), which includes:
  - I feel genuinely appreciated at Cardinal. (up 37%)
  - I feel well-informed about important decisions at Cardinal. (up 42%)
  - My job makes me feel like I am part of something meaningful. (up 30%)
  - Cardinal enables me to work at my full potential. (up 39%)
- “The Basics,” which includes:
  - I have the flexibility I need to balance my work and personal life. (up 35%)
  - This job has met or exceeded the expectations I had when I started. (up 37%)

Another clear indication that Cardinal is staying the course with a highly engaged culture is the feedback from district employees. For example, here is just a sample of the overwhelmingly positive comments received from dozens of teachers:

## ***HAPPY KIDS AND TRUSTING PARENTS LEAD TO HIGHER OPEN ENROLLMENT:***

- “I am astounded at the amount of support we have provided for kids. Whether it's been providing positive conversations with students, fun activities for celebrating student success, or even allowing students to make choices about the school.”
- “Open enrollment is up because the communities surrounding Cardinal are seeing the progress and positive things happening.”
- “We have transformed into a positive culture by focusing on solutions and celebrating the small and big gains we have accomplished as a team.”
- “The amount of open enrollment is amazing! We are the best! People want the best for their kids. Parents trust us to educate their children. That's an honor to me!!”

We're also growing positive outliers, there are many stories like Zach's below:

### **Zach's Orange Frog Story**

After reading the Orange Frog parable I couldn't help but think about how this could make a difference in my children's lives. My son Zach who is eight has always struggled with breaking social scripts (because he is afraid of what people may think) and knowing what to do with his feelings rather it be anger or happiness. He has always been a follower and not a leader. He is a child that wants do things to make others happy but is afraid. When Zach was seven he had a difficult time with making and keeping friends and knowing what to do in difficult situations.

I gave Zach a short explanation about Spark the Orange Frog, he was intrigued. Zach went to his room and about an hour later he came into the kitchen and handed me the book. I asked him what he thought. His response shocked me. "Mom, I think Spark is a pretty smart frog!" He then asked if people can be like Spark. He asked if the purpose of the story was to teach people how to be better. (He is a pretty smart cookie) I told him absolutely. He then made a statement that has stuck with me. "Everyone has bad days mom, but it is easier to have happy days, so that is what I am going to do."

A few weeks went by and I was amazed in the difference I saw in my son. We no longer have sad days when he gets off of the bus. We have happy ones. A number of times he has come home and explained to me how he has made other people catch "Spark fever" as he calls it. He has taken on breaking social scripts like a champ. If someone is sad or having a bad day he tells them to smile, because after all when you smile you can't help but be happy and if you're happy so is everyone around you. Pretty smart thinking for an eight year old! Zach was excited when he found out that all of his friends would soon be reading The Orange Frog at school. Joel Pedersen had given Zach a large stuffed Spark, Spark sleeps with him every night!

I am proud and happy to report that Zach has been named Student of the Month at school. He has always strived for this recognition. His teacher mentioned that she could not believe the change in him and how wonderful things have been going this year. The assembly is today and I can not wait to see his excitement when they announce his name! If this can make a difference in my child's life just imagine what it can do for all children as well as adults.

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Joel Pedersen  
Superintendent  
Cardinal Community School District



## **NEW HIRES GET HOOKED ON CARDINAL POSITIVITY:**

- “I have only been at Cardinal for 1 year, but I think one of the biggest successes is how positive everyone is and how willing everyone is to help each other. I feel comfortable asking for help when needed.”
- “I have only been on staff for one year, but I grew up in the area. When I was in school, Cardinal was looked at in a negative light. I think the most improvement has been rebranding Cardinal into a place that is trying new things and always trying to get better.”
- “I've only been involved with Cardinal for one year, but I can say that I've really enjoyed the positive energy from our staff. I've been in an environment that has allowed me to feel comfortable to grow. It's lead to me having a first year of teaching that I can really be proud of. I've seen a lot of talented teachers doing great things this year and I'm excited to see where that takes us!”
- “In the past year I have worked at Cardinal, our district has grown tremendously with the number of open enrolled students.”

## **THE DOG CAME HOME: ORANGE IN CARDINAL CLASSROOMS**

Although Cardinal has the hard data that proves the tremendous progress they've made, most at Cardinal would first point to the heart-warming stories they have to share.

During the *Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog* workshop, Cardinal staff, teachers, and students learned a positive phrase that reminds everyone to share good news and focus on the positive: The dog came home. The idea is simple: We often see signs posted around town that tell us that a dog is missing, but how often do we get the goods news that the dog was found and came home? For example, here is a story about a Cardinal high school science teacher battling cancer, but continues to teach his Iowa students via video conference all the way from Houston, Texas!

Cardinal has many other “dog came home” stories. Meet Bethany Short, Social and Emotional Academic Learning (SEAL) Interventionist. She works with kids in grades five through eight in what was formerly known as a behavioral disability class. Beginning in the 2017 school year, the class was renamed SEAL, and the



story she shares certainly shows that social and emotional learning is resonating with students:

## NEXT STEPS FOR SUSTAINING THE ORANGE



*My own children walk down to SEAL from the elementary and often times engage with my students. My youngest, Rowdy, is really struggling with being away from his dad and I. This is the conversation that took place with him and a 6th grade student.*

*Student: Why are you sad, Rowdy?*

*Rowdy: Well, I really miss my dad [started crying].*

*Student: Well, I know you're sad, I can tell. It's okay that you are sad, because sometimes, when I miss my mom, it makes me very sad.*

*Rowdy: It does?*

*Student: Yes. Do you want me to tell you what I do when I get sad? It might help you to do it too.*

*Rowdy: What?*

*Student: When I miss my mom, I close my eyes and I picture her face. It helps me, because I get to see her.*

*This thrills me. This shows me that my student is empathetic, able to identify emotions in himself and another person, and capable of stepping into a leadership role when needed. This is growth and improvement. It makes me so proud. Just remember, it's important to celebrate these wins.*

And here's another story from a Cardinal staff member and parent of a SEAL student:

*I know that my son, Cash, has always had a supportive team at SEAL, and everyone has always tried to accommodate him, but of course with autism and anxiety, he has still struggled. This email is a salute to SEAL, and I feel like it is much deserved. Somehow Bethany and her team have come together like a well-oiled machine. By this time last year, Cash had been restrained 18 times and suspended once, and this year he has only had three restraints (and no suspensions.) Cash went from 18 to 3, and that is huge! Imagine how it feels as a parent to know your child has to be restrained, and then imagine saying "ONLY three times." It's still hard, but there has been so much growth and progress this year. I am always amazed at the ways everyone at SEAL notes the positives. I was skeptical of Cash being the only autistic student at SEAL, but I could not be happier that he is there. Cardinal has something very special with SEAL and I am thankful to be part of Cardinal.*

Considering the progress that Cardinal has made in the last few years, we look forward to seeing what Joel and his remarkable staff and faculty will accomplish next! Recently, Cardinal High School was awarded a bronze medal by the U.S. News & World Report, which now ranks among America's best high schools!

Also, Joel was able to share some plans that the district has in mind. "We are budgeting money for the next fiscal year to re-train everybody at Cardinal with the *Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog* workshop," he said. "There is natural turnover and staff additions that make it necessary to repeat this training so that everyone has a common language and is clear on who we are and what our district is about."

Remarkably, Cardinal is passing along the Orange not just among district staff, teachers, and students, but to the community as a whole. To this end, they plan on offering the *Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog Workshop* at no cost to community members and parents. "We feel this could be a game changer as we 'ripple out' *The Happiness Advantage* principles," Joel commented.

In preparation for the 2019 school year Cardinal had nearly 100 faculty and staff complete a two-day workshop based on my most recent book "Big Potential" which outlines exciting new research that shows our greatest happiness and Biggest Potential is achieved when we work toward the happiness of others - our entire social system.

This workshop is focused on keeping the Thrall from returning and shifting the responsibility for leading a Positive Culture clearly to each individual

in the district. "Leading from every seat," was how I described this effect when I profiled Cardinal District in Big Potential.

Also during this workshop Joel's team took responsibility for creating the district's "tour of meaning" a physical and symbolic showcase of the district's wins and accomplishments. The teams took responsibility for creating these "culture exhibits" and then took turns giving the tour. As many of the attendees wiped away tears of pride

and appreciation Joel said, "this clearly places ownership of the Cardinal culture where it belongs; in the hands of our team. Next year we plan to have students give the tour to others interested in our journey."

Now that we've learned what the Happiness Advantage looks like as it transforms a school district, here are my key tips for seeing positive change in your own district:

## TIPS FOR SUSTAINING A POSITIVE AND A HIGHLY ENGAGED CULTURE IN YOUR DISTRICT

- 1. Model positive behaviors and a positive mindset.** Actions speak louder than words, and attitudes speak louder still. This will attract educators, staff, and families that want to be a part of a district that is unique and special.
- 2. Empower positive "outliers" to model and spread positivity.** These individuals may want to habitually share good news, make social investments, or emphasize the strengths of the district. It is best to identify a variety of people ranging anywhere from administrative staff to bus drivers.
- 3. Expect that the "thrill" will set in, even after making big, positive changes.** Many unavoidable negative things can affect your district. The key is to "fall up" and continue emphasizing what is going well while addressing areas that need improvement.
- 4. Connect to a network of like-minded people.** Preferably at least some of your network should be outside of your district. This will allow you to learn and share best practices as well as provide and receive social support.
- 5. Speak a common language.** Each district needs words, phrases, and images that instantly show a common understanding of the importance of a positive mindset. Many participants in the Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog workshop report that this is one of the most important pieces of a sustainable, positive culture.

### MINDSET MATTERS

Much of what Cardinal has accomplished can be summarized in one of *The Happiness Advantage* principles: Mindset Matters. "Joel has a 'make it happen' mindset," a Cardinal employee elaborated. "It's empowering and motivating to be around a team that is constantly looking for ways to better the school. I've also always thought that Cardinal

having the title of being one of the best workplaces in Iowa is awesome! I can definitely see why we have been awarded that."

Stay tuned as we keep an eye on Joel and Cardinal staying the course to continued success!