

BusEco: Writing case studies - annotated example

Atlanta Public Schools: A Case Study

Executive summary

Since 1999, the Atlanta Public Schools System (APS) has implemented significant changes in performance evaluation strategies after the appointment of Beverly Hall as its superintendent. Over 10 years, Hall's data-centric methods were praised, attributing the significant improvements in academic performance in APS schools to her rigorous attention to the measurement of data. However, an external investigation in 2011 revealed that schools had been cheating to obtain these high results. This report investigates the factors that could have led to this situation. It identifies problems associated with the organisational culture, leadership style, and top-down control of the APS. The main problems identified in the APS organisation are that staff are motivated by fear, there is an inappropriate leadership style, and too much emphasis was placed on the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of each school.

The authors have investigated and critically analysed each main problem and formulated solutions to address these problems. From these solutions the report recommends a suitable implementation plan, to aid the new superintendent in considering the future of APS. Recommendations include the introduction of a new cultural mantra, holding focus groups with APS principals and teachers, and establishing new metrics to evaluate performance in non-academic areas.

To understand the problems and consider solutions this report applies theories including organisational culture

The first section of the Executive Summary provides a brief background to the organisation and outlines its problems. It uses clear language and lists the problems identified. It also states the purpose of the report – to investigate the factors leading to the situation. ✓

This is a brief outline of the recommendations. Remember, this is just a summary, so you do not need to go into a lot of detail or explain the recommendations yet. 💡

The final part of the Executive Summary mentions theories used and any assumptions made in preparing the report. ✓

Legend

✓ Good practice

✎ Needs improvement

💡 Comment

theory, transactional and transformational leadership styles, the balanced scorecard approach to controlling, and benchmarking. The authors assume that APS has appointed a new superintendent, and that the organisation has sufficient human and financial resources to implement the recommendations made in this report.

Problem Identification and Analysis

1. Organisational Culture

The culture problem faced by the APS organisation is that staff are motivated by fear of punishment rather than the mission of the organisation.

The culture problem faced by the APS organisation is that staff are motivated by fear of punishment rather than their vocation to educate students. Teachers were motivated to achieve targets because of the intimidation, threats and humiliation they may receive if they failed to do so: “In the end, meeting targets became more about the adults than the children.” (Simons & Kindred, 2017, p.17). This placed high pressure on employees and caused them to seek ways to reach the targets with minimum effort (Reizer, Brender-Ilan, & Sheaffer, 2019). Staff in their desperation have resorted to cheating to avoid the harsh punishments. The tone for this survivalist atmosphere was set by Hall’s mantra of “No exceptions. No excuses.” As suggested by Williams et al. (2016), an organisation’s founder is integral in setting the beliefs, attitudes and values of the organisation. Hall’s merciless approach was adopted by the principals, who then influenced their staff and proliferated the phrase, “low score, out the door” (Simons & Kindred, 2017, p11). Furthermore, this culture was reinforced by the celebration of ‘organisational heroes’, staff who met the targets but did so whilst demonstrating these unhealthy behaviours (Williams et al., 2016). Hence, though the practices were unethical, teachers were pressured to comply or keep silent as they “feared retaliation if they spoke up” (Simons & Kindred, 2017, p.16). Due to these reasons, the APS organisation sustained a culture shaped by fear. Staff have adopted unethical practices which provide quantitative results, but do not work towards educating students.

This example case study (report) looks at only one problem. However, case study assignments will often require you to discuss a number of different problems in a particular scenario.



What is the ‘mission of the organisation’? Change this topic sentence to be more precise by thinking about what the organisation’s mission might be.



A clear topic sentence is used to outline the first problem.



Include an explanation of the causes of the problem; note that there are several causes.



Theory is clearly applied to the situation. Note how this is done here by first describing the theory of Williams et al, and then applying this to Hall’s behaviour.



A clear concluding statement links the causes to the problem.



When analysing multiple problems, repeat the processes of this paragraph for each problem you identify.



Statement of major problems

Organisational Culture

Staff are motivated by fear of punishment rather than their vocation to educate students

Leadership style

Hall's transactional leadership style is ineffective in leading APS towards providing students with a good quality education. It fosters a short-term rather than a long-term focus and does not inspire innovation.

Top-down control

The organisation focused too much on achieving the required AYP targets, leading to the neglect of other non-academic measures. The ability of principals to correct problems at individual schools was also compromised.

Generation and evaluation of alternative solutions

Organisational culture

Introduce a clear code of conduct: Introduce a written code of conduct prohibiting the use of actions such as intimidation, threats and humiliation. Research by Chen, Chen and Liu (2013) suggests that when a clear set of organisational rules is defined, employees are less likely to engage in deviant behaviours. Staff would be more aware of the expected behaviours, and hence, less likely to continue acting unethically to achieve goals (Chen, Chen & Liu, 2013).

With the threat of abuse removed, teachers would experience less peer pressure to cheat and are more likely to invest time and energy into developing legitimate teaching plans to support their students. However, the reduced external pressure may negatively affect the

State clearly which are the two or three main problems that must be solved first.



Include a short concise statement of what problems you are going to solve in the remainder of the case.



States the problem first, followed by the solution. Then, includes a short statement explaining the solution.



Note that here, the theory is clearly related to the practical solution. The solutions must be useful and viable for the organisation; if you use theory in this section it should support the practical solution proposed.



After explaining the solution in detail, it is important to evaluate it. What are the potential disadvantages or difficulties in implementing the proposed solution? Remember, you don't need to make recommendations in this section - you just need to explain and evaluate each solution.



schools' performance in statistical terms. With cheating discouraged, schools may not be able to produce the required AYP, disqualifying them for funding, which would further slow their progress. Staff could also be reluctant to change. Doll, Cornelison, Rath and Syme (2016) note that culture change is difficult and spans many years.

Establish and teach a new cultural mantra


Regularly monitor staff behaviour


Recommendations


Organisational Culture


The chosen solution is to establish and teach a new cultural mantra that focuses on educating students, the APS's mission. This solution will work to solve the problem of motivation by fear, by focusing on the purpose of APS, rather than the data, and changing the merciless attitude initiated by Hall. If the new superintendent consistently promotes and demonstrates the new statement, change will be possible within the organisation, as the cultural foundation is set by the organisational leader (Williams et al., 2016).


This solution addresses the base cause of the aggressive culture, which is the attitude set by the organisational leader, rather than only addressing the outward behaviours, like teachers' unethical practices. This solution is also more likely to lead to sustained improvement in the future. Thus, the recommendation being put forward is to establish and teach a new cultural mantra centred on the mission of the APS organisation.


Repeat the above process for each solution to this problem. Then move on to the next problem and repeat the process of explaining and evaluating solutions. 

Repeat the above process for each solution to this problem. 

Restate the problem. Remember each problem usually has specific solutions, so it is important to remind the reader which problem and its solutions you are discussing. 

Clearly state how the solution will solve the problem. 

Explain why this recommendation is preferable to the other solutions proposed in the previous section. 

A clear concluding statement about this recommendation. 

Implementation

Organisational Culture Plan

Establish and teach a new cultural mantra

Who

Superintendent, deputy superintendent, directors, principals, administration personnel

What

Create a new cultural mantra that highlights the mission of APS, which is “to ensure that APS students are successful in school and life”. Teach, promote and demonstrate this mantra so that the fear culture of APS can be transformed.

When

Where/How

Costs

Establish and teach a new cultural mantra ...

Regularly monitor staff behaviour ...

The implementation section states the action steps involved to introduce the recommended solutions: Who/When/How/Cost? You may choose to present this information in a table, as in this example. Include a separate implementation plan for each recommendation.



Include a clear restatement of the problem and the solution to the problem.



Complete for each recommendation. Remember to identify the problem first, then the recommendation, and then you are ready to outline your implementation plan.



Develop a separate implementation plan for each recommendation.

