

Making Our People the Priority: Going All-In on Employee Engagement

Milford Exempted Village Schools

“This is us, right here!” – John Spieser, Superintendent of Milford Exempted Village Schools, a district of 6,600 students and nine buildings just outside of Cincinnati.



**CHASING
SMILES** 



Two years ago, a district team from Milford engaged in a year-long human capital cohort experience where Employee Engagement was a focus in terms of its impact on organizational outcomes, ways in which to measure engagement and utilize the results, and strategies to foster highly engaged employees. It was at that point where the Milford team decided to ramp up their efforts.

Measuring engagement sends a very powerful and positive message. It says – “We want you to want to be here, and for this to be a place of employment at which everyone thrives.”

The Milford team immersed in the science behind employee engagement and the learning of practical strategies from external experts and practitioners.

Foundational advice from Superintendent Spieser: “Identify your key thought partner(s) to lead and plan for this work – don’t go at this alone. I work closely with my thought partner, Jennie Berkley, Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources & Student Services. She was the rock to get this work up and running.”

Big Moves for Milford's Implementation of Employee Engagement Efforts

Big Move #1: All staff members – certified and classified, were brought together to kick-off the school year, and talked in depth about “*Chasing the Smiles that come in every day*”. This theme for the year represented the organizational commitment to the work of Engagement – for employees and for students.

The All-Staff Convocation was designed to inspire fun, appreciation for, and engagement of Milford's staff. Superintendent Spieser reminded staff of the difference they make every day for students, incorporated student performances, and shared learnings from motivational leaders like [Dr. Joe Sanfelippo's Look Up message](#).



“The most important thing is that Employee Engagement efforts are genuine and that it’s clearly communicated to everyone throughout the organization.” – Superintendent, Spieser

Big Move #2: Milford leaders established a variety of methods to gather employee input that ultimately informs the action plans of their employee engagement results. This includes:

- **An all-staff employee engagement survey.** Milford utilizes a vendor tool they purchased that was closely selected to ensure that it was research based, efficient to complete, provided norms for comparison purposes, produced easy-to-use reports, and that it came with high-quality, actionable response tools.
- **Stay Interviews.** One-on-one conversations with current staff to help uncover themes and new understandings of the employee experience at Milford. This is being done with a percentage of certified and classified employees each year.

The feedback gathered from Stay Interviews is studied closely by Milford leaders alongside the monitoring of attrition data. Superintendent Spieser is pleased and humbled to share Milford's Five-Year Attrition Results for teachers:

SY 21-22: 13/348 = 3.1% (3 retired, 7 resigned, 6 leaving field)
SY 20-21: 23/419 = 5.4% (6 retired, 17 resigned, 4 leaving field)

SY 19-20: 18/422 = 4.2% (10 retired, 8 resigned, 3 leaving field)

SY 18-19: 28/416 = 6.7% (11 retired, 16 resigned)

SY 17-18: 23/406 = 5.6% (5 retired, 16 resigned)

- **Exit Interviews.** One-on-one conversations with those staff retiring or resigning to inform operations. Based on the learnings in part from Exit Interviews, one area of recent improvement is the addition of New Hire University at Milford, which now includes a second day for new teachers and focuses solely on curriculum.

What Milford Has Learned in Measuring Engagement

“By formally measuring Employee Engagement, we are giving more opportunity for all staff to have a voice. While the results vary across our schools and departments, so far we are hearing district themes that staff would like more opportunity to grow professionally and to be celebrated.” – Assistant Superintendent, Berkely

“To make it actionable, it was important for us to model the analysis of and response to the results at the district level first. Next, we worked with the building leaders and department managers to review their own engagement data who then work with their building teams to set a goal and action plan.”

Big Move #3: Milford’s continual commitment to the growth of its employees (an essential component to employee engagement) is one that allows for input, personalization, flexibility, and access, in a variety of ways. Examples of prioritized efforts this past year include:

- **Administrator PD:** In partnership with the Board, the superintendent worked to allocate funds for professional learning needs identified by principals and unit leaders. This allows leaders to have a voice in the PD and opportunities they need to grow professionally.
- **Job Coaching, SMART Goals & Monthly Supervisor Meetings:** To ensure individual needs are being heard and met, Superintendent Spieser meets monthly with his direct reports and they in turn meet monthly with their direct reports. Additionally, Spieser provides an opportunity for his central office leaders to consult with an external Job Coach on their personal growth and SMART goals for their upcoming year.

- **Teacher Leadership Development Series:** Through collaboration with teacher leaders, Milford committed to quarterly PD through their local ESC on leadership topics (i.e., courageous conversations).
- **Milford University/Teacher PD:** Milford provides quarterly New Teacher PD that morphed out of what their new teachers told them they needed to be successful.

Growing and supporting employees in classified positions is also important to Milford leaders. “When we say that Milford is only as strong as the people who serve our students, we mean every one of our staff members.” – Superintendent, Spieser

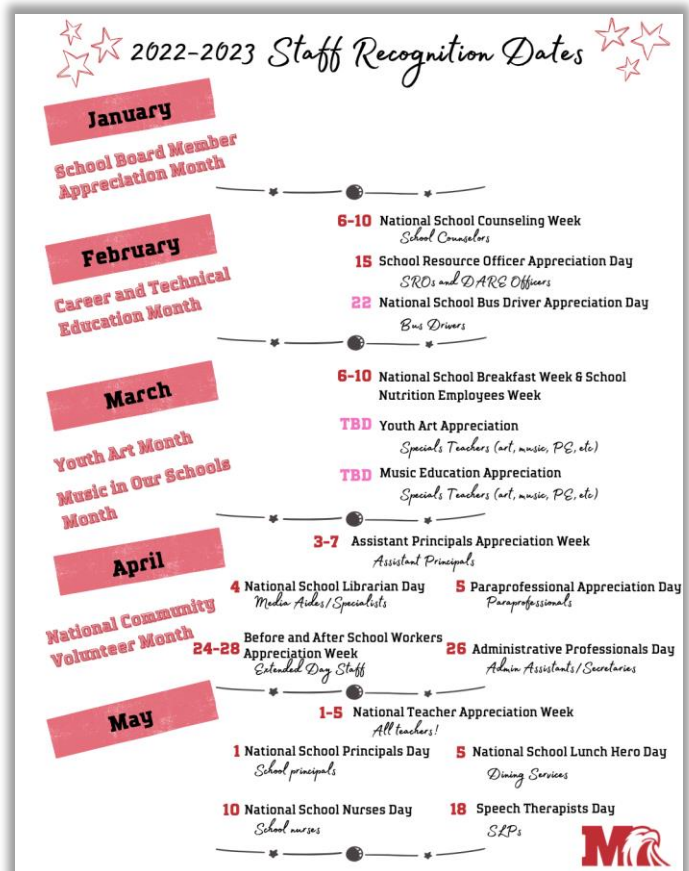
Examples of recent efforts for Classified Roles include:

- For 2023-24, Milford is planning a PD Day for ALL staff – certified and classified.
- Milford trains a great number of instructional aides into “RESA aides” by focusing a great deal on restorative practices.
- For building operations and maintenance staff, Milford looks closely at what special trades they have and additional learning opportunities.

Big Move #4: A favorite area of this work for Milford leaders is staff recognition efforts, however, they note that just celebrating staff is not enough – giving staff a voice to inform their individual growth efforts and PD as previously discussed is essential, and staff recognition is an important add-on.

Proactive planning enables Milford leaders to implement monthly staff recognition efforts across all employee classifications throughout the year. Leaders rotate and commit to a roadshow to seek out every employee during their recognition week and personally thank them for the work they do and give them a small token (i.e., Lifesaver with note). Often this effort includes the superintendent and assistant superintendent, and key messaging is reinforced that we all play an important part for our students and for one another as staff.

Appreciation videos are also a key strategy that Superintendent Spieser works closely with the Communication Director to create.



A fun example is the November staff appreciation video showcasing “Chasing Smiles” staff highlights from the year and moderated by the superintendent while he fries a turkey for a staff feast.

Appreciation Video Example

To further promote a positive workforce culture and a sense of belonging, there is also intentionality in efforts to provide informal peer-to-peer connection opportunities and time to foster and build relationships.



Big Move #5: Based on feedback from exit interviews, Milford added more action into their efforts for Staff Wellness and Care to move beyond just talking about its importance. Led by Assistant Superintendent, Berkely and informed by the district’s Mental Health Team and the Wellness Liaison from each school, Milford hosted a monthly event focused on staff wellness or well-being. An example is the December event shown in the flyer image to the right with the goal of providing time for staff to decompress. Other event examples include a Mindless Wellness Walk at an area nature trail, and Coffee, Consult and Chat opportunities where a Sign-Up Genius organized timeslots to meet with a mental health expert. Moving forward, several of the monthly wellness events will be built into the workday each quarter to allow for more access and time for teachers to reset.

Other ongoing staff wellness efforts includes: working closely with the consortium of wellness



resources available through the district's insurance; offering onsite biometrics; and providing students with reset rooms which also benefits their teachers in allowing for time and space away from the classroom for students to reset.

These "Big Moves" of employee engagement strategies feed into a larger, comprehensive human capital management system at Milford that helps the district deliver on its vision for all students. This system is very interconnected as much of the retention efforts discussed also impact word of mouth and recruitment efforts. In its commitment to find the best talent to serve its students, Milford also continually refines all areas, such as hiring tools and processes and onboarding experiences.