

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Masbate's Maximo S. Lazaro Elementary School: From Pit to Peak

"If a child is always the center of everything the school does, the school head needs to know the child. He has to get to know his family. He has to spend time with them."

So says Jerry Arizala, the school principal of Maximo S. Lazaro Elementary School (MSLES) in San Pascual, Masbate. This school's tale is a turnaround one. Its scores were at the pit when Arizala first took over. Of the 27 schools in the San Pascual District, it took the 27th spot.

But today, fifteen years later, MSLES has become one of the top 10 schools in the National Elementary Achievement Test in the country and Arizala, is among the ten principals who were recognized as "Most Outstanding School Based-Management (SBM) Implementer," by the Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP).

TEEP is the flagship project of the Department of Education (DepEd) to institutionalize SBM in the public school system. This led to school improvement, boosted the confidence and the morale of school heads and teachers, and strengthened the bonds of the schools and communities that support the schools.

Arizala's ached as he looked over his school's dismal performance. He sought to extract the root of the problem. He found that since the teachers were either from Masbate Mainland or Ticao Island, many of them were always late, if not absent in their classes. Worse, most were also lacking dedication and commitment to serve. Residents also did not get involved and even considered themselves passive beneficiaries when they receive development efforts.

Thus began his and MSLES' quest towards social change.

He realized that he needed to relate with three groups of people: the pupils, the teachers, and the community. His ability to harmonize the roles of these schools sub-systems, with the child at the center is the key to the school's success.

One with them

Principal Arizala started going house to house to visit all his students, if possible. Conversations become intimate over food so he would chat with the family while dining with them over a plate of boiled banana or camote.

"If the school head feels at home in the houses of his pupils, the pupils are at home too in their schools. This is because in school, they are free to tell stories with the principal and the teachers."

To hone the talents of the children, the school clubs were organized. Dramatic Guild, Glee Club, Baseball, and Basketball teams were formed. Unabashed, Arizala would bring his guitar and snare drums and jam with the kids. He would also join them in folk games like luksong tinik, patintero and the like.

Arizala also finds the time to be with his teachers. A teacher who turned principal, he feels for them. He facilitated their professional development. He invested time in training them particularly the new teachers. They have stayed with them for ten years now.

His teachers also joined him for Lakbay-aral to Esteban Abada Elementary School in Quezon City, a model of excellence (MOE) school to shop for possible innovations and instructional materials. In order to bring the best in his teachers, he gives them his full support and respect for their individual teaching styles. He gathered all the instructional materials as well as collecting reviewers from other schools that would benefit MSLES.

The community took on an active part in school activities as well, from simple activities like preparing food for their Supplemental Feeding Program to complex ones such as helping out in remedial instruction.

Change is contagious as the community became a close ally of the school in instituting reforms. "At first, my budget was affected because I included my pupils in my meals. But later the parents understood my purpose. The pupils brought with them rice, corn, cassava, banana and camote."

He adds, "We relished our meals consisting of fish caught from their "Kitang" (fish net) and sea shells which the pupils gathered from the seashore."

When he had all the stakeholders' attention and more importantly, cooperation, the school's revival became evident.

Best Practices

Eventually MSLES became an Elementary Leader School and had the opportunity to implement Tutorial Reading Improvement Project (TRIP) and the Comprehensive Help for Improved Learning Development (CHILD). These ushered not only the improvement of quality of education but also to the holistic development of the child.

With TRIP, 145 students identified as slow readers, habitual absentees and non-readers went through various interventions. For a quarter, they participated in reading tutorials every Saturday. Teachers were given financial assistance in the preparation of instructional materials and students were given school supplies. Parents also benefited in this project since they were taught livelihood skills.

Parents began to imbibe a positive attitude towards education. They started monitoring their children's performance regularly. They are the ones prodding their children not to miss their classes.

The school has adapted various strategies in CHILD like Each One Teach One, The One O' Clock Habit, Educational TV, use of direct learning materials and Lakbay-aral to Esteban Abada Elementary School for the teachers.

It is vital that the school head rally the stakeholders to his side. All they need to know is that they are agents of change too. The students need to feel that inside the school they are nurtured. Under his leadership the teachers feel empowered. And even the community has come to realize that their support is critical in shaping a school that produces national achievers.

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