Relationships Before Change

Prioritizing listening and building a culture of relationships

Clint Williams

Principal, Skyridge Middle School, Camas SD, 2016 Washington State Assistant Principal of the Year

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA
Creating a Culture, Engaging the Community

started in administration 10 years ago as the associate principal of Skyridge Middle School in the Camas School District. It was my first administrative position. I was excited and nervous about the opportunity. The school was already very successful according to state test results, one of the things that caught my attention when I was applying. Both the school and the community had a culture of high expectations, and the majority of students met those expectations. However, the success hid some of the culture concerns the staff was holding onto.

My first year was also the first year with our new principal. One of our charges was to improve communication and the overall culture of the building, making sure that all staff was on the same page. Goal number one for us was to strengthen relationships and re-establish a positive environment within the building.

In order to build relationships, we needed to get a pulse on the building. We met with any staff member that wanted to come in during the summer. We asked two questions and

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just listened. Those questions were:

1. What's going well?

2. What's maybe not going so well?

Following those discussions, we decided nothing needed to change right away. During our first meeting with the entire staff, we laid out our plan. It was to listen and learn about the systems that were in place. We were not going to make any changes. Year one would be about our own learning and building relationships with staff, students, and the community. In retrospect, the idea of no big changes seemed to put a lot of people at ease. Change, or just the idea of change, can cause a lot of anxiety in people.

As we continued to build a culture of relationships within the building, we also began looking at the systems we had in place. One of those was our schedule — specifically, we were interested in what happened at the end of the day. At the time, the last hour of the day was devoted to student exploration. Teachers taught subjects that they had an interest in and students signed up for classes that appealed to them. These classes ranged from guitar, to cross-stitching, to cooking and preparing food.

We felt like we could do more with this time to help our students who might be struggling in their academic classes, but we also knew we had to hold fast to our plan of no changes. As we continued to share student data as a staff, our relationship investments and culture-building paid off. The staff began questioning on their own if they were making the

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best use of the end of the school day. By the end of the first year, there was a movement to change that last hour and make it more of an academic intervention and extension time — a movement that started with the staff.

We implemented that change during the second year and, in fact, have continued to refine this process each of the ten years I have been here. It has become a system we incorporated into our inquiry cycle. As a staff, we use the results from the previous year to plan what it will look like next year, and during implementation we gather data from staff, parents, and students on the effectiveness of the new plan. Because the origin of the program came from the staff, it has become part of our culture to continue to refine and change that system. If we (me and our principal) suggested the change, there is no way it would have become such a part of what we do.

Tackling a Problem of Practice: Using developed relationships to foster a change in our grading practices

As I progress in my career, I learned the value of focusing on my personal and professional growth. While making time for learning can be difficult, I began to set aside time to increase my personal intelligence, my systems intelligence, and my social intelligence. The last for me has been the most difficult, but I've learned how important it is to acquaint yourself with the community you are working in and to build social awareness of what your parents and community are looking for in their school.

The importance of social intelligence is illustrated by a problem of practice we recently addressed at

Skyridge. Three years ago, during an examination of our student data, we became alarmed by something in our attendance numbers. We found a high number of students who were refusing to come to school because of anxiety. Our community places a high priority on a quality education and focuses heavily on grades as a deciding factor of that education. As I talked to students, they expressed how much of their anxiety stemmed from the pressure to perform in school and achieve high grades. In light of that problem, we crafted a new theory of action to address this problem of practice, one that we continue to build upon today.

The first year was about our own education and making sure we were learning about student anxiety and reflecting our learning in our own practices. We did this by asking: what were we doing that was contributing to this issue? We didn't have control over our students' home environments, but we could control what they faced during the school day. During year two, we focused on building a growth mindset with our staff and students in an effort to reduce the anxiety often felt around making a mistake. This year, we are focusing on continuing the work from the previous years, while also crafting new interventions for students who might have areas of growth not served by such a system. Our theory is that if we can fill in some of those holes, we will see a decrease in student anxiety, and an increase in students at school.

This line of thinking has led us to look at one of our biggest systems in the building: our grading system. Through making time for my own learning, I have come to believe standards-based learning might help with our theory of action around student anxiety. A grading system focusing on growth instead of total points might very well reduce much of the anxiety our students face when driven to achieve

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high grades. Such a change, however, would be huge. It would not only affect staff and students, but also the broader community. Because of this, we are taking this change very slowly.
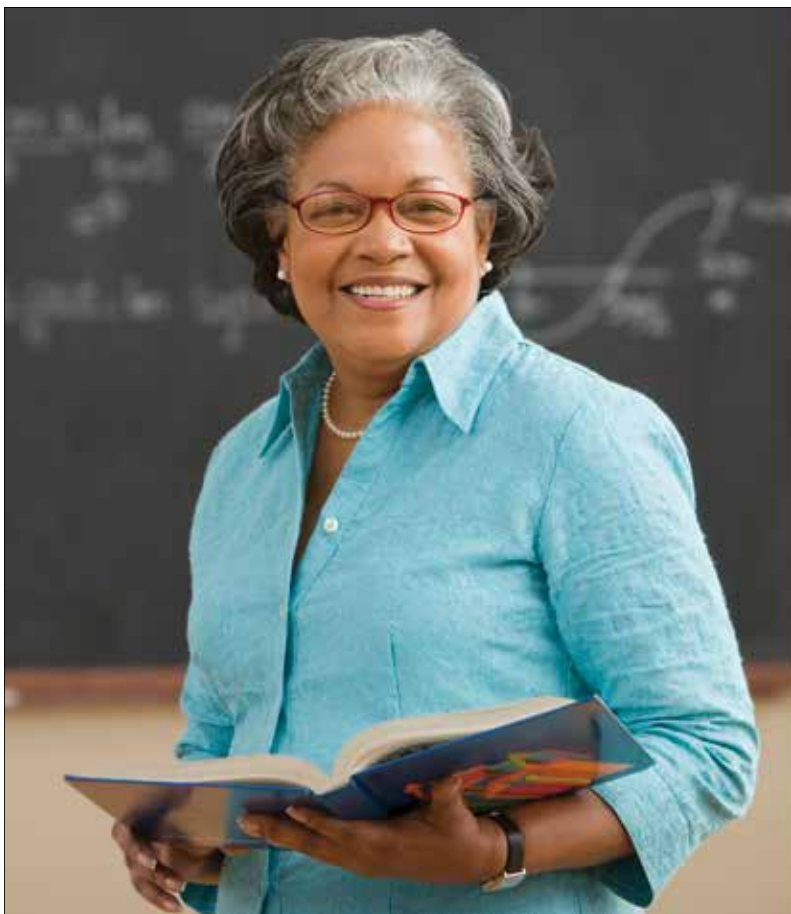
We started with staff members who had experience in a standards-based system, or who were curious about what it might look like. This group was then formally turned into our steering committee to learn as much about standards-based learning as we can. As the staff try new practices in their classrooms, they are talking to colleagues in the building and our group is growing. Granted, the process is moving a little slower than I would like, but with a change this big I have had to continually tell myself we need to "go slow to go fast." Patience has been crucial as we work to implement this change. As the transition moves closer to reality, communication with our community

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will be critical. We are looking at changing a system that works for many of our kids, but it is also causing angst for a growing number of our students.

Ten years ago, I arrived to a high performing school, not wanting to rock the boat too much. Things were going well here, so why change? Yet through building relationships and involving staff in the decision-making process, I realized we made some significant changes and now have regular processes to analyze our systems to make sure they work for our kids. These changes were made as a team and did not just come from me.

When people felt heard and like they were a part of things, they were willing to make the difficult changes and did not allow complacency to set in. There are times when top-down decisions can be effective, but those times are rare. It is much more effective to work as a team. This often begins with your early adopters, and then spreads to the rest of the staff, but the key is building and maintaining the relationships that allow people to question and adopt new practices at their own pace. Through this process, we managed to keep the boat sailing in the right direction and have even managed to pick up speed. I look forward to seeing where we go from here. ■