

LISTENING AS AN ACT OF LEADERSHIP



Kristen Wong Callisto
Director of School Improvement, OSPI

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Planning with Data, Improving Instruction, Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap

Sometimes listening is one of the hardest aspects of leadership.

Listening requires us to quiet our egos and set aside our never ending to-do lists. I studied the adaptive leadership framework by Ron Heifetz out of the Kennedy School of Government, and this framework underscores the importance of understanding perspectives as part of analyzing challenges. Because of that, as new leaders within the Office of System and School Improvement at OSPI, Assistant Superintendent Tennille Jeffries-Simmons and I decided to undertake a “Listening and Learning Tour.”

BY CAR, PLANE & FERRY

The best listening is sometimes intentional and not accidental. Our Listening and Learning Tour began with a structured plan, objectives, a values statement, a social media strategy, and a set of five questions

“In the best moments, the acts of listening were more instructive than any email, data set, or gossip could ever yield.”

we would ask every school. The questions were important. We designed them to be open-ended to encourage an honest conversation led by the school staff. We asked about priorities, barriers/challenges, how OSPI could support the school, what happens when a student isn’t learning, and what the school celebrated about themselves. The common questions allowed us to study similarities and differences across the schools we visited. We selected thirty representative schools across the state of Washington and then hit the road for four months, traveling the state by car, plane, and ferry.

The initial invitation into a conversation is critical and requires some self-awareness. I was well aware as a representative of OSPI, from the school improvement office no less, some people may not have had many positive interactions with our agency or office. I recalled from my own teaching experience how uncomfortable and nervous I was with classroom observations.

Because of that, when I began every visit, I always made it a point to express our values for the visit: curiosity, partnership, empathy, and humility. I also shared how my own experiences as a special education teacher in some of the poorest parts of Hawai’i meant there was probably nothing I would see or hear that would shock me. But probably the most important thing I did was I remained fully present, I tried to close my mouth, and I listened deeply.

In the best moments, the acts of

Continued on page 18



listening were more instructive than any email, data set, or gossip could ever yield. When a teacher sat before me and pounded her fist on a table in frustration that Priority schools were not treated as priorities, I felt empathy. When I watched a teacher interact with a five-year old in a virtual learning school, my whole paradigm for alternative learning shifted. When I inquired about a gun locker in a small, rural school and learned the fastest police response, “on a good day,” was 45 minutes, I realized I arrogantly assumed I understood the unique challenges our small, rural schools faced. This moment crystallized how much I had to learn.

RESTORATIVE LISTENING

There were times on the tour when I was on the other end of the spectrum and felt I had much to teach. Sometimes, the act of listening is fraught with difficult choices. In more than one school, I heard some unfortunate comments spanning the spectrum of bias and prejudice. These comments were directed at me (as a woman of color), they were directed at students, and they were directed at communities. In those moments, I

had to make choices to address these comments, to “interrupt racism,” or to be silent. And in those moments, I made a conscious, but difficult choice, to be silent because I was there to understand the school and community, not judge it.

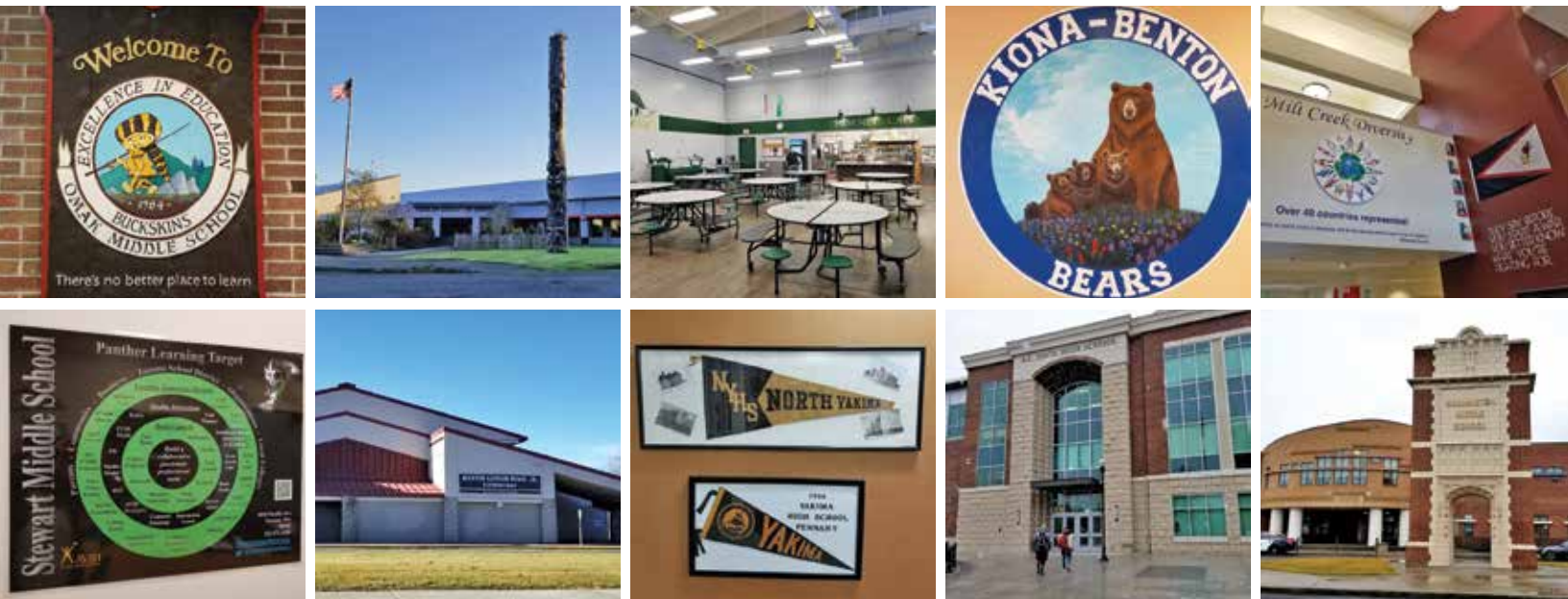
Listening was also surprisingly restorative. There is a narrative that schools identified for school improvement are failing schools – they have poor leadership, poor instruction, or even poor kids. But the Listening and Learning Tour confirmed for me that in the vast majority of Washington’s schools, we have dedicated, passionate educators who are doing the best they can for their students. I saw some spectacular teaching – if you can visit an American Sign Language class, I’d encourage it, as it is darn near magic to see the (silent!) engagement of a room full of classroom of high school students. And I also saw teaching making it clear we have an opportunity gap in the quality and rigor of instruction students receive, with too much variance from classroom to classroom and from building to building. But in speaking to these teachers, I realized many of them are unaware or unable to figure

out how to become more powerful educators, but they are trying their best. There is reason to hope with supportive structures, transformative leadership, equitable resourcing, effective professional development, and some difficult conversations, we have a shot at closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

LISTENING LESSONS LEARNED

While I took away an extraordinary amount of benefits and learning from listening, I came to realize my listening was also tremendously validating for those who shared their stories with me. Everyone wants to be authentically listened to, but I don’t think we give or receive it often enough. As leaders, this is perhaps one of our most underutilized skills. Many people believe they are exceptional listeners, but deep listening is deceptively challenging. Based on my experiences on my listening and learning tour, here are some tips you might find helpful:

- Be conscious of the invitation to the conversation – our offices are not neutral territories, go into their spaces or a neutral space if you can.





- Make active choices in the moment to facilitate a psychologically safe environment – monitor yourself for domineering or defensive responses, tone, or body language.
- Be fully present and narrate if you aren't – for example, sometimes on my tour I'd be on my phone and I would explain I was tweeting something awesome I had just seen.
- Be curious, not judgmental – the best strategy I have for this is to try to frame my contributions to the dialogue as a series of questions and to minimize statements.
- Validate and paraphrase – sometimes statements are powerful, especially if you paraphrase; I've found they are even more powerful if you circle back to something you've heard much later in the conversation – I guess paraphrasing is a little like wine: better with time.
- Monitor technology – I once preferred to take notes with a computer, but I quickly realized the laptop screen literally served as a barrier between myself and the speaker, so I switched to paper-and-pen. I also put away my phone unless I was using it as a camera to capture great examples of learning and teaching.
- Monitor yourself – make sure you're emotionally available to listen

deeply because stress, frustration, and anger can be contagious; practically speaking, also make sure you're not hungry since it's hard to listen deeply if you're worried about your stomach growling!

Hopefully with these tips, you can be reminded how powerful deep listening is as a part of our repertoire

of leadership moves and begin to practice it more frequently with your staff, your students, and your communities.

Got something you'd like to share with me and the team here at OSPI? Shoot me an email at kristen.wongcallisto@k12.wa.us. We're always listening. ■



THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION

All school employees get a special discount. Start saving today!

1-800-GO-PEMCO
(1-800-467-3626)
pemco.com

AUTO ~ HOME ~ BOAT



PEMCO Insurance Co., Seattle, WA