

BUILDING STAFF RESILIENCY

An essential part of school improvement



James Hester

*Principal, Washington High School,
Franklin Pierce School District*

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Planning with Data, Improving Instruction,
Managing Resources*

The single greatest effect on student achievement is not race, it is not poverty – it is the effectiveness of the teacher. – Harry Wong

Research suggests among school-related factors, nothing impacts student achievement more than the quality of the teacher we put in front of them.

We know our teachers play a critical role in taking care of our kids, but what role does the building principal play in taking care of our teachers?

DATA SURPRISE


Washington High School is a 2A school located just south of Tacoma in Parkland. We are the poorest high school, in the poorest school district in Pierce County. According to one study, we are the ninth most diverse high school in the nation. We were

“My initial reaction was a bit defensive. I thought, “How could my teachers not feel good about working at our school?”

labeled as a “dropout factory” the year I took over as principal. During my 11 years as principal, we enjoyed some significant improvements in our student achievement data, along with strong climate and culture staff perception data.

Several years ago, we were surprised when we looked at our end-of-the-year staff survey data and saw it was not nearly as strong as it had been in previous years. My initial reaction was a bit defensive. I thought, “How

could my teachers not feel good about working at our school?” I’ve got to admit I was a bit stumped as to why our perception data was not as strong as it had been in the past. I thought our administrative team was doing a great job of making sure we were focused on addressing positive school climate and taking care of our staff. It had always been my practice to share the results of our staff perception data with staff. Typically this sharing consisted of us patting ourselves on the back for a job well-done, but this



data was different. I was not excited about sharing it with our staff, but knew it had to be done.

We immediately planned some group activities to help staff process the data, to start exploring reasons for the slump, and coming up with possible solutions for righting the ship. Our positive feelings about the gains we made in student achievement and building a stronger sense of pride in our school could carry us only so far when it came to staff morale. Simply put, our staff was worn out. They worked so hard to improve our school, and no matter how good they felt about those improvements, the work took a toll on them emotionally and physically. As our leader, I had to reflect on everything we threw at them – training on and implementing PLCs, Safe and Civil Schools, Standards Based Grading and Assessment, MTSS, RtI, SIOP, and an extensive array of interventions targeting our ninth students.

FOCUSED ON SOLUTIONS

As we continued to process the data, we turned our focus toward solutions. Our work led us to looking at research around ACEs, vicarious trauma, and building staff resilience. Despite working with a very high poverty student population, the research behind ACEs, and the vicarious trauma that often accompanies working with such a student population, was new to me and most of my staff. We read research articles about these topics, held staff discussions, and identified areas to help address the vicarious trauma through building staff resilience. A few of the specific steps we took included:

- Watching the movies *Paper Tigers*, and *Resilience*.
- Engaging in a staff-wide poverty immersion simulation offered through Washington State University.

- Providing a stipend to a staff member who took on the key teacher leadership role in leading our work around addressing vicarious trauma and building staff resilience, when she introduced me to the Compassionate Schools materials from the OSPI website.
- Set aside time at most staff meetings and training days for staff-led activities to address building staff resilience.
- Hired a counselor to focus almost exclusively on implementing Restorative Conferencing as a way to address conflicts between staff and students.

Thanks to this focus, our building morale and staff perception data improved considerably. Recent staff perception surveys produced the following results:

- 100% of staff agree they have positive relationships with students at our school.
- 95% say we have a positive school climate/culture at WHS.
- 97% say they are satisfied with their job.
- 94% agree their supervisor/manager cares about them.

Staff comments also supported the importance, and positive impact of our work on building staff resilience:

“Finding a way to combat compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout has been paramount to our success over the last two years. You can see it not just in our significantly more positive interactions with each other and students around campus, but also in the data. For example, on a staff survey question asking us whether the climate at our school is positive, after the first year of intentional staff resilience activities, we went from 64.3% of staff agreeing that our climate is positive to 95.3% of our staff agreeing.” – WHS teacher

“As a staff, the realization our experiences were not unique becomes a bond allowing us to more strongly approach the tasks before us. From learning about compassion fatigue to vicarious trauma, having professionally recognized names offered us an affirmation of the experiences we individually had and simultaneously afforded us the opportunity for a collective response with intentionality rather than the knee-jerk response the emotional toll might invite – burn out, moving on, leaving education, or self-defeating attitudes.” – WHS teacher

“ What I have increasingly come to understand is how absolutely important it is to make sure we are leading to make a difference for our teachers as well.”

This year will be my last as principal at Washington, as I transition into the position of Executive Director of Human Resources and Business Services for our district. As I start to reflect back on my time as principal, I am proud a school once known as a “dropout factory” has a five year extended graduation rate of over 90% for the past two years. I am also proud of staff perception survey results like these. When asked why we do this work, most of us probably say something like, “I want to make a difference for kids”, and my answer is no different. What I have increasingly come to understand is how absolutely important it is to make sure we are leading to make a difference for our teachers as well. In fact, it seems impossible to do the former without taking care of the latter. ■