

# SOMETIMES, DOING WHAT'S RIGHT MEANS DOING THE UNEXPECTED

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**In 1995, I was** an administrative intern at Capital High School. I carried out my duties day in and day out without giving them much thought, until one special day when my passion and purpose became abundantly clear. It wasn't the entire internship experience or never-ending pile of attendance and discipline referrals that solidified my path, but a single moment.

I'll never forget the day I was finally able to connect with a chronically absent student. I'd been searching for this kid day after day. As the intern, this was my daily work; creating a list in the morning of all the kids who needed some sort of corrective action, discipline or detention assigned. Each morning, I built a spreadsheet with the six periods of the day and created my plan of how, when, and where I might find each of these students on "the list."

Josh lived on that list and was an ongoing mystery with an exponentially growing mountain of attendance infractions. For obvious reasons, I could never find Josh in class. Now, as a sign of the times, the reason I was looking for Josh was to assign him "after school detention" for failure to attend after school detention, failure to attend classes, and failure to excuse his absences within a 24 hour period. And, to

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make you even more horrified, I was ultimately supposed to suspend him from school because of his poor attendance.

Breathe. Yes, I just said that. I was going to find Josh and suspend him from school for missing school. Yes, I was following the adult-centered policy of the times and was really going to hammer Josh if I ever found him. Josh's name was on my list every day and remained that way for weeks until the day both of our worlds changed.

As a young intern, I remember timidly stepping into the classroom to say a student's name only to have everyone and everything stop in their tracks. So much for not interrupting. This day was no different. I read through my list of kids I needed to see, including Josh. And per normal, most of the students were not present at the time, except amazingly... the always elusive Josh.

He stepped out into the hallway with me and his body language said it all, "I don't trust you... or even like you." I didn't blame him. He knew why I was there even though we had never

met. I opened our uncomfortable conversation with, "So, why do you think I'm here?" His response was quick as to end this miserable experience as fast as possible. He said, "You are here to suspend me or assign me more after school detention time, right?"

This is where I had a choice as the "authority figure" to make a decision that would impact the course of our conversation. I responded to Josh with something he didn't expect. I said, "Well Josh, that's what the system wants me to do, but that's not what I want to do. Why don't you tell me what's going on and why you miss so much school? I have no desire to suspend you or assign more time."

His demeanor changed instantly. In fact, it shifted from disdain to tears in about two seconds. I'm not kidding. Josh, who stood about a foot taller than me, was now wiping tears from his eyes and saying words that I've carried with me to this day: "You are the first adult to ask me why I miss school. You are the first one who actually seems to care."

*Continued on page 50*



Continued from page 49

Talk about crushing words to hear. Now the two of us were crying in the hallway outside this classroom as Josh went on to tell me that after his dad died, his mom had to take on multiple jobs, which meant that he had to get his sisters fed, and then to and from school every day. No wonder he was always late, absent or missing detention. By the time our conversation was over, I had ripped up all of the referrals with his name of them, cancelled the detention hours he owed, and certainly did not suspend him. Instead, we built a relationship that solidified my why as a school leader and hopefully changed his outlook towards adults in the school.

I share this story as an example of the power of the principal. We, as school leaders, have an opportunity to eradicate adult-centered policies, procedures, and systems that have been in place for decades. We can either choose to perpetuate horrific, inequitable systems that continue to harm kids or we can build environments of hope, care, and unconditional love. I made a choice that day that has served as my unwavering pursuit to constantly push the status quo. The system won't change unless we all become student-centered. I hope I changed Josh's trajectory in that conversation; I know he changed mine.

I sleep at night knowing we have a state full of principals and assistant principals working hard to lead with relationships over rules. In the long run, those relationships will carry a forever and immeasurable impact. Just imagine a K-12 system focused on relationships above all else. I won't rest until this dream becomes reality. ■



*Dr. Scott Seaman joined AWSP in the fall of 2013 after serving as the principal at Tumwater High School. In July 2018, he assumed duties as Executive Director.*

# Humor me!

Created by **David Ford**, Retired Washington State Principal

