



THE Climate and Culture PUZZLE

My journey as a first-year principal



Brandon Bakke
Principal, Fife High,
Fife SD

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Closing the Gap

In 2002, I sat down for a heart-to-heart conversation with principal Dan Bisset, who would go on to become the 2018 Washington State High School Principal of the Year. He was an assistant principal at Wilson High, where he had been for over a decade. I was a 29-year-old principal intern — and my life had just been turned upside down. I found myself quite suddenly a single father raising two small children, which

undoubtedly had me asking some big questions about my life and career.

Dan, sensing I was struggling to balance my ambition with my new reality, shared some encouragement: **“Don’t be in a hurry, Brandon. I myself am waiting until my kids are out of high school before I will entertain any idea of being the principal, and I don’t regret it.”**

Dan’s wisdom would shape the next

17 years of my life. I crossed out written goals where I meticulously benchmarked how I’d be climbing various points in my professional ladder. I hoped to be a superintendent by 40, but I adjusted my thinking. I became resolved to travel the assistant principal road until my kids graduated from high school. To be honest, I felt “judged” professionally at times for this decision. But for me, it was the right decision.

EMBRACE YOUR JOURNEY

It was a glorious day in June 2018. I got to announce my son's name from the stage at Sumner High School's graduation, where I was an assistant principal. A week later, I started a new position as principal at Fife High School. My first day as the principal.

"Embrace Your Journey!" This saying adorns the wall in my office, and I mention this journey to the principalship because one would think that after 16 years as an assistant principal, I'd feel one hundred percent ready. I can honestly say I felt confident, but I was undoubtedly nervous and some self-doubt was creeping in. Frank DeAngelis, Columbine High School's incredible former principal echoed this in his book, "They Call Me Mr. Dee": "... I don't care if you were an assistant principal for 20 years or two: until you're the one sitting behind that desk making those decisions, you have no idea what it's going to be like."

“ Fife is known in our region for having a strong school culture and climate, but the school experienced some bumps in the road in recent years.”



Brandon Bakke with Class of 2020 Senior and Eastern Washington University-bound Casonndrah Polo.



Students celebrate the first day of school at Fife High.

Fife is known in our region for having a strong school culture and climate, but the school experienced some bumps in the road in recent years. Whether I was ready or not, the charge given to me by the district leadership was to improve the staff and student climate and culture, and this is what I set out to do.

Defined, in organizations and schools, culture is how we behave and climate is how we feel. Improving either of these is not a one-person undertaking. Principals are like quarterbacks — they often get too much blame when things go wrong or too much credit when things go right. It takes a lot of people showing commitment to impact a school's culture. I viewed the principal as a leader who could be a catalyst for positive change, which I sincerely hoped to be.

As my first year as a high school principal came to a close, students and staff alike noticed some positive change. One long-time teacher shared with me, "We haven't felt positive energy like this in years." A student commented, "Mr. Bakke, the school just feels different, in a good way!" Statements like this from all stakeholders were common. Examining pre- and post-year staff

surveys showed very encouraging results, and by all indications, it was a great school year. The staff at Fife High School did amazing work!

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Healing a school's culture and climate for a principal is like a puzzle really: it takes a lot of pieces fitting together, but only a few falling into place to bring clarity to the big picture. So here are the five pieces that made the puzzle fit.

PUZZLE PIECE 1: MAKE MOMENTS AND SHARE THEM

In the book, "*The Power of Moments*," authors Dan and Chip Heath contend that as leaders, we should help people make meaningful moments, rather than just trying to solve problems. Thinking in these terms really empowered me. From simple things like how you recognize people's achievements, to how you welcome newly hired staff members, making moments changes how people feel (*climate*).

With students, it started with the first day when we honored our state champion track team with a

Continued on page 38

Continued from page 37

banner-raising ceremony followed by a new tradition we started called, “the popsicle celebration.” From that moment on, every time we win a state championship, the whole school celebrates with popsicles! We tweaked how we recognize monthly outstanding students; it now involves our administrative team going into classrooms with music blaring from my backpack with some standing ovations and Twitter images being sent out.

We started holding a quarterly “press conference” where we recreate a professional press conference highlighting students and staff achievements as well as providing a forum for students to ask me questions. These are just a few of the moments we tried to create, but a theme exists: as much as possible we are trying to make “the ordinary something extraordinary.” All of these moments we tried to capture on social media. Telling the story, changing the narrative, and showing our joy was a big step in our school community, and we are starting to feel proud again.

PUZZLE PIECE 2: STRESS RELATIONSHIPS

Making moments becomes shallow if there isn’t a relationship. My quest was to memorialize our staff’s existing belief in the importance of student and staff relationships while doing my best to model it. I believe people love because someone first loved them.



Bakke and student Miguel Hernandez lead a cheer at Fife’s Top 5 Unified Special Olympics ESPN Assembly.

I tried to show love by greeting students every day at our front gates, being quick to respond to staff or students in crisis, and taking time to get to know people as people. I wrote notes to staff and students daily, and sent notes to the parents of some staff members to let them know how fantastic their “kids” are in their profession. I asked for forgiveness if I hurt someone. I made it a goal when addressing our students as a group to tell them as much as possible that I love them. None of this is rocket science or new ideas to anyone reading this, and I feel like I still have a long way to go, but I can affirm in hindsight it was the most important thing I did in year one as a principal (and every year to come).

“ From that moment on, every time we win a state championship, the whole school celebrates with popsicles!”

PUZZLE PIECE 3: LEARN OUR HISTORY

Fife High School is over 100 years old with incredible history and tradition, both in the community and the school. I made it a goal to become an authority on our past. I met with our local museum, spent hours with alumni asking questions, read old yearbooks, and spent much of my winter vacation reading two books on the history of Fife. About three months into the school year, I began working Fife history into the speeches I was giving and the lessons I was writing. Why? I want the Fife community to know I’m all in and one of them! I also want our staff and students to know they have a lot to be proud of being a part of this school, and our history is a great way for people to feel that. Did you know that



Brandon Bakke getting Fife High School students fired up for the start of the school year!

the Fife School District was started by a Native American tribal leader, or that the town decided to incorporate so they wouldn’t lose the school to a neighboring district? Did you know that Fife was nearly 50% Asian American for the first 50 years of its history and was known for embracing diversity? That is a story that needs to be told!

There is much to learn from the successes and mistakes of our past, and history continues to be a great source of wisdom. What untold stories need to be told from your school’s history? It is the leader’s job to provide a sense of positive identity for both staff and students.

PUZZLE PIECE 4: COMMUNICATE VISION

Vision gives us purpose and meaning. It is the spyglass keeping us looking ahead at our destination and the rudder keeping us on the right path.

I spent hours crafting a multi-year vision for our school; I think a lot of principals do this. The really important thing, however, was making sure I had a practical and aspirational plan for *communicating* the vision. I needed to make an

“ Having vision can create powerful organizational belief, but we have to constantly communicate and teach it to our stakeholders.”

emotional case for change. Part of this process was developing our staff’s collective beliefs, as well as the values we wanted our entire school to be teaching, modeling, and following. I’ve held strong to the belief that we have to define our culture so we can teach it— and then teach it!

Our staff did a great job helping roll this out in our first year together. I had many opportunities through lessons I wrote for the school advisory classes, as well as whole grade-level meetings where I directly taught student lessons on the different aspects of our collective culture. We created new imagery articulating our culture, and a new school mantra.



Culture assembly celebration at Fife High.

Having vision can create powerful organizational belief, but we have to constantly communicate and teach it to our stakeholders.

PUZZLE PIECE 5: TAKE RISKS

It was the first volleyball game of the year (a few days into the school year) when I noticed our student section could use a little help creating some positive energy. After a brief moment of contemplation, I just jumped in and started leading cheers. Without the students really knowing me quite yet I took a risk, and thankfully the students responded! I didn’t know it at the time, but I created my own monster. Students are constantly checking to see if I’m coming to their games or events and actually get upset with me if I do not have it on my schedule. I later developed a cheer I taught our students, and throughout the year at games, assemblies, and even graduation, we do the cheer together. Teachers have the best job in the world — they get to have direct connection with students every day! Principals can have the same connection, but we have to be incredibly intentional to create the opportunity.

The lesson? Take risks! From my cheer, to the press conferences and lessons I taught to students, to finding moments to tell them how much I care, to even the unique twist I used for the speech I gave at graduation, I don’t regret one risk I took this first year. In most cases, these risks took preparation and extra effort, which I was committed to not letting deter me from something potentially great. Sometimes the risk was simply being vulnerable, like sticking your hand out every morning to say hello hoping students will reciprocate. I found people actually noticed the risks I took, and encouraged me by letting me know it was appreciated.



Bakke looking on with pride as student Taylor Mountsier and Zoie Breland address the media at Fife’s Special Olympics ESPN Unified Top 5 Inclusion School Press Conference.

STILL PUTTING IT TOGETHER

As I reflect on my first year, I can honestly say I am really proud of our people and the work they did to help improve our culture and climate. The people of Fife — our staff, students, and community — are truly remarkable and deserve to feel good about their school.

Healing climate and culture is indeed one big challenging puzzle, and so is being a principal. In reality, I’m still figuring out where all the pieces go. But, one piece, one smile, and one handshake at a time, I’m excited to see the beautiful picture taking shape. ■

Brandon Bakke is in his second year as Principal at Fife High School. Fife was recently recognized by Special Olympics and ESPN as a Top 5 National Banner school for their work with inclusion. Brandon has been a high school administrator for 17 years, with previous stops at Sumner, Foss, and Mount Tahoma High Schools. He started his educational career at Clovis High School in Clovis, CA where he taught social studies and was the Head Boys’ Basketball Coach. Brandon graduated with a BA in history from Fresno State University, and earned his MA in Educational Leadership from City University.