WASHINGTON PRINCIPAL

MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL PRINCIPALS | FALL 2026

AWSP PRESIDENT ERIN MCKEE

AWSP'S 2026-27 Board President Shares Her Story 6

TACKLING THE CULTURE OF "NICE"

The Importance of Honest Conversations 10

AUTHENTIC FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Moving from Judgment to Curiosity 14

GROW: This issue highlights "Grow," the first of AWSP's four association priorities: *Grow, Support, Sustain,* and *Advocate.* Pictured is 2026–27 AWSP Board President Erin McKee, principal at Cougar Mountain Middle School in Issaquah. Read about her leadership journey on page 6.

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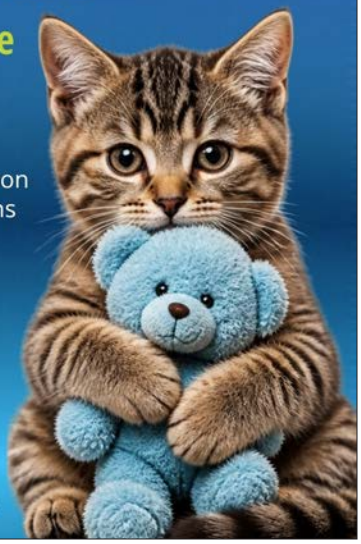

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Table of Contents

AWSP and Foundation Highlights 4

Deciding What Kind of Regular to Become 6

Who Leads You? Meet Your 2026-27 Board and Committee Leadership 9

Tackling the Culture of "Nice" 10

The Practice of Noticing 12

From Judgment to Curiosity: Growing Authentic Family Partnerships 14

Looking Under the Hood: Systems that Actually Work 18

Caution Corner 21

Intentionally Analog 22

Student Leadership: The Small Things We Put into the World 26

Ask a Principal 29

From the Executive Director 30

Thank You, Partners 32

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Proud National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Award of Excellence winner!

FROM THE EDITOR:

New Perspectives

Back when I was studying art at Pacific Lutheran University, my drawing professor gave our class an assignment that forever changed my perspective as an artist. He handed each student a detailed line drawing and asked us to recreate it simply by looking at it. Some of us had pictures of flower vases, others had outdoor scenes, and others had faces. We spent quite a while trying to replicate these images, but none of us could quite capture the originals.

Then our professor explained, "The reason your drawings look different from the originals is because you are drawing what you *think* you see, rather than what you *actually* see."

He instructed us to turn our images upside down and try again. Suddenly, vases became loops and shapes, and faces became squiggles and lines. Our brains were forced to focus on what was actually in front of us rather than our own assumptions. We had to trust the process.

When we flipped our finished drawings right side up, we were amazed to discover how much more accurately we'd captured the originals. By letting go of our familiar process and perspective, we'd grown as artists and achieved better results.

Grow is the theme of our fall issue and the first of AWSP's four priorities for strengthening school leadership: *Grow*, *Support*, *Sustain*, and *Advocate*. I'm excited to share some fantastic articles from outstanding leaders, each exploring growth from a different perspective: personal wellness, authentic relationships, school systems, student leadership, and developing future principals.

Speaking of growth, you may have noticed a few changes to this publication. This year, we've returned to our roots and our original name, *Washington Principal*. We've outgrown our newsletter status and are once again an official magazine! (Though we'll always remember our *Bookends* era with fondness.)

You might also notice that AWSP's brand colors look a little different. As we continue to grow as an association, we're working to make our communications more accessible to everyone. Our updated color palette meets accessibility standards and reflects our commitment to supporting *all* school leaders and *each and every* student.

As you explore this issue, I encourage you to think back to my drawing professor's lesson. Sometimes growth doesn't require us to work harder or do more. Sometimes it simply asks us to turn things upside down, challenge what we think we know, and see what's been right in front of us all along.

As always, we'd love to hear from you. Reach out anytime! ■

Caroline Brumfield
AWSP Marketing and Design Director

AWSP & Foundation

Congrats to the 2026 Schools on the Rise!

The AWSL/AWSP "Washington Schools on the Rise" award celebrates schools where students and adults collaborate to improve culture and amplify student voice. These schools foster inclusive and equitable environments. Congrats to all of this year's winners:

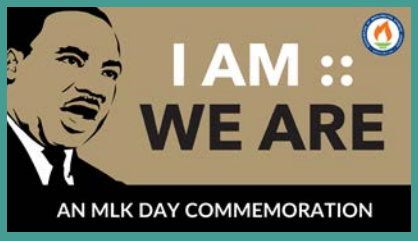
- Armin Jahr Elementary, Bremerton SD
- Coweeman Middle, Kelso SD
- Hockinson Middle, Hockinson SD
- La Center Middle, La Center SD
- LaCrosse Schools, LaCrosse SD
- Lakeside High, Nine Mile Falls SD
- McLoughlin Middle, Vancouver SD
- Meridian Middle, Meridian SD
- Mt. Stuart Elementary, Ellensburg SD
- Scenic Hill Elementary, Kent SD
- Shaw Road Elementary, Puyallup SD
- Tumwater Middle, Tumwater SD
- University High, Central Valley SD

Learn more at www.awsp.org/OnTheRise.

AWSP Winter Forum on Feb. 17

Join us for our Winter Forum on Feb. 17, 2027 from 3:30-5:00 p.m. Each of our quarterly school leader forums is a member benefit and an opportunity to hear from your association leadership and leaders from our partners across the state. Clock hours are available! Register on the AWSP Learning Lab at www.awsp.org/forums.

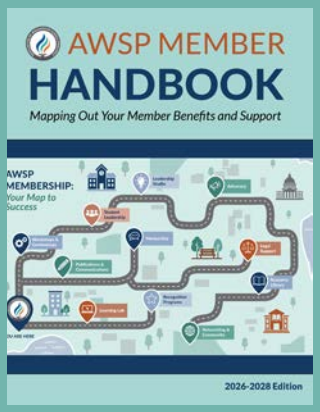
I AM | WE ARE: An MLK Day Commemoration



Recognize MLK Day with the Association of Washington Student Leaders! AWSL is proud to announce that the 2027 Martin Luther King program, I AM | WE ARE, is coming soon for elementary, middle and high school students!

Updated each year, I AM | WE ARE is a ready-to-roll program designed for school assemblies and MLK Day events. It includes a keynote address, implementation guide, engagement questions, and access to AWSL Director James Layman, all in a format that lets you customize a 20-30 minute assembly event that fits your school day. Engage your students across all grade levels with the ideas of belonging and humanity. Learn more at www.AWSLeaders.org/mlk.

2026-28 AWSP Member Handbook



The 2026-28 AWSP Member Handbook is here! From member benefits to Framework information, this handbook is a reference you will want to revisit throughout the school year. A print copy was mailed to all AWSP members in October. You can also download a PDF at www.awsp.org/Handbook.

Culture Kickoff Winners Announced

The AWSL/AWSP Culture Kickoff Award celebrates schools that are intentional about creating a positive culture from the very

Highlights

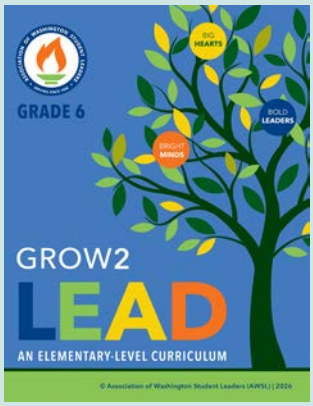
beginning of the year and carrying it forward all year long. This award recognizes schools that: launch the year with engaging assemblies, themes, and fall kickoff events; intentionally set the tone for belonging, community, and success; and sustain that positive culture throughout the year by fostering collaboration between students and adults. Congratulations to our 2026 winners! There are more than 50 winners this year. View the full list, read the press release, and learn more about the award at www.awsp.org/culturekickoff.

AWSP's Roz Thompson Receives WIL Award from ESD 113

In September, the ESD 113 Board of Directors celebrated AWSP and WASA's work with Women in Leadership! Established by AWSP's Roz Thompson (pictured sixth from left) and WASA's Kim Fry (fifth from left), alongside AESD, WSSDA, WAMOA, WASBO, and WSPA, the network was created to cultivate current and aspiring women leaders in education. With over fifty percent of school leaders in Washington being women, the network has been an invaluable resource. Learn more about Women in Leadership and get connected with a network or upcoming professional learning events at www.awsp.org/WIL.

Credit: Mishele Barnett, ESD 113.

AWSL's Grow2Lead Elementary Curriculum

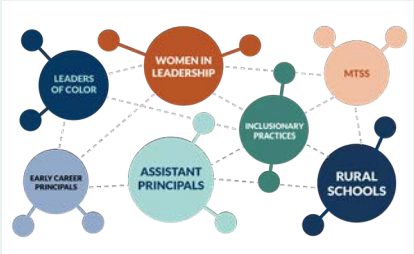


Leadership starts early! Grow2Lead is a new K–5 curriculum designed to help students build the skills, confidence, and character to lead in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Through engaging, age-appropriate lessons and activities, students explore essential leadership skills while putting them into practice in everyday situations. Flexible, easy to implement, and designed with busy educators in mind, Grow2Lead will be available in June 2027! Visit www.AWSLeaders.org/grow-2-lead to learn more.

AWSP Welcomes Shari Parsons to the Team!

Please welcome Shari Parsons, AWSP's new Programs and Operations Coordinator who joined us this fall. Shari brings a rich background in educational administration and operations to her work, with experience spanning Yelm Community Schools as a paraprofessional and principal's secretary, the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) as an executive assistant, and for the AWSL CheerLeadership program as a camp director. Known for her cheery disposition and welcoming smile, Shari grounds her work in servant leadership and exceptional customer service, creating an efficient and encouraging environment for every school and organization she represents. Outside of her professional life, Shari and her husband love spending time with their eight grandkids, embarking on summer Jeep adventures, and traveling—especially to Hawaii. Send Shari a "welcome" email at shari@awsp.org.

Join an AWSP Leadership Network



It's not too late to jump into one of AWSP's seven Leadership Networks this year! There is no cost to join. AWSP Leadership Networks bring school leaders together around shared roles, identities, interests, and problems of practice. This year's networks include Leaders of Color, Early Career Principals, Women in Leadership, Assistant Principals, Inclusionary Practices, MTSS, and Rural Schools. Learn more and join a network at www.awsp.org/networks. ■

FROM THE AWSP PRESIDENT:

Deciding What Kind of Regular to Become

How Small Habits Sustain Wellness and Leadership

By Erin McKee, Principal, Cougar Mountain Middle, Issaquah SD
(2026-27 AWSP Board President)

Erin and her family camping at Camano Island State Park.

A few years ago, after I dropped off one of my daughters at her new weekly dance class, I began to head over to an adjacent and beloved neighborhood pub. My idea was to unwind and have an adult beverage after a busy day of principaling while I waited for her class to finish. I remember thinking all of a sudden, "Wait. If I made a routine of this, I'd become a regular." I had flashbacks to Cheers episodes and could already picture the staff saving me my favorite bar stool. Now, I enjoy happy hour with a friend or settling in with a good book and a well-made cocktail as much as the next person. An occasional visit would have been fine, but with both of my daughters attending weekly classes nearby, I realized I was standing at the beginning of a habit and needed to decide what kind of regular I wanted to become.

At the time, I was helping launch a new school while supporting students, staff, and families recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. At home, I was raising two young children, including one with significant medical and behavioral needs. I was recovering from a hip injury and learning how to prioritize my own mental health.

I remember learning about habit bundling (or temptation bundling) from a podcast featuring Dr. Katy Milkman, a behavior scientist and professor at the Wharton School. Later on, I read *Atomic Habits* by James Clear that built on Milkman's research. Essentially, the idea is to pair a habit you want to do with one you're less likely to do.

I knew becoming a regular at this local establishment would not serve me well, and it was not the future I wanted. Luckily a few more steps from the pub was a small local gym. I knew exercise made me feel better, helped me with stress, and allowed me to sleep well. But I was too busy as a principal and mom. I didn't have time for that, I thought.

However, I signed up that day and for the past three years I have been lifting weights when my daughters go to their dance classes. I'm proud to say I go regularly enough that the gym staff recognize me. And while I'm not entering any bodybuilding competitions in the near future, I feel great. Looking back, the decision wasn't really about the pub or the gym. It was about being intentional with how I cared for myself.

Wellness and health do not begin and end with exercise—of course, it's just one piece of a puzzle. In my speech as incoming AWSP president at Summer Conference this past June, I asked folks to tend to their own wellness. This encompasses physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being. The stakes feel especially high given the responsibilities we hold as school administrators. It feels like we must be everything to everybody. We are expected to be courageous while remaining compassionate, vulnerable while remaining steady, and fully present for the many students, staff, and families who depend on us. Our jobs are hard, it's just a fact. We must tend to our wellness to be the impactful leaders our schools and communities need while still preserving ourselves to be who we are outside of our careers. Leading a school requires us to care deeply. But caring for others becomes unsustainable if we are unwilling to care for ourselves.

> "The work of school leadership is too important for us to neglect ourselves in service of it. Taking care of your wellness is not stepping away from leadership. It is one of the most important ways to sustain it."

My understanding of wellness deepened years ago at an AWSP/WASA conference when I first learned about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Research suggests that many people drawn to helping professions have experienced adversity or trauma in their own lives, making self-care and wellness especially important. This certainly resonates with my own experience. As school administrators, we can also face compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and the risk of burnout as we support students, staff, and families through their own challenges. It is both a privilege and a responsibility to lead schools and have the opportunity to positively impact so many lives. Our work is meaningful, inspiring, and at times incredibly demanding. To sustain that work, we must be intentional about caring for ourselves. For me, that care has come through small habits practiced consistently over time.

Over the years, I've learned that wellness is less about major changes and more about small, intentional habits. Here are a few practices that have helped sustain both my well-being and my leadership.

Move Your Body

I'm not telling you to get a gym membership. I am saying: find ways to move your body every day. Walk laps around your school while checking in with staff and students. Build movement into meetings or trainings. Start a staff walking challenge with glory and bragging rights on the line.

Manage the Stress

We carry so much, but we are not robots. We are often expected to be crisis managers, instructional leaders, counselors, and decision-makers all before first lunch. Find small routines that help manage stress. For me, that includes guided meditation, prioritizing sleep, and being more intentional about what I eat. Want the most accessible strategy? Breathe. Lower your shoulders and keep breathing.

Make that Appointment

It's not uncommon for folks in our position to push off appointments because we are too busy. Don't worry, the work will still be there for you. Schedule that dental cleaning, mammogram, or annual physical. Find that therapist or dermatologist and look into finally doing that sleep study.

Staff take spirit days seriously at CMMS!

First day of school fun at Cougar Mountain.

Put Down Your Phone

We tell ourselves we always need to be connected, and to some extent that's true. But small changes can help us be more present. I limit notifications and sometimes leave my phone in another room. If you have a work phone, when can you put it off and away?

Guard Your Mental Real Estate

Of course, as principals and assistant principals we listen to understand, but who are you allowing into your head? Sometimes folks communicate with us when they are not their best selves. Filter feedback wisely. Be thoughtful about how much attention and emotional energy you give to an angry email or passive-aggressive comment.

Control What You Can

This mental framing has been instrumental for me and has allowed me to stop perseverating on what is not within my control. I have worked to guide my actions and save my mental and emotional energy for challenges I can actually change and improve. Control what you can, manage what you cannot.

Make Time for Friends

In person. The principalship can be lonely, and maintaining friendships takes intention. Make time for the people who know you beyond your title, and stay open to building new connections.

Lean into the Hard Conversations

Don't let issues fester. These can stack up and weigh you down. When you lean into these conversations, you open up the opportunity for deeper understanding as well as potential solutions.

Count on Your People

Although we have large responsibilities, we are not alone. There are folks in your school building and in your home or personal life who care about you, believe in you and are ready to support you. Give them that chance and invite them in rather than try to solve and do everything yourself.

Make Time for Fun

Find ways to add more fun to your day. Spirit days are a great start. I've even loaned staff items from my daughters' dress-up bin. (Anyone need a pair of cheetah ears, a crown, or a feather boa? Call me.) If you want a masterclass, call my assistant principal, Jennifer Johnson. From rubber ducky prize drawings to Seahawks celebrations and "Name That Song" competitions, she has a gift for creating joy and connection.

Anticipate Joy

Our family intentionally plans experiences to look forward to, whether that's camping, a concert, or a sporting event. We especially do this during what we lovingly call "the big dark" of winter.

Three years later, I'm still at that gym while my daughters dance. The staff know my name. I've never become a regular at the pub. More importantly, I've become a regular investor in my own well-being.

The work of school leadership is too important for us to neglect ourselves in service of it. Taking care of your wellness is not stepping away from leadership. It is one of the most important ways to sustain it. Your students, staff, family, and community need you. And they need you well. Wellness is not selfish. Wellness is leadership.

Do you have ideas for investing in your own wellness or the wellness of your staff, students, and families? I'd love to hear them. Share your ideas with AWSP and help us continue learning from one another. Additionally, I encourage you to consider leading a session at the AWSP/WASA Summer Conference in June 2027. Whether your expertise is wellness, leadership, school culture, student support, or another area of practice, we all have something to teach and something to learn. Thank you for all you do. ■

Erin McKee is principal at Cougar Mountain Middle School in Issaquah SD. She is AWSP's 2026-27 Board President.

WHO LEADS YOU?

Meet your 2026-27 AWSP/WSPEF Board and Grade Level Leadership Committee leaders!

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TACKLING THE CULTURE OF NICE

The school where everyone is *nice*—and nothing ever changes. Here's how to lead beyond it.

bts spark
school leadership made personal

Alyssa Gallagher, Global Director, BTS Spark

Every principal knows this school. Everyone smiles in the hallway. Staff meetings are collegial. People are friendly and operate with the best of intentions. And yet nothing changes.

Problems that everyone sees get discussed in the parking lot or at a staff happy hour, never in the structured or meaningful ways. A struggling teacher continues to struggle—year after year—while colleagues quietly carry the extra weight. Students pay the price.

This is the Culture of Nice. It is well-intentioned, born from a genuine desire to protect relationships and maintain harmony. But it is not neutral. And as a principal, the cost lands squarely on you and on your school.

John had spent years building warm, genuine relationships with his staff. When trust issues emerged on his leadership team, he avoided addressing them. He did not want to damage what he had built. For months he patched over tensions rather than surfacing them. The relationships did not get better. They got worse.

When John finally found the courage to be honest and have those hard conversations, what he discovered surprised him: tackling the difficult things together deepened trust more than anything he had ever done. Staff who had seemed resistant were actually relieved. They had been waiting for someone to finally name what everyone already knew.

"Having the courage to be honest… I cannot believe what a difference it made." —John, school principal

That is the uncommon sense of school leadership: relationships get stronger when you tackle the hard things together. Not despite the discomfort, but because of it.

In coaching more than 26,000 school leaders globally, we found the single most common development need across all countries and all types of schools was giving feedback and holding difficult conversations. Leaders told us, almost universally, that they were avoiding the conversations they most needed to have. So, if you have been avoiding a difficult conversation, know you aren't alone. Here are three strategies to help you begin to tackle the culture of nice while not only maintaining relationships but also strengthening them:

1. Name the Traps That Keep You Stuck

Principals do not avoid difficult conversations because they do not care. They avoid them because they fall into very human patterns. We call these Feedback Traps:

The Avoidance Trap: You keep meaning to have the conversation but never get there.

The Pleasing Trap: You want to be liked, so you stay quiet.

The Fear Trap: You worry the conversation will make things worse.

The Busy Trap: There is always something more urgent, so you push the conversation to a later date.

The Harmony Trap: You have convinced yourself the cost outweighs the benefit.

The first step is simply naming which trap catches you most often. Awareness creates choice. Once you can say, "I am in the Pleasing Trap right now," you can make a conscious decision about what to do next instead of drifting into avoidance.

2. Build a Feedback Culture One Small Moment at a Time

The most powerful thing you can do is normalize feedback so that giving and receiving it stops feeling like a high-stakes event and becomes part of the daily fabric of your school.

Begin with a very simple tool: **www-ebi. What Worked Well? Even Better If.** These two questions take 60 seconds and can follow any conversation—after a staff meeting, a classroom visit, a team debrief. The beauty is in the balance: you name what is working and point toward improvement at the same time. You are not delivering judgment. You are opening a dialogue.

For harder conversations about a pattern of behavior that has been quietly undermining your school, use **A FIRM.** Plan the conversation around five elements: the Agenda (frame it and check the timing), the Facts (clear, specific, observable), the Impact (the real effect on students and colleagues), the Request (a concrete, forward-looking ask), and Mutuality (a genuine two-way conversation toward agreement).

One more thing: feedback cultures are built from the top down. When you model asking for feedback on your own leadership, you signal that feedback is safe here. You go first. That single act does more to shift your school culture than any policy or program.

3. Be Kind on the Person, Tough on the Issue

The deepest misconception underlying the culture of nice is that you must choose between being caring and being honest. You do not.

You can be kind on the person and tough on the issue at the same time. Withholding honest feedback from someone—in the name of protecting them —is actually unkind. It denies them the information they need to grow and prioritizes your comfort over their development.

"It does not have to be a tradeoff between high expectations and strong relationships. You can be kind on the person but tough on the issue."

Being kind on the person means choosing the right moment and setting, approaching with curiosity rather than judgment, and listening as much as you speak. Being tough on the issue means not softening your message until it loses its meaning and not letting another week pass on a conversation you have been rehearsing in your head.

When you hold both at once, something remarkable often happens. Relationships deepen. Because trust is not built in the easy moments, it is built in the moments when someone shows up with the truth.

The culture of nice feels safe. But safe for whom? Not for the teacher who has been struggling without honest feedback for three years. Not for the students in that classroom. Not for the colleagues who compensate for what is not being addressed.

Your school does not need you to be nicer. It needs you to be braver and to discover that bravery, done right, looks a lot like kindness. ■

Alyssa Gallagher is Global Director for BTS Spark, a not-for-profit initiative that has coached more than 26,000 school leaders globally. She is co-author of Embracing MESSY Leadership: How the Experience of 20,000 School Leaders Can Transform You and Your School (2024), Design Thinking in Play (2020) and Design Thinking for School Leaders (2018). Contact: alyssa.gallagher@btsspark.org.

COACHING DISCOUNT

Did you know AWSP members receive a discount on coaching from BTS Spark? Find out more at www.awsp.org/BTS.

The Practice of Noticing

Jack Arend, Deputy Director, AWSP

I have watched principals and assistant principals move from a classroom observation to a student discipline conversation, then to an IEP meeting, answer a radio call in the hallway, greet a parent, and somehow still remember to smile at a kindergartner who proudly wants to show them a drawing.

Before lunch.

Honestly, I don't know many other professions that ask this much of one person before noon. By the end of the day they've solved problems they never anticipated, coached teachers, calmed students, answered emails, attended meetings, and probably spent a few minutes wondering where they left their coffee cup.

It's no wonder so many school leaders end the day wondering where the hours went.

Or the coffee.

Or both.

It's also why I keep coming back to one question: What does busyness quietly steal from us?

Not our calendars. Those seem to disappear all on their own.

"What does busyness quietly steal from us?"

Not our energy. By November, most principals and assistant principals could tell you exactly where that went.

I wonder if busyness slowly teaches us to stop noticing. Not because we don't care. Simply because there's always something else asking for our attention.

We stop noticing the teacher whose shoulders relaxed after a difficult conversation.

The student who finally raised a hand.

The office secretary who somehow knows exactly what everyone needs before they ask.

The custodian who waves every morning.

The parent whose face softens after hearing good news.

The kindergartner who just wanted someone to admire a drawing.
None of those moments will ever appear on tomorrow's agenda.
And yet they may become the moments we remember most.

We stop noticing the ordinary moments that quietly become the story of a school. And sometimes... I wonder if we stop noticing ourselves.

Every time I have the opportunity to learn alongside principals and assistant principals, I encourage them to ask a simple question:

"What does my building need from my leadership today?"

What does my building need from my leadership today?

I still believe it's one of the best leadership questions I know. Lately, though, another question keeps finding me. Maybe it belongs right beside the first one...

What are people experiencing when they experience me?

As I travel around Washington visiting schools, I rarely remember a building schedule. I don't remember the agenda from the staff meeting. I don't remember which initiative happened to be the focus that year.

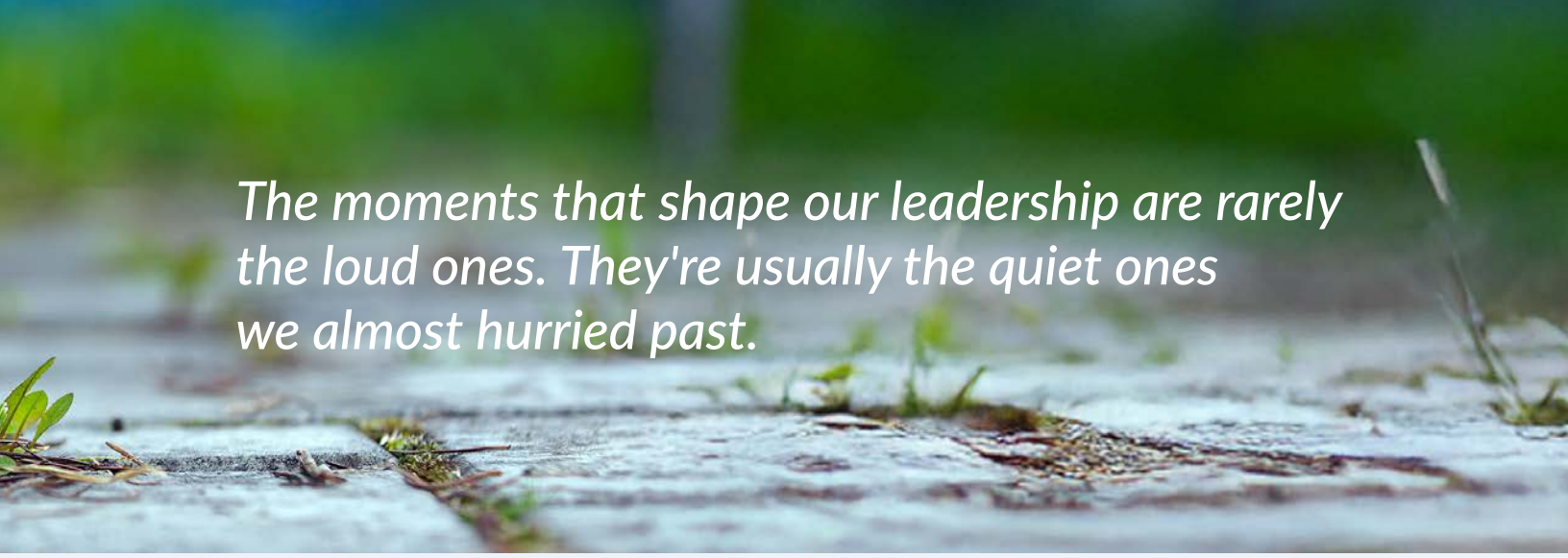
What I remember is how the school felt.

I remember whether people smiled when they greeted one another.

Whether students looked comfortable walking into the office.

Whether teachers felt known.

Whether there was a sense of calm, even on a difficult day.



I remember the feeling long before I remember the details. Why is that? Maybe people experience us long before they evaluate us.

In almost all professional learning I facilitate with principals and assistant principals, I remind them that an effective leader is a reflective leader. I've believed that for a long time. Lately, though, I've started wondering if I've only been telling half the story. Maybe reflection doesn't begin when we look back on the day. Maybe it begins much earlier. Maybe it begins the moment we notice.

Noticing when a teacher needs encouragement more than advice.

Noticing the student who keeps walking past your office door.

Noticing the colleague who has grown unusually quiet.

Noticing your own hurried response. Your tone. Your face. Your presence.

Noticing whether the leader you hoped to be this morning is the leader others experienced this afternoon.

For the past several years, I've had the privilege of facilitating conversations with principals and assistant principals around the School Leader Paradigm and the AWSP Leadership Framework. What continues to surprise me is that those conversations keep teaching me something, too.

No matter where the conversation begins, it always seems to bring me back to the same simple truth. The School Leader Paradigm describes leadership as "Becoming While Doing." The AWSP Leadership Framework helps us practice that every day through our relationships, our decisions, our communication, and our commitment to every learner. I've come to believe they both begin in the same place.

They begin with noticing.

"What are people experiencing when they experience me?"

I've come to believe that some of the most influential school leaders I've known weren't extraordinary because they always had the right answers. They were extraordinary because they noticed what others overlooked.

They noticed the teacher who needed someone to believe in them.

The student who needed another chance.

The family who needed one more phone call.

The small success that deserved celebrating.

People felt seen because someone took the time to notice. As you head further into another busy school year, I hope you'll continue asking, "What does my building need from my leadership today?" It's a question worth carrying.

But every once in a while, I hope you'll give yourself permission to slow down long enough to notice.

Notice the student who finally smiled.

Notice the teacher who left your office standing a little taller.

Notice the quiet moments that rarely make the agenda but often become the moments that matter most.

Because the moments that shape our leadership are rarely the loud ones. They're usually the quiet ones we almost hurried past.

And when we notice them, we don't just become better leaders. We remember why we wanted to become one in the first place. ■

AWSP Deputy Director Jack Arend joined the AWSP team in 2019. He has served in education since 1989 as an elementary, middle and high school music teacher. He began his building leadership career in the fall of 2006 as the principal of Peter G. Schmidt Elementary in Tumwater. After eleven years in the principalship, he served two years at the Central Office level.

A parent reads with her child at Littlerock Elementary's family engagement evening, "Camp Littlerock." Reading with therapy dogs is a hit!

from **JUDGMENT** *to* Curiosity: Growing Authentic Family Partnerships

Dr. Tamara York, Principal, Littlerock Elementary, Tumwater SD

A parent misses two conferences. The teacher says, "They don't value school." A mother questions an instructional decision. Someone describes her as "aggressive."

A family doesn't attend school events. We begin thinking of them as "uninvolved."

In schools, we can move quickly from what happened to why we think it happened. The first is observation and the second is interpretation. That distinction can determine whether a relationship grows—or shuts down. I learned this lesson across two vastly different educational systems.

For more than a decade, I lived and worked in Western China, teaching and leading schools in Qinghai Province. When I returned to the United States and entered an American public school classroom, the expectations for how families interacted with schools

were very different from those in Qinghai. Yet beneath those differences, I noticed something remarkably consistent. Families wanted their children to be respected. They wanted their concerns to be taken seriously. And they wanted assurance that their children were safe, cared for, and supported.

No matter how differently that care was expressed, the hope parents carried for their children was the same. What differed was how educators interpreted it.

That realization continues to shape how I lead today. As principals, we spend a great deal of time helping navigate relationships between families and schools. In those moments, one of our most important responsibilities may be helping our staff—and ourselves—separate what we know about a family from the story we have attached to it.

For me, that work comes down to three leadership moves:

- Pause the Judgment
- Lead with Curiosity
- Redefine Partnership

Pause the Judgment

Interpretation matters because it shapes what happens next:

A family did not attend conferences. That's an observation.

"They don't care about school." That's an interpretation.

A parent sent three emails questioning a decision. That's an observation.

"She is difficult." That's an interpretation.

The distinction seems simple, but in the busyness of schools, we cross that line all the time. Once a narrative takes hold, it can influence every interaction that follows. A parent becomes "difficult." A family becomes "uninvolved." An advocate becomes "aggressive."

As principals, we have an opportunity to interrupt that cycle.

When a staff member says, "That family never responds," we don't need to immediately correct the educator or defend the family. We can pause and ask:

What do we actually know?
What are we assuming?
What else might explain what we are seeing?

Pausing judgment does not mean ignoring patterns or excusing behavior. It means refusing to let our first response become our final conclusion.

Dr. Tamara York poses with students who are celebrating their "excellence in character" certificate.

"The student who challenges us at school is still someone's very best child. Our responsibility is to accept that child where they are, remain curious about what they need, and build a partnership with the people who know and love them best."

We teach students about the power of *yet*. There is value in applying that same mindset to our relationships with families.

This family hasn't responded—yet.
This parent doesn't trust us—yet.
This partnership hasn't formed—yet.
Sometimes one word is enough to leave room for the relationship to grow.

Lead with Curiosity

I experienced walking a teacher through the process of leading with curiosity in my first term as an assistant principal. A teacher came to me frustrated with a mother she perceived as aggressive about her daughter's learning. From the teacher's perspective, the parent's intensity felt confrontational. Her frustration was real, but I also recognized that we were beginning to assign motive without fully understanding the parent's perspective.

Parents have a lot of fun participating in Littlerock Elementary's Field Day.

So, I met with the student's mother. As I listened, I learned more about her background, values, and expectations for her daughter's education. What had initially been interpreted as aggression was, in fact, deeply connected to advocacy.

The parent's behavior had not changed—our understanding of it had. As the teacher began seeing the interaction through a different lens, the relationship changed. The parent felt heard. The teacher felt better equipped to communicate with her. Trust began to grow. Eventually, the same parent who had initially been perceived as an adversary began volunteering in the classroom!

That experience changed the way I think about my role as a school leader. Sometimes a principal's job is not to solve a difficult family relationship; it is to help people reinterpret it. We can reinforce the narrative already forming about a family, or we can slow it down.

What might we not know?
What might this family want us to understand?
Have we asked—or have we assumed?

An educational leader once shared something with me that has stayed with me: Parents send us their very best child. They don't keep the easy version at home and send us the difficult one. They send us the child they love—the child they know, worry about, advocate for, and hope the very best for. The student who challenges us at school is still someone's very best child. Our responsibility is to accept that child where they are, remain curious about what they need, and build a partnership with the people who know and love them best.

Redefine Partnership

Curiosity changes how we see families; partnership changes how we work alongside them and forces us to examine something bigger: What do we actually mean when we call a family "engaged"?

When I lived in China, I watched grandparents devote a tremendous amount of time to caring for grandchildren. They transported them to school, prepared meals, supervised schoolwork, and waited outside school at dismissal.

In an American school, none of those things would necessarily appear on a PTO roster, volunteer log, or family night attendance sheet. But could we really say those families weren't engaged?

Schools I've worked with in the US tend to notice what is easiest to count:

- Conference attendance
- PTO membership
- Volunteer hours
- Family-night participation
- Returned forms

Those things are valuable. But they primarily tell us how successfully families participate in structures schools have created. They don't necessarily tell us how invested a family is in their child's education.

That distinction matters.

Involvement often takes the form of what families do at school. Engagement includes what families know, value, contribute, and share in partnership with us. If we want authentic family partnerships, perhaps the question isn't "How do we get more families to engage?" Instead, we might ask:

Littlerock parents attend the Kindergarten spring concert.

How do we create more ways for families to engage?

That shift places some of the responsibility back on us as educators. It asks us to examine whether our definition of engagement is broad enough to recognize the many ways families already support their children—and whether the structures we have created make partnership possible for all families. That leads to a different set of questions for school leaders and their teams:

If the same families attend every event, whose voices are we not hearing?

If a parent cannot volunteer during the school day, what other opportunities have we created for them to contribute?

If a family rarely attends school events but consistently supports learning at home, do we recognize and value that as engagement?

If our primary communication system isn't working for a family, do we label them unresponsive—or do we find another way to connect?

Perhaps the better measure of family engagement isn't simply how often families show up for us, but how intentionally we create opportunities to show up for one another.

This doesn't mean conferences, PTOs, family nights, or volunteer programs aren't important. They absolutely are. But they should not become our definition of partnership.

"How do we create more ways for families to engage?"

Parents have the opportunity to attend "excellence lunches" with their certificate-earning child.

Lead the Change

Redefining partnership ultimately requires more than changing an event or adding another opportunity for families to participate. It requires leaders to pay attention to the beliefs and systems underneath those opportunities.

As principals, we influence both. We influence the systems by asking whose voices are represented, removing barriers to participation, creating different ways for families to contribute, and adjusting communication when our usual methods aren't working. But we also influence the way our schools talk about families.

When assumptions begin to surface in a staff room, meeting, or conversation, we have an opportunity to interrupt them. We can help shift the conversation from *Why won't this family participate?* to *What might be getting in the way?* From *They never respond* to *How else could we connect?* From *This parent is difficult* to *What are they trying to help us understand?* That is where the three leadership moves come together.

Pause the Judgment. Lead with Curiosity. Redefine Partnership.

Not all families will engage with schools in the same way. My years working across two very different educational systems taught me that they shouldn't have to. What remained consistent across both contexts was not *how* families showed up. It was *why.*

Parents want their children to be known and respected. They want them to be safe, supported, and given opportunities to succeed. As school leaders, we help shape both the structures families encounter and the stories our schools tell about them. We can continue asking families to fit the structures we have created, or we can become curious about how those structures might need to change.

Authentic partnership begins when we are willing to do both. Because if we want relationships with families to grow, sometimes the first thing that needs to change is the story we're telling ourselves about them. ■

Dr. Tamara York is principal at Littlerock Elementary in Tumwater School District. Tamara's journey into education was unique, beginning with more than a decade of teaching and leading schools in western China before returning to Washington to pursue classroom teaching and eventually school leadership.

A MATTER OF **PRINCIPALS**

Hear more from Dr. Tamara York on AWSP's podcast!

An AWSP Podcast

Andrea Dixon-Hundredmark, Director of Student Safety and Principal, Weston High, Arlington SD

There is a moment every school leader knows.

It's the moment when the policy leaves the binder.

The training is over. The framework has been adopted. The forms are exactly where they are supposed to be. Then Monday morning arrives, a real student walks through the door, and the situation in front of us refuses to fit neatly into the boxes we have prepared.

That is when we find out whether we have a good system or a system that actually works.

Behavioral threat assessment is no different. This year, Arlington School District is trying something new. In collaboration with ESD 189 and Erin Bafaro and Mike Luvera, we are piloting a district-level student threat assessment team called ANCHOR: Assessment, Navigation, Collaboration, Help & Ongoing Review.

ANCHOR grew from a question that is simple to ask and much harder to answer…How do we help administrators become genuinely skilled at behavioral threat assessment when their opportunities to practice vary so dramatically from school to school?

Knowing Is Not the Same as Doing

Some administrators may participate in several threat assessments during a school year. Others may go a year or longer without conducting one. They can attend the same training. They can use the same instrument. They can understand the procedures equally well.

But understanding a process and feeling steady enough to lead it when the stakes are high are not the same thing. That steadiness comes from practice. It comes from repetition, coaching, honest feedback, and the opportunity to sit beside someone with more experience and watch how they navigate uncertainty. It comes from being able

to say, "I'm not sure what to make of this," and knowing that the response will be curiosity, not judgment.

We would never expect someone to become fluent in a complex skill after hearing about it once. Yet in education, we sometimes treat training as though it creates mastery.

It doesn't.

Training gives us knowledge. Practice helps us build judgment. And behavioral threat assessment requires both.

Training Wheels, Not a Takeover

From the beginning, we knew what we did not want ANCHOR to become. We did not want a district team that swoops into a school, takes the case away from the principal, completes the assessment, and returns with an answer.

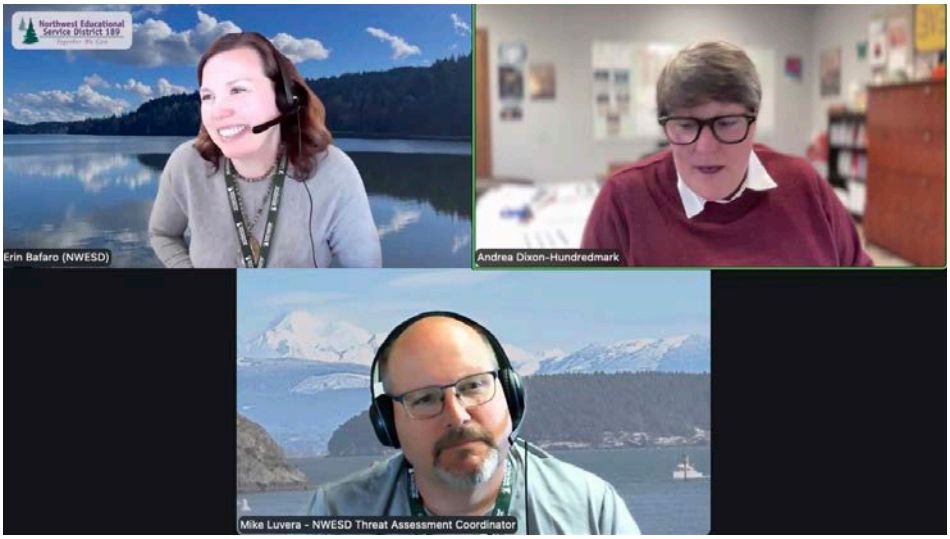
That might feel efficient. It might even feel reassuring. But reassurance and capacity are not the same thing.

If the expert always takes the handlebars, no one else learns to ride. So I keep describing ANCHOR as training wheels.

The school administrator stays on the bike. ANCHOR rides alongside. Campus administrators remain active participants in the assessment while working with a multidisciplinary team whose members have deeper training and more frequent experience. Together, they sit with the information, the context, and the questions surrounding the student.

"Behavior makes considerably more sense when we understand what is underneath it."

ANCHOR team members Katy Brown, school counselor; Krissa Cramer, district nurse; and Bridgette McVey, school psychologist, collaborate during a scheduled work session to strengthen interventions, coordinate supports, and build responsive student safety plans.



ANCHOR creators Andrea Dixon-Hundredmark; Erin Bafaro, NWESD 189 School Safety Program Manager; and Mike Luvera, NWESD 189 Threat Assessment Coordinator, collaborate to turn threat assessment into coordinated action, practical support, and ongoing accountability.

The purpose is not simply to reach the right conclusion.

It is to understand how we got there. Because the real work is not checking a box. The real work is developing the judgment, confidence, and humility to lead the process well the next time.

Choosing Curiosity Over Certainty

This is where behavioral threat assessment becomes particularly meaningful to me as an educator.

When the process is implemented thoughtfully, we're not simply asking, Is this student dangerous? We're asking:

What happened?
What changed?
What is happening in this student's life?
What stressors are present?
Who knows this student?
Who does this student trust?
What protective factors exist?
What is the context surrounding the behavior that brought us to the table?
And what intervention might change what happens next?

Those are threat assessment questions. But they are also deeply human questions. And they are some of the best questions an educator can ask.

For most of my career, I have worked with students whose lives did not fit neatly within the systems schools

> **“Looking underneath does not mean minimizing harmful behavior or avoiding accountability. It means refusing to confuse a behavior with the whole human being.”**

created for them. One lesson has followed me through all of that work: Behavior makes considerably more sense when we understand what is underneath it.

Looking underneath does not mean minimizing harmful behavior or avoiding accountability. It means refusing to confuse a behavior with the whole human being.

It means holding safety and compassion at the same time.

That is not soft work. It is disciplined work. It asks us to slow down when we want certainty, remain curious when we feel afraid, and seek understanding without surrendering responsibility. When we get better at doing that around a threat assessment table, I believe we become better educators everywhere else, too.

The Work After Adoption

I am increasingly interested in what happens after schools adopt evidence-based practices. We invest enormous energy in identifying good models and appropriately so. But choosing a strong model is only the beginning.

Adoption is not implementation. Training is not implementation. Having a binder is definitely not implementation.

Eventually, somebody has to look under the hood.

Where does the process get stuck? Which questions create confusion? Who needs to be at the table? What information is not reaching the people who need it? What happens when an experienced administrator leaves and someone new takes their place?

And perhaps most importantly: How do we know the same model is being implemented with fidelity across every school in a district?

These are not glamorous questions. They do not fit neatly into a press release. They rarely produce a ribbon-cutting moment. But they may be where much of the real work of school safety lives.

There is vulnerability in looking closely at a system we have built and asking whether it works as well as we hoped. The answer may expose gaps in our training, inconsistencies in our practice, or assumptions we did not realize we were making.

But if we are unwilling to look honestly, we cannot improve. Accountability begins with the courage to see clearly.

Success Means Needing Us Less

There is an intentional irony built into ANCHOR. If it works as intended, our schools should eventually need it less. We are not trying to create dependence on a central district team. We are trying to build expertise throughout the system.

Eventually, the training wheels should come off. We want administrators who understand the process deeply enough to lead strong assessments in their own buildings and who also know that asking for help is not a failure of leadership. A highly skilled multidisciplinary team will remain available when a situation becomes particularly complex.

Capacity does not mean doing everything alone. It means knowing what you can lead, recognizing when you need support, and being willing to reach for it.

So this year, we are going to learn. We will watch where the process works and where it does not. We will listen to our administrators. We will identify gaps in training and procedure. We will examine where additional scaffolding helps and where it gets in the way.

We will stay curious. We will tell the truth about what we find. And we will keep looking under the hood.

Because ultimately, the question is not whether a district can say it has a behavioral threat assessment process. The more important question is:

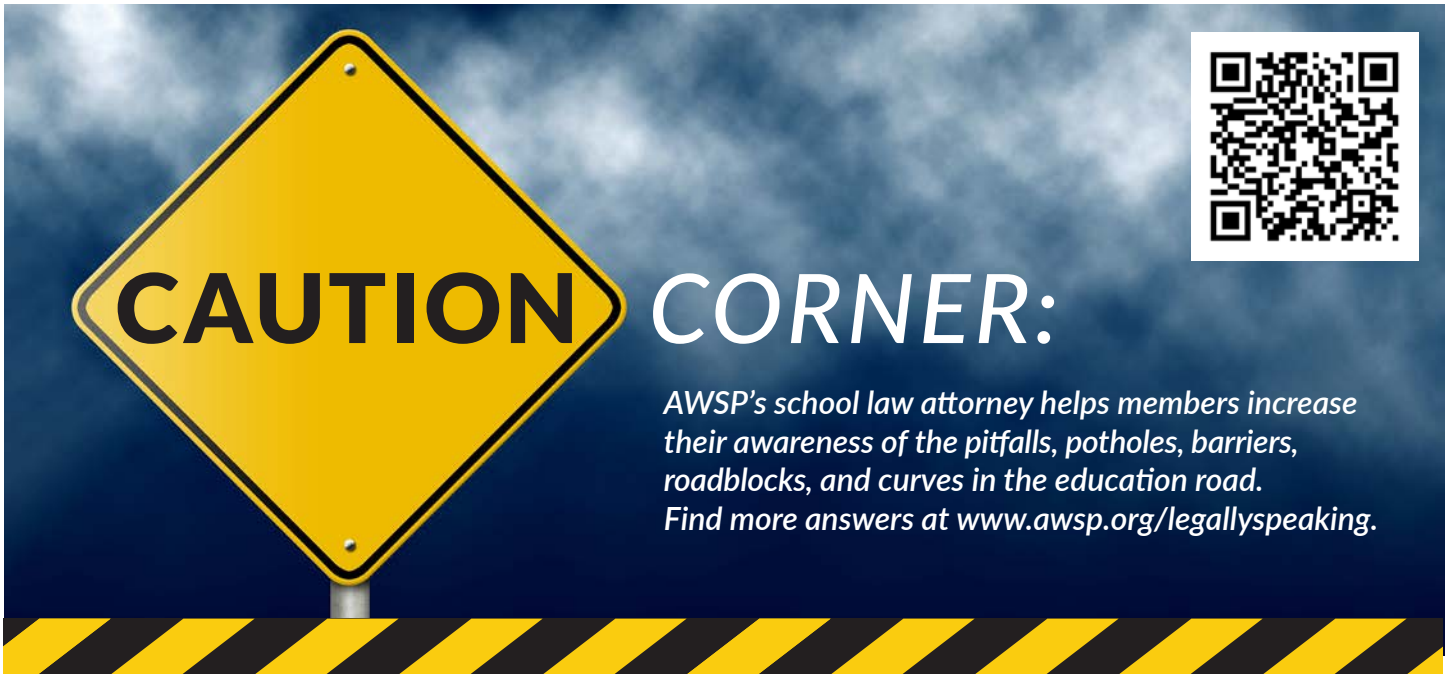
Does that process work, consistently and well, for the students and educators who depend on it?

That is the question we are hoping ANCHOR helps us answer. ■

Andrea Dixon-Hundredmark is principal of Weston High School and Director of Student Safety for Arlington SD. Andrea’s team is removing barriers to student success, reimagining traditional grading practices, and developing ANCHOR—a collaborative approach to strengthening behavioral threat assessment practices.

A MATTER OF **PRINCIPALS**

Hear more from Andrea Dixon-Hundredmark on AWSP’s podcast!



CAUTION CORNER:

AWSP's school law attorney helps members increase their awareness of the pitfalls, potholes, barriers, roadblocks, and curves in the education road. Find more answers at www.awsp.org/legallyspeaking.

Q: When do emails, texts, or messages on personal devices become public records and how should leaders protect themselves from potential staff/student boundary invasions when so communicating?

A: If you are using a cell phone or computer, no matter if that phone or computer is owned by you or by the school district, to communicate about issues related to your official capacity as a principal—those communications qualify as being public records. Those public records in your phone or computer may be exempt from public inspection, but they still legally qualify as being public records. RCW 42.56.101(3)

There are retention schedules that legally require school districts to retain their public records for specified periods of time. Your official capacity texts and emails are subject to those retention schedules. You should seek guidance from your school district as to how the district wants you to retain the public records that you create on your phone or computer.

It is extremely important to avoid communications with students that are not within the scope of your official capacity as a principal. All districts have a policy that addresses staff/student boundaries in which a boundary invasion is defined as an act or pattern of behavior that does not have a bona fide health, safety or educational purpose. Your communications with or about students must adhere to these strict boundary requirements.

Q: Can conduct in your personal life negatively impact your professional life as a certificated public school employee?

A: The answer to that question is yes, it can.

The statutory standard that is required before a certificated employee can be terminated, nonrenewed or adversely affected in contract status is sufficient cause. There are decades of case law that define what that sufficient cause standard involves, but that case law does not expressly state the specific type of conduct that is per se grounds for such serious disciplinary actions being imposed by a school district.

However, that case law is clear that if a certificated employee's conduct outside the profession is the basis for such disciplinary action, that otherwise private conduct must have some nexus or relationship to that employee's performance of duties as a certificated employee.

And, except in cases in which a certificated employee has been found to have been flagrantly sexually exploitive or physically abusive of a student, certificated employees are entitled to efforts to remediate lesser forms of misconduct before the sufficient cause standard can be met.

Seemingly private conduct may negatively impact your certificated employment if that private conduct has a negative impact on your ability to effectively perform your assigned duties as a certificated employee. ■

The fine print: Caution Corner provides general legal information to help Washington school leaders better understand common legal issues. Content is reviewed by legal counsel but does not constitute legal advice or establish an attorney-client relationship. Laws and circumstances vary, and readers should consult appropriate legal counsel for guidance regarding specific situations.

Have your own question? Don't hesitate to call our office. No question is too small, and there isn't a reason you should have to problem-solve alone. Reach out to 800.562.6100.

Intentionally Analog:

Reclaiming Student Attention in a Digital World

Bret Cochrun, Principal, Interlake High School, Bellevue SD

The Story Behind Intentionally Analog

In 2025, Interlake High School Principal Bret Cochrun wrote an article for AWSP titled "Should States Ban Cell Phone Use in Schools?" At the time, Interlake was entering its third year as a phone-free school, with a bell-to-bell restriction on student phone use during instructional time. While the policy helped create a more focused learning environment, Bret recognized the challenges of maintaining consistent expectations without stronger district or state policies to support them.

As one of the first schools in King County to implement a phone-free policy, Interlake encountered challenges with outdated district policies and procedures. Bret began advocating for clearer, more consistent expectations at the district or state level, much like the established laws prohibiting tobacco use on public school campuses.

But as Bret continued observing classrooms, he noticed another challenge. Although students had put away their phones, screens were still competing for their attention. In a one-to-one technology environment, school-issued laptops offered many of the same distractions, from messaging and online shopping to gaming and streaming videos.

This realization prompted Bret to look beyond cell phones and consider the broader impact of screen use on student attention, engagement, and learning. It also helped inspire a new approach at Interlake High School: "Intentionally Analog."

Putting Teachers in a Position to Win

As second semester of the 2025-2026 school year was underway, I was listening to two commentators argue why one of our professional Seattle sports teams wasn't winning. One of the criticisms they both agreed on is the job of the coach and manager. Their endless responsibilities, if consolidated into one purpose, is to put their players in a position to win. While sports analogies can be tiresome, I couldn't help but immediately think of how that relates to the role of a school leader.

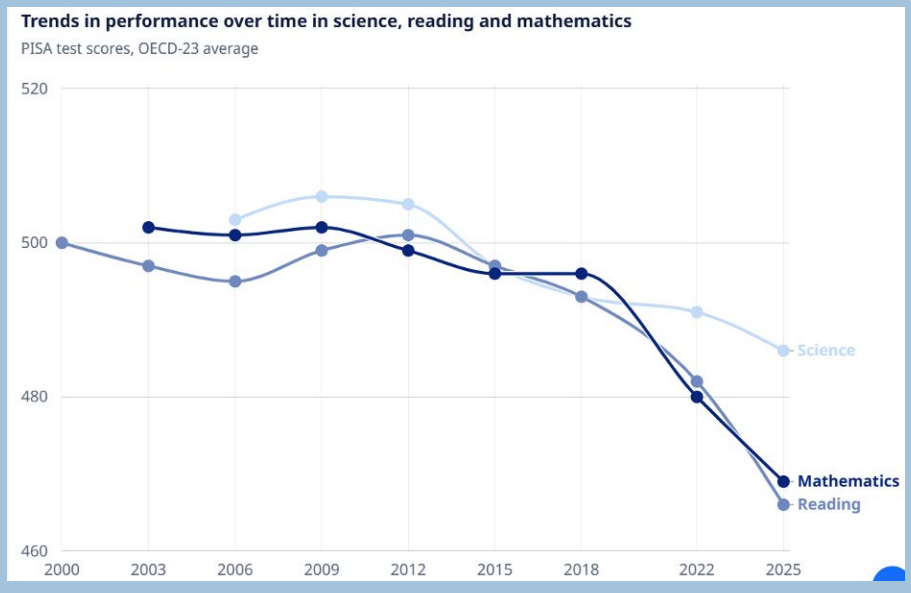
High schools are no different. Teachers have endless competing priorities, and schoolwide expectations are a place where school leaders can influence the setting and culture of a school that puts their teachers in a position to win.

At about the same time, I came across the book *The Digital Delusion* by Dr. Jared Horvath. This book confirmed my suspicions about laptops and how it's another screen stealing the attention and focus of our students by providing many of the same dopamine triggers that cell phones do. One of the most compelling theories that he proposes is the sudden drop in math and literacy rates at some point between 2008 and 2012—ironically, when many districts started adopting one-to-one and issuing every student a laptop. What is most convincing, for me, is the similarity in the data sets whether you're looking at scores globally, nationally, or in the state of Washington.

International Scores: PISA Exam

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is conducted by OECD and it's one that I remember administering in the Bellevue School District. We took a random sampling of 150 fifteen-year-olds in a two-hour computer-based exam and measured those results against the rest of the world. This is the exam where you typically hear that Singapore and the Nordic countries are outperforming the majority of other nations. The results for the 2025 exam were published and the trends are continuing in the wrong direction.

But maybe this is primarily a problem outside of the United States. Let's zoom in to our national database.



Results from the 2025 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The downward trend shows that the drop in math and literacy rates is happening worldwide, not just in the US.

National Scores: NAEP

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is often considered the nation's report card. Conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, it is also a random sampling of 10,000-20,000 students at various grade levels. Prior to looking at the data, it's also important to note that student performance had little to no variability based on other student demographics. For example, in math, student performance went down proportionately across parents' education levels.

Between the 2019 and 2024 exam, students whose parents didn't finish high school went down five points while students whose parents graduated from college also went down five points.

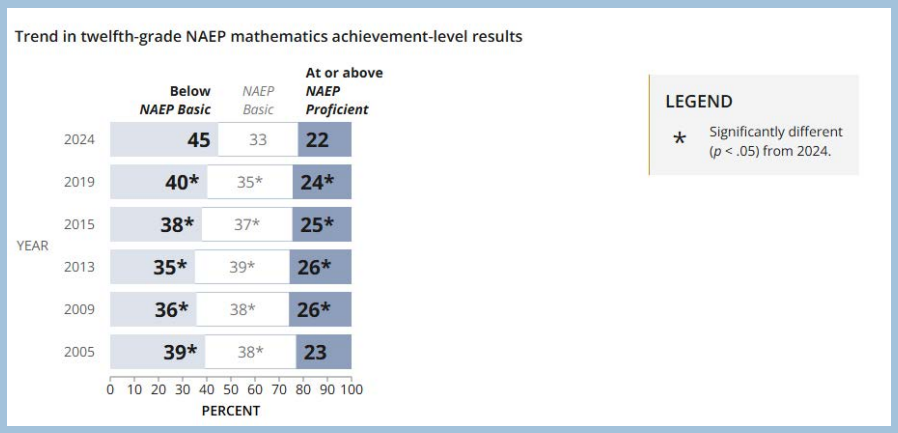
Math

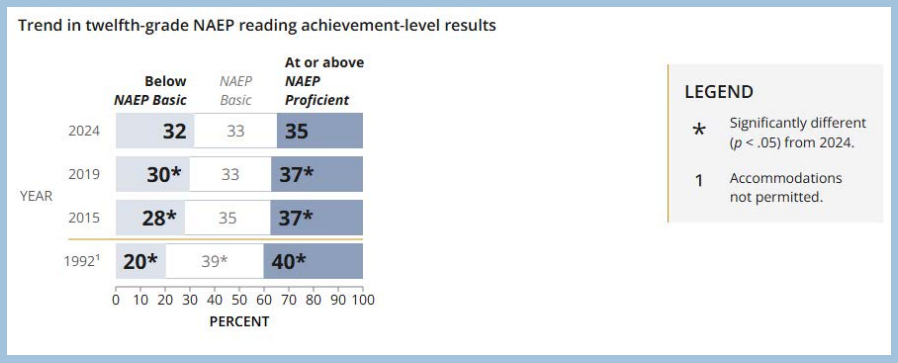
The most recent assessment of twelfth-graders across the nation was March of 2024 and 19,300 students across 1,500 schools were assessed in mathematics. The table on the following page shows six different assessment years and the percentage of students testing in three levels of proficiency: Below NAEP Basic, NAEP Basic, and At or Above NAEP Proficient.

While the data mostly speaks for itself, there is a statistically significant decline in student performance beginning in 2013. If you compare this data with the international assessment data of the PISA exam, there is significant overlap.

Reading

The twelfth-grade reading assessment was also conducted in March of 2024 and it assessed 24,300 students across 1,500 schools. Reading has more of a longitudinal study as it has assessment data reaching back to 1992. Again, the data suggests that at, or around, 2015 students started performing worse across the nation. (See the chart on the following page.)





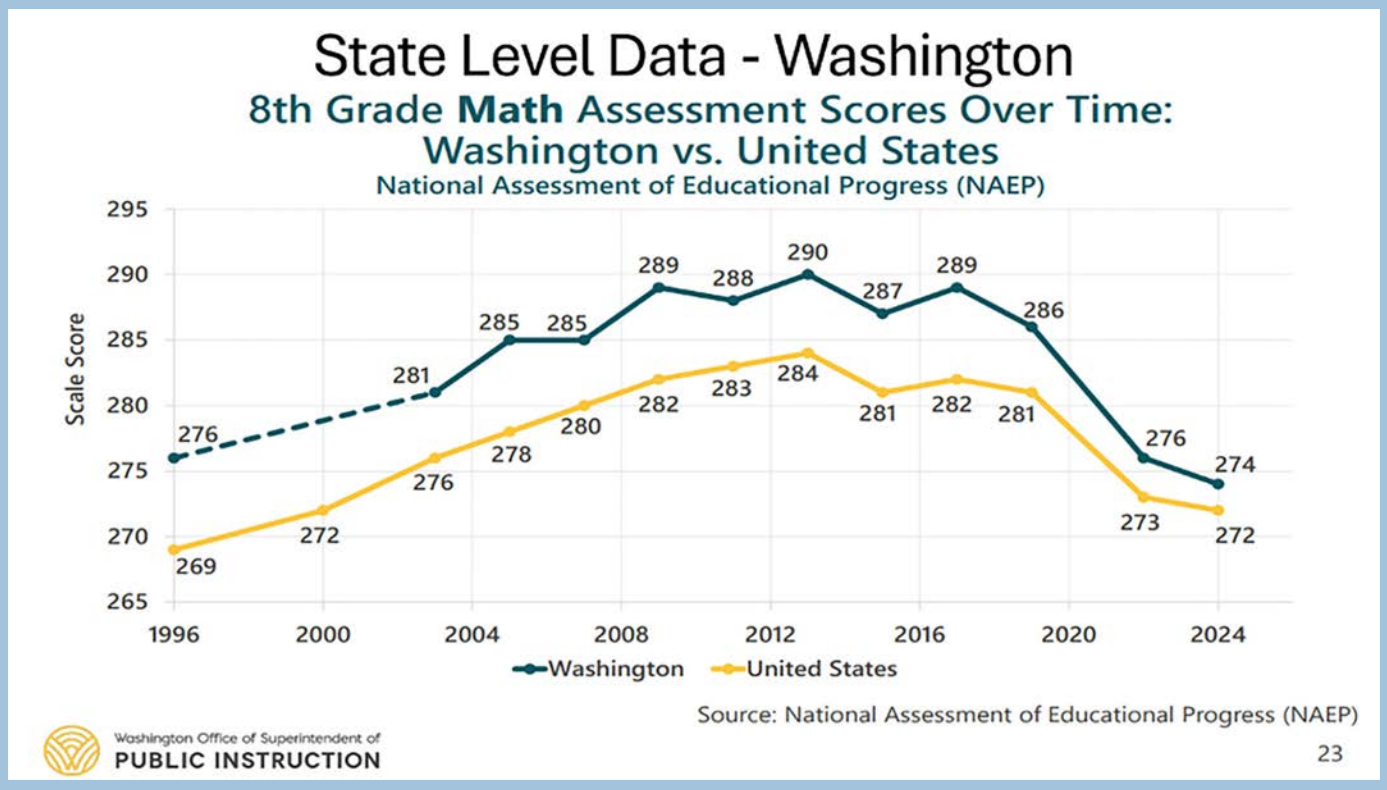
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data shows a statistically significant decline in student performance beginning in 2013 for math and 2015 for reading.

Let's look at Washington state, to zoom in even closer and look to see if we've cracked the code on this concerning trend.

Washington State Data

You likely already know where this is heading. According to OSPI as sourced by NAEP, you can see where the math assessment scores started trending downward. Granted, this is for eighth grade math scores, and we'll continue to use the NAEP exam for continuity. While Washingtonians should celebrate the fact that we're performing better than the national average, it is shadowed by the steep decline in scores and narrowing of the gap between Washington and the national average.

If we were to use longitudinal data for the Smarter Balanced Exam, we would see hope on the horizon as eighth grade math and ELA seem to be stabilizing. Given that, we're still well below pre-pandemic levels.



State level data for math assessment scores shows a noticeable downward trend starting around 2020.

“Have we adequately examined the academic cost of putting a screen in front of every student for most of the school day?”

None of this proves that one-to-one technology caused the decline. The timeline illustrates correlation, not causation, and the last decade includes no shortage of confounding variables—from smartphones and social media to chronic absenteeism and pandemic disruption. But the convergence is significant enough to warrant a question: ***Have we adequately examined the academic cost of putting a screen in front of every student for most of the school day?***

Intentionally Analog Isn’t Anti-Technology, It’s Anti-Default

In April of 2026 I presented my staff with a new vision for Interlake High School during our monthly PD. In layman’s terms, I said I wanted to put the screens down. We looked at the data I presented in this article. We looked at brain science around handwritten notetaking versus digital notetaking and its relationship to memory retention. We looked at the curve of forgetting. We did a staff book study with *The Digital Delusion*. We listened to staff voices who were already making these shifts throughout the school year.

Lastly, we looked at engagement strategies because when we remove electronic devices and reclaim student attention, we create an opportunity, and a responsibility, to fill that space with powerful, high-engagement strategies that elevate learning.

While this will be the arc of our professional development for the 2026-27 school year, it’s important to note that it means something different for each department and staff member. While I’d argue that art, music, PE, English, foreign language, math, and science don’t need screens, we need to create space and understanding for those who do. The point isn’t to villainize those who are using screens. We’ll continue to offer computer science, photography (screens needed for editing), graphic design, and other classes that are computer-based. I also have instructors who are teaching College in the High School courses and some of the curriculum is purely online.

Lastly, this isn’t a “light switch” adjustment to our lesson delivery and pedagogy. It’s going to take time to de-digitize our curriculum. Teachers are already reporting that it’s difficult to pull their resources, worksheets, and other documents off of Microsoft OneNote and recreate them in a printer-friendly or editable document. This is going to take time.

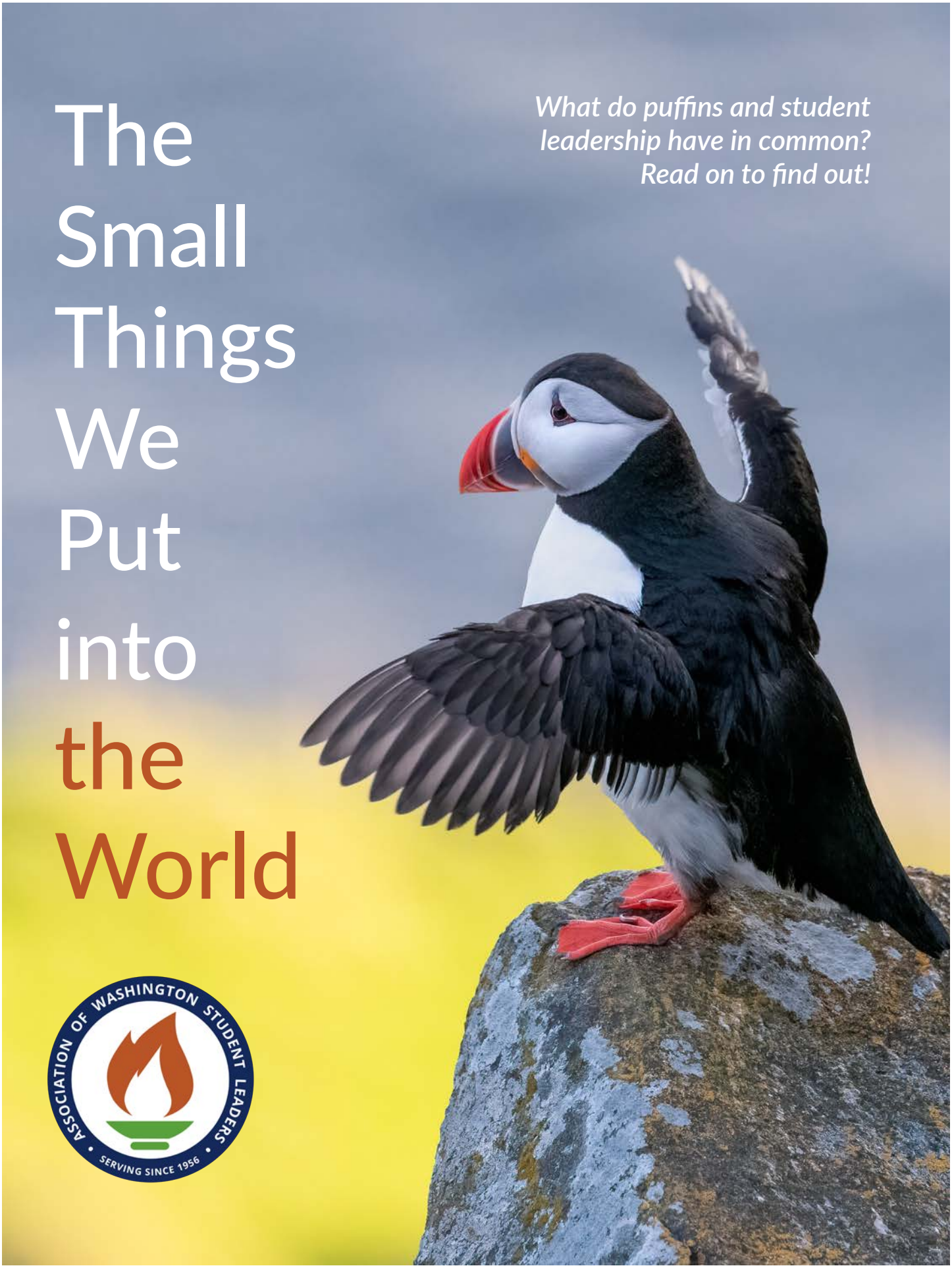
This has largely become a national conversation so I was worried this was going to be labeled as a “bandwagon” vision. But that’s exactly it, the conversation has become a national topic.

Those willing to take action to do what’s best for students, I’d argue are on the front lines. Don’t wait for state law or district policy to drive change. The data may not give us a single culprit, but it gives us more than enough to lead with a strong conviction—we need to put the screens down and return to analog learning. ■

As Principal of Interlake High School, Bret leads with a vision rooted in high expectations, equity, and innovation. Under his leadership, Interlake has consistently ranked in the top 1% of public high schools in the nation—a testament to the community’s unwavering commitment to excellence and student growth. One of his proudest accomplishments has been creating a phone-free school environment, fostering greater student engagement, focus, and well-being. This cultural shift has strengthened their sense of community and academic rigor.

The Small Things We Put into the World

What do puffins and student leadership have in common? Read on to find out!



James Layman, Director, Association of Washington Student Leaders

When we talk about growth in schools, we tend to talk about big things.

We grow programs. We grow achievement. We grow opportunities, partnerships, and systems. And sometimes, if we are being truthful, we grow the number of tabs open on our computers.

Growth can feel like it requires more. More time. More resources. More meetings. More added to an already full plate. But what if growing our impact is not always about doing more? What if sometimes it is about becoming more intentional with the people, opportunities, and moments we already have?

The Fortune Cookie Writer

There is an actual job called a fortune cookie writer. Seriously. For decades, Donald Lau wrote fortunes for Wonton Food, one of the largest fortune cookie manufacturers in the world. He did not grow up dreaming of becoming a fortune cookie writer.

As the story goes, he ended up with the responsibility because his English was the strongest. So he wrote little messages. Tiny pieces of encouragement. Thoughts small enough to fit on a slip of paper tucked inside a cookie.

There is something about that work that feels a lot like school leadership. Lau could write the fortune, but he could not follow the cookie. He did not know who would eventually read his words, what kind of day they were having, or whether the message would be forgotten five minutes later or tucked into a wallet for years.

School leaders rarely get to follow the cookie, either.

We greet a student by name, leave a note for a staff member, show up at an event, ask one more question, offer a little grace, create an opportunity for a student to lead, or remind someone that they matter. Most days, we never get to see what happens next. But that does not make the moment any less important.

"One puffin can land without knowing its presence will give another puffin the courage to land. One student can extend an invitation that changes another student's experience. And one school leader can create a moment without ever knowing how far that moment will travel."

Our work is to keep putting good into the world and create schools where good things have the opportunity to grow. Sometimes that growth is easy to measure. Other times, the growth that matters most is harder to see: a stronger sense of belonging, a student discovering their voice, an adult seeing a student differently, a deeper connection, or a little more hope.

This is where student leadership becomes so important.

At AWSL, we believe leadership is learned. We also believe leadership development is not reserved for the students who already hold a title, wear the ASB sweatshirt, or are the first to raise their hands.

Every student has the capacity to lead. The opportunity for schools is to create the conditions where students can discover it, practice it, and use it to make their communities better. That brings me to another story I keep coming back to.

One Brave Puffin

For nearly 100 years, puffins were gone from Eastern Egg Rock, a small island off the coast of Maine. Beginning in the 1970s, scientist Stephen Kress and his team worked to bring them back. But they encountered a problem. The island looked empty.

Puffins are social. When they look for somewhere to land, they look for signs that other puffins are already there. An empty island did not feel like a place to belong.

So Kress and his team tried something wonderfully simple. They put wooden puffin decoys on the island. From the sky, those decoys sent a small but powerful message:

There are others here. This may be a place where I can land. Eventually, one puffin landed. Then another. Those puffins became a signal to others. In 1981, puffins began nesting on Eastern Egg Rock again.

I love this story because our students spend a lot of their day looking around our schools and asking questions they may never say out loud:

Is this a place for me? Will someone notice me? Does my voice matter? Is it safe to join? Where can I land? And every day, our schools are answering those questions.

Not just through strategic plans, mission statements, assemblies, or big initiatives. We answer them in hallways, classrooms, cafeterias, student sections, playgrounds, activities, advisory periods, at the bus loop, and in the few seconds before a meeting begins.

We answer them through whose names we know, who we notice, how we respond to mistakes, whose ideas we ask for, and who we invite into the conversation.

And importantly, students are answering those questions for one another. That is one of the reasons AWSL exists.

Forever Skills

For 70 years, AWSL has helped Washington schools develop student leaders and strengthen the adults who work alongside them. Today, that work stretches across the entire K–12 continuum and extends far beyond traditional student government. AWSL sits at the intersection of leadership development and forever skills, helping students build the skills they need not just to lead in school, but to navigate whatever comes next.

Through leadership experiences, school culture and climate work, student voice, adult learning, resources, workshops, camps, and direct support for schools and districts, our goal is not to add one more thing to schools' plates. It is to help schools strengthen the work they are already doing.

To help more students find a place to land.

To help adults create the conditions where students are known, heard, valued, and empowered.

To give students opportunities to practice the skills they will carry into classrooms, careers, communities, and life.

And to remind all of us that leadership development does not have to be another initiative. It can become part of how a school operates.

Because those moments may feel small. But small does not mean insignificant.

What Powerful Moments are You Creating?

One puffin can land without knowing its presence will give another puffin the courage to land. One fortune can be written without knowing who needs to read it. One student can extend an invitation that changes another student's experience. And one school leader can create a moment without ever knowing how far that moment will travel.

That could be part of leadership. We are planting things we may never get to watch grow.

Start Small

So, as we think about Grow, perhaps we start small:

- **Learn one more name.** Find a student you see but do not really know. Being known is one of the simplest ways we tell someone they belong.
- **Notice out loud.** When you see something good, say it. Tell the student. Tell the teacher. Tell the paraeducator, custodian, secretary, or bus driver. Never assume people know that you noticed.
- **Ask one more student.** Before making the next decision that affects students, ask them what they think. Student voice does not always require a committee, survey, or new program. Sometimes it begins with a question.
- **Look toward the edges.** Who is hovering? Who has not joined? Who has not been asked? Who might simply be looking for a safe place to land?
- **Make the invitation.** Sometimes belonging begins with two words: "Join us." Open the circle a little wider.
- **Create opportunities to practice leadership.** Students do not have to wait until adulthood to become leaders. Give them meaningful opportunities to communicate, collaborate, solve problems, make decisions, reflect, and contribute right now.
- **Trust what you cannot see.** Keep greeting students. Keep writing the notes. Keep asking for their voices. Keep showing up. Keep putting good into the world, even when you do not get to see where it lands.

And when you are wondering how to make those ideas more intentional, sustainable, or accessible across your school or district, *AWSL can help with that!*

Growth is not always about becoming bigger.

Sometimes it is about strengthening what is already there.

One fortune. One puffin who is willing to land. One adult who notices. One student whose voice is invited into the room. One school that believes leadership belongs to everyone. One student who begins to believe *"there is a place for me here."*

One of the greatest things we can grow in our schools cannot be measured on a spreadsheet: hope.

Hope that I am known. Hope that I belong. Hope that my voice matters. Hope that someone believes in me. Hope that I can make a difference. Hope that tomorrow can be different than today. Hope that there is a place for me to land.

And when we grow that kind of hope in one student, they might help grow it in someone else.

That is how culture grows.
That is how leadership grows.
That is how communities grow.

And for 70 years, AWSL has been honored to grow alongside Washington's students, schools, and communities. AWSL develops the leader in every student.

That sounds like growth to me. ■

James joined the AWSL staff in the summer of 2017. James has been involved with AWSL since attending camp as a delegate in 2001. He has served as a Junior Counselor, Senior Counselor, and Camp Director. James is now the AWSL Director.

"ASK A PRINCIPAL"

In October, we asked school leaders, "What leadership quality do you see in your students that gives you hope for the future?" Here are a few of the great responses we received:

"The leadership trait I am seeing in my students is the willingness to speak up for any injustice they see. They are learning to do so with calm and measured voices and are learning that the adults around are listening. These are our leaders of the future. Baruti Kafele spoke at a conference I was at and said, 'It's not enough to give our students a voice, we need to teach them what to say.' I would add to that, 'and how to say it to be heard.' That is what we are hopefully instilling in our students."

— Dianne Harlow, Principal, Valhalla Elementary, Federal Way PS

"What gives me hope is seeing how students respond to high expectations, guidance, and encouragement from adults they trust. I believe every student wants to succeed, know their work matters, and take pride in their achievements. When we create a sense of belonging, build confidence, and encourage students to take risks and work hard, there is no limit to what they can achieve."

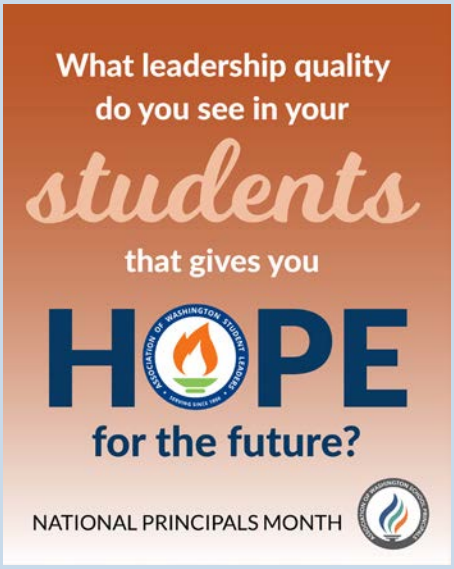
— Jay Opgrande, Principal, Mt. Solo Middle School, Longview Schools

"The leadership quality I see in my students that gives me hope for the future is inclusion and acceptance of others. Recently, I observed a PE lesson where students of all abilities chose partners and worked together, embracing classmates with different backgrounds, physical abilities, and language skills. It warmed my heart to see how naturally they included one another. It was a beautiful reminder that leadership is about kindness, acceptance, and making sure everyone belongs. Seeing these qualities in my students gives me hope for a future where differences are celebrated and everyone feels valued."

— Amanda Voorhees, Principal, McKinley Elementary, Yakima SD

"The leadership quality I see in our students that gives me hope for the future is their willingness to serve. Students love having opportunities to serve others by meeting needs others have and feeling helpful in a way that makes a difference. Their actions of service not only give me hope for the future but make me grateful to serve alongside our youth today."

— Courtney Dallas, Assistant Principal, Park Middle School, Kennewick SD



"Empathy. Our kids care so much about others, how they feel, and what will make their lives better. Kids these days are pretty incredible!"

— Katie Louie, Principal, Central Valley High, Central Valley SD

"Resilience. Working in a small school, I have the privilege of watching students grow in ways that go far beyond academics. I see students face challenges, overcome setbacks, support one another, and continue pushing forward even when things aren't easy."

— Dustin Wendt, Principal, Colton School, Colton SD

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA!

We'll post more fun prompts with prizes for National Principals Month in October, Member Engagement Month in February, and other special events.

FROM THE AWSP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Someone is Watching You

LEAD

Whether we realize it or not, our leadership is always recruiting. The question is: What are we recruiting people toward?

There is someone in your school right now who is watching you. You probably don't know who it is. It might be the teacher who stops by your office every morning. The paraeducator you pass in the hallway. The counselor sitting across from you in a difficult student meeting. The new teacher trying to figure out whether education is really their calling. It might even be a student.

They are watching how you lead. How you treat people. How you respond when things get hard. How you handle conflict. Whether you listen. Whether you laugh. Whether you admit when you're wrong. Whether you still seem to find joy in this incredibly challenging work. And without either of you realizing it, they may be asking themselves: Could I do that someday? That question matters more than ever.

"Without either of you realizing it, they may be asking themselves: 'Could I do that someday?'"

We talk a lot about the leadership crisis facing our state. We should. The data, the turnover, the increasing complexity of the job, and the shrinking pipeline of future leaders demand our attention. At AWSP, we will continue pushing policymakers and the larger education system to recognize that crisis and build better systems to grow, support, sustain, and advocate for school leaders.

But there is another leadership development system operating in every school, every day. YOU.

We Are All Growing the Profession

We often think about "growing leaders" as something formal. Leadership academies. Principal preparation programs. Internships. Mentorships. Professional learning. Succession planning. Those things matter tremendously. But I believe the most powerful recruitment strategy for the principalship might be much simpler: Be a leader worth following.

Think about your own leadership journey. Chances are, somewhere along the way, somebody saw something in you before you saw it in yourself. Someone encouraged you. Someone gave you an opportunity. Someone modeled leadership in a way that made you think, *Maybe I could do that.*

Or perhaps the opposite happened. Maybe you watched someone lead and thought, *If I ever get the opportunity, I'm going to do that differently.* Either way, someone influenced your decision to lead. Now you are that someone for somebody else. That's an incredible opportunity—and an incredible responsibility. Because whether we realize it or not, our leadership is always recruiting. The question is: What are we recruiting people toward?

"When you show that it's possible to work incredibly hard while still finding joy, connection, laughter, and purpose, they are learning about leadership."

What Does Leadership Feel Like Around You?

This year, you've heard me talking a lot about hope. Our leadership development work has evolved into ***Creating Hope: A Leadership Journey*** because I believe hopeful leadership isn't soft, naïve, or disconnected from reality. Hope isn't pretending everything is okay. Hope is acknowledging the challenges in front of us while maintaining the belief that tomorrow can be better than today—and that we have the collective ability to make it so.

School leaders are dealers of that hope. People will feel hopeful because of the hope they see in you. But here's the connection I don't want us to miss: Hope doesn't just influence the people we lead today. It grows the leaders who will lead tomorrow.

When someone watches you navigate an impossible situation with courage and compassion, they are learning about leadership. When they see you advocate fiercely for a student, they are learning about leadership. When you recognize a staff member's potential and give them an opportunity to lead, they are learning about leadership. When you admit you don't have the answer, ask for help, and keep moving forward, they are learning about leadership. When you show that it's possible to work incredibly hard while still finding joy, connection, laughter, and purpose, they are learning about leadership.

And yes, our inactions teach them something too. People are constantly forming a picture of what leadership looks like, sounds like, and feels like by watching us. That picture may determine whether they ever see themselves in it.

Grow

That's why the word GROW means so much more to me than increasing the number of people entering principal preparation programs. We need to grow the profession. We need to grow the pathways. We need to grow the capacity of our current leaders. But first, we need to grow people.

Sometimes that starts with a conversation. "Have you ever thought about leadership?" "You were really good in that meeting today." "I see something in you." "Would you like to lead this?" "You should think about becoming a principal someday."

Imagine if every principal and assistant principal in Washington intentionally identified just one person this year and planted that seed. Not because we need to fill vacancies. Because we see leadership potential in them. And then imagine if we did more than plant the seed. What if we gave them opportunities to lead?

What if we let them see behind the curtain of the principalship—not just the stress and complexity, but the joy, purpose, relationships, and incredible privilege of serving a school community? What if we showed them that leadership can be challenging and life-giving? What if we became living examples that this profession is still worth choosing? That is how we begin growing the future of school leadership. Not someday. Today.

You May Never Know

Here's the humbling part. You may never know. You may never know which interaction mattered. You may never know which staff member went home and started looking at principal preparation programs. You may never know which teacher remembered something you said five years earlier. You may never know which student watched you lead their school and quietly decided, I want to do that someday.

And that's okay. Leadership has always been about planting trees under whose shade we may never sit. Our responsibility isn't to see every result. Our responsibility is to plant. To notice people. To create opportunities. To encourage potential. To model courage. To demonstrate joy. To create hope. And to leave this profession stronger than we found it.

We absolutely need systemic solutions to Washington's leadership crisis. We need better policies, better resources, better working conditions, stronger preparation, meaningful professional support, and a statewide commitment to growing, supporting, sustaining, and advocating for school leaders.

AWSP will continue championing those efforts. But we shouldn't underestimate the power already sitting in our hands. Nearly every future school leader in Washington is sitting in someone's school today. They are watching. They are listening. They are deciding what leadership is. And somewhere, someone may be looking at you and wondering: ***Could I do that someday?***

Let's make sure the answer they see in us is: Yes. And it's worth it.

Keep growing leaders. Keep creating hope. And, as always, keep up the great work for kids!

Dr. Scott Seaman joined AWSP in the fall of 2013 after serving as the principal at Tumwater High School. Scott became Executive Director in 2018.

AWSP
ASSOCIATION OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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