

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

 **NASSP**
National Association
of Secondary School Principals

SEPTEMBER 2024

CHOOSING JOY THIS SCHOOL YEAR



WIN THE DAY!

Returning joy
to our profession
P. 24

BRINGING THE FUN

Boosting engagement
in middle school
P. 38

LEAD WITH A SMILE

Prioritizing school
climate and culture
P. 42



SCIENCE GEOMETRY HISTORY KINDNESS?

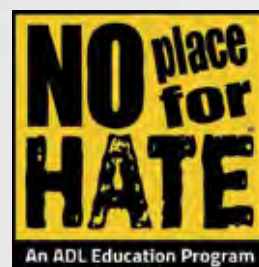
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PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
SEPTEMBER 2024
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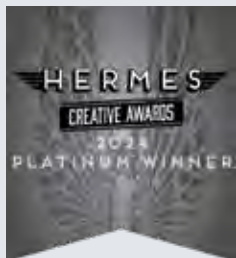
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“As a school leader, you must do everything in your power to make sure public schools have the necessary funding and resources to deliver a high-quality education for all kids.”

—Ronn Nozoe, NASSP CEO

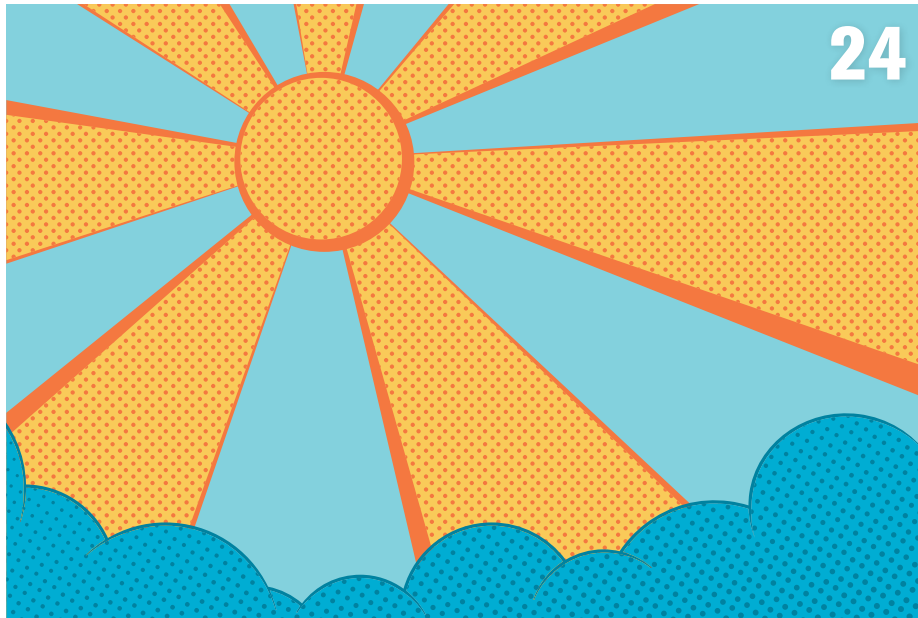


Past and present NASSP board members attend the annual National School Leaders Advocacy Conference in Washington, D.C.

PHOTO BY ALLYSSA HYNES/NASSP

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MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

RONN K. NOZOE | NASSP

WELCOME BACK! I hope you had a restful and relaxing summer break, and I know you're excited to return to serving your school communities. Another year of tremendous learning and growth awaits you, your students, and your staff. We at NASSP are here to support you. Whether you lead a school in a big city or a small town, I encourage you to join our association and your state association, and become an active and engaged member. The very future of public education depends on it. And no, I'm not being dramatic.

As a longtime public school educator, I am seriously concerned about how our tax dollars are increasingly being used to fund private education. Private school is rightly part of the educational landscape in this country. In fact, many NASSP members are principals and assistant principals at private schools. I applaud their work and their commitment to their school communities just as much I applaud leaders of our public schools.

I do, however, take issue with a voucher system on steroids. It's wrong when money dedicated to our chronically underfunded public schools is siphoned away to fund more and more private schools each year. We should be fully funding education and the myriad options available to our children.

As a school leader, you must do everything in your power to make sure public schools have the necessary funding and resources to deliver a high-quality education for all kids. We need principals and assistant principals to get involved and start paying attention. NASSP members must fight to ensure money is restored to public schools, where it belongs.

The days of "this too shall pass" and "problems like these are above my pay grade" are over. I'm here to tell you it is absolutely in your pay grade now. It is our responsibility to advocate for public education and make sure the resources are there to support teaching and learning for every child. And it is NASSP's responsibility to help you.


There is no more authentic and credible voice to elevate what is really going on in schools than your voice. Superintendents may come and go but building leaders often choose to stay. They stay because of the close



NASSP CEO Ronn Nozoe says school leaders must advocate for public education.

relationships they've developed with students, families, teachers, and staff. They stay because they care.

Now is the time to let everyone else know just how much you care. How can you do that? By engaging in NASSP Advocacy actions to save and grow public education. By joining NASSP Leadership Networks to connect with and learn from your peers. By becoming an NASSP Ambassador to weigh in on the types of professional learning and resources school leaders like you need and deserve.

For people outside of education to realize just how important the job of a principal is, a principal needs to acknowledge and realize the importance of the job, too. They must also effectively communicate what they do and how they do it with those who never even set foot in public schools. As a school leader who champions student agency with NASSP's student leadership programs, you already know the value of encouraging young people to make their voices heard. Your student leaders would say you should do the same thing for them this year—and for you. 

Ronn K. Nozoe is the CEO of NASSP. Previously, he served as associate executive director and interim executive director of ASCD. A former deputy assistant secretary for policy and programs at the U.S. Department of Education, he also served as deputy state superintendent in his home state of Hawaii, where he began his career as a teacher, vice principal, and principal.

Reference

Meckler, L., & Boorstein, M. (2024, June 3). Billions in taxpayer dollars now go to religious schools via vouchers. *The Washington Post*. [washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/06/03/tax-dollars-religious-schools](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/06/03/tax-dollars-religious-schools)

SAVE THE DATE!

We're excited to announce two dynamic events for the 2024–25 school year.

The **National Honor Society Conference** and the **National Student Council Conference** will bring together students and advisers from across the country to forge the future of leadership.

Attendees can expect to leave equipped with valuable resources and new inspiration to make a positive difference in their schools and communities.

January 31–February 2, 2025



Learn more by scanning the QR code. Call for proposals and registration opens this month!



A NEW PLAYBOOK FOR WOMEN IN EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

FOLLOWING THE LARGE number of resignations among school leaders in the wake of the pandemic, the nation missed the opportunity to address the lack of female leaders in an overwhelmingly female workforce, according to Women Leading Ed. “The problem is not a lack of female talent,” says the group, which is a network of district and state education leaders. “It’s that women face both systemic and informal obstacles to advancement that seldom impede—and in some cases, advantage—many male leaders.” The organization has put together a playbook of strategies to transform the education leadership ladder and address those obstacles to advancement, which include:

- Discrimination
- An absence of family-friendly policies and leave practices
- Biased leadership pipelines
- Pay inequities
- Prejudicial recruitment and hiring processes

Read the playbook at bit.ly/3Ju2mDk.



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AMID THE U.S. IMMIGRATION DEBATE

AT A TIME of divisive debate in our country about immigration, Todd Quarnberg, the principal of Herriman High School in Herriman, UT, says we can't forget the essential need for compassion. Three years ago, his school received hundreds of refugees from South America over six months, which left the school without the resources or staff to manage the increased needs. However, he says, “my job is to help students see a glimpse of what the future holds for them. I also help them determine and manage the tools they will need to navigate that future. Our students who are refugees didn't have a choice in where they live.” Quarnberg adds that his dedication to students has nothing to do with politics. “I don't want to talk about how politically red or blue I am,” he says. “I will only say that I take great pride in the Red, White, and Blue. Humanity is worth the fight. My commitment is unwavering to refugee students and to all those in dire need of basic human kindness.” Read more at bit.ly/49PdNjG.

TUTORING INCREASES STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN D.C. SCHOOLS

RESEARCH ON HIGH-IMPACT tutoring programs in Washington, D.C., schools shows that students who participated in the tutoring were less likely to be absent from school on those days. The study by the National Student Support Accelerator at Stanford University shows the promise of tutoring, which has been a common strategy for dealing with pandemic-related learning losses. The research found that absences were reduced by almost 7% among students on days when tutoring was scheduled, which translates into attending 2.3 more days of school over the course of the year. The impact was even higher for middle school students and for students who had missed more than 30% of school days the previous year. Read more at bit.ly/3UsrjWi.



MANY HIGH SCHOOLS OFFER LIMITED CIVICS-FOCUSED EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

PUBLIC EDUCATION PLAYS a critical role in preparing youth to participate in our democracy. The Brookings Institution looks at one “proven practice” to increase civic development among students: participation in extracurricular activities (such as debate teams, student government, and Model United Nations). Among the findings:

- Most U.S. high schools (eight in 10) offer students the opportunity to participate in student government. However, other civics-focused extracurricular offerings are less common.
- High-poverty high schools are less likely than low-poverty high schools to offer a range of civics-focused extracurricular activities.
- Not only do many students lack access to diverse civics-related extracurricular activities, but access is also highly unequal.

Read more at bit.ly/3UeiZYU.

MY TIME AS AN NASSP AMBASSADOR

KATE WILLIAMS | FORMER PRINCIPAL

WHEN I APPLIED to be an NASSP ambassador last year, I was focused on what I could contribute to the group and on being fully committed to the experience. I knew there would be regular meetings over many months, and I wanted to make sure that I arranged my schedule to participate, which, as all principals know, is sometimes quite the feat. I knew to expect focused sessions where I'd collaborate with other ambassadors to help NASSP design professional learning experiences that were meaningful to

the membership. What I didn't anticipate is all that I would get out of the experience and how incredibly meaningful it would turn out to be. Here are five ways being an ambassador helped me grow as a leader.

1. It challenged me to rise to a new professional level.

In our very first meeting, I realized right away that I was surrounded by hard-working, intelligent, capable individuals who were at the top of their game. They



Kate Williams, back row at left, with ninth graders at Cordova Jr/Sr High School last school year.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATE WILLIAMS

offered thoughtful commentary and brought diverse and rich perspectives to the conversation. And they were quick on their feet. You might be used to being top dog in your school. Get ready to be with an entire pack of top dogs. The benefit? You're challenged to rise to the very high level of everyone in the group. And everyone knows that without a challenge, you cannot grow.

2. It gave me the chance to make my school board and community proud. As principal, I provide a monthly report to our school board, and I included my selection as an NASSP ambassador as an item of note. I was proud of having been selected as one of 10 principals and five assistant principals in my ambassador group from across the nation, but I didn't stop to think that the school board, superintendent, and staff would also be proud of me. One commented that it was a "feather in the cap" of the school district to have our school represented in this way on the national stage. Those moments don't come along very often in the principalship, and I soaked it in. Those feelings and that support can get you through the tough times.

3. It offered the opportunity to meet great school leaders from across the country. As a rural school principal, the isolation of being a single-site administrator is real, and there's little you can do about it day to day. Being an ambassador gave me the opportunity to connect with other principals experiencing the same challenges and successes, whether they were in Hawaii or Kansas. Our meetings meant that we established professional connections that have grown into professional friendships. It's an exchange of information on a whole other level.

4. It made me appreciate the work that goes into our professional association. Being an ambassador has given me insight into (and respect for) the work that goes into our professional association. I've been a member of NASSP for seven years, from the very first year I became a principal. I looked forward to

reading *Principal Leadership* every month and attending NASSP's annual conference was a goal of mine. Being an ambassador gave me the courage to successfully advocate to our superintendent and school board to attend NASSP's annual conference in Denver last summer. I knew I'd have to go alone as a single-site administrator, but I was so motivated to meet the other ambassadors and NASSP staff in person after months of seeing each other virtually that my apprehension melted away. And I'm so glad I did.

That first morning, I headed downstairs in the hotel to grab coffee at what can only be described as an ungodly hour, expecting to be the one person awake. I was shocked to see the lobby buzzing with excitement and the line for espresso snaking around the escalators. At every other out-of-town meeting I'd been to, I was the only early bird—the one who wanted to get up and be prepared and not be late. Here, I was surrounded by people of the same mind and habits. As I chatted in line, it occurred to me, "These are my people—my tribe." We were all middle and high school principals. We were all used to being up bright and early—often the first ones in our buildings—and we were all ready to squeeze everything we could out of this national conference.

Another principal told me that attending the NASSP summer conference was life changing for her professionally, and she was absolutely correct. I'm so proud of the work we did as ambassadors to identify the most pressing concerns facing principals and review session proposals for the 2024 UNITED conference in Nashville with those concerns in mind. Before this experience, I really had no idea all that went on behind the scenes. The conference is first-rate because there are first-rate people working on it all year long.

5. It gave me the push I needed. Collaborating with principals from all over the country made me reconsider what was in my own backyard. In my first year as principal, I would reach out to other principals in the same region of Alaska or those in similar-sized coastal communities whenever I had an urgent problem and wasn't sure how to approach it. It was always helpful and would point me

“Being an ambassador gave me the opportunity to connect with other principals experiencing the same challenges and successes, whether they were in Hawaii or Kansas.”

in the right direction—maybe the direction I was already headed or maybe something entirely different.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped doing that. After five years in the principalship, I finally felt like I knew what I was doing. Every crisis became some variation of a previous crisis that I'd successfully dealt with. So, I didn't feel the same sense of helplessness or urgency that pushed me to reach out to others. I had come to the point in my journey where I needed to reach out to other principals, not because I couldn't do it without them but because it would make me a better principal if I did.

When I was struggling with the curriculum review process and course credit by exam last school year, I contacted a curriculum coordinator in Fairbanks at a huge high school, wanting to find out how they dealt with the same issues. We ended up in an hour-long conversation, sharing stories that solidified just how connected all people are who work in public schools. We know the challenges, and we appreciate when someone else recognizes them and—even more importantly—can help us to do better. I found myself on the receiving end of those calls with a principal and superintendent from a nearby school who were curious about our innovative four-day school week with the fifth day focused on tutorials and a Multi-Tiered System of Supports.

Instead of being nervous or downplaying our success, I was able to recognize the value of our experience for others. I found myself becoming an ambassador for the four-day school week, for our forward-thinking dress code proposed by students, for all of the things that make

our school an incredible place to be. NASSP had stirred something in me with the ambassador initiative.

Every principal is an ambassador, every school its own nation, with its own culture and traditions. I was able to embrace and embody the role of ambassador in all areas of my professional life. Last spring, Cordova Jr/Sr High School was ranked the number one high school in Alaska by *U.S. News & World Report*, and you can bet I've been the best ambassador I can be for our students, staff, and community.

Being an NASSP ambassador expanded my horizons in the best possible way and made me further appreciate the network of principals there for us, made up of us.

I encourage you to tap into it whenever you're ready. 🚀

Kate Williams served as the principal of Cordova Jr/Sr High School in Cordova, AK, for seven years and is a former NASSP ambassador. Kate Williams served as the principal of Cordova Jr/Sr High School in Cordova, AK, for seven years and is a former NASSP ambassador.

Learn more about NASSP's
Ambassador Program at
nassp.org/ambassadors.



How Many **SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS** Will Your School Have?



2025 **NHS SCHOLARSHIP**

The National Honor Society (NHS) will award over **\$2 million in scholarships** to 600 deserving high school seniors to support their higher learning and leadership goals and provide national recognition and prestige to their schools. Top 25 finalists receive an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., and \$5,625. Four Pillar Award winners get an additional \$5,000, and the national winner receives \$25,000.

Applications open **September 16** and close **November 26**.



LEARN MORE
[nationalhonorsociety.org/
scholarship25](https://nationalhonorsociety.org/scholarship25)



NEW **NASC SCHOLARSHIP**

The National Association of Student Councils (NASC) is thrilled to introduce the new **NASC Scholarship**, awarding **\$100,000** to high school juniors and seniors and providing national recognition for their exemplary leadership and contributions to their school communities. Seventy-five finalists will be awarded \$1,000, and five national winners will receive \$5,000 to support their higher education and leadership aspirations.

Applications open **September 24** and close **December 4**.



LEARN MORE
natstuco.org/scholarship25

Help Your Students Win College Funding & National Recognition
ENCOURAGE YOUR STUDENTS TO APPLY

Student Centered

ELEVATING STUDENT VOICE THROUGH NATIONAL STUDENT COUNCIL


AS THE NATION wrestles with critical issues from the future of education to democracy itself, student voices have been left out of the conversation—until now. In May, NASSP held its first election for the newly created National Student Council. The 10 students elected to the council will advocate on behalf of millions of their peers regarding federal policies that directly shape their educational experiences. NASSP's National Association of Student Councils (NASC) will administer the council. "I am ecstatic to have the privilege to represent the hearts of student leaders nationwide; it's an honor that I will not take lightly," says Anjali Verma, president of the National Student Council and a high school junior in West Chester, PA.

A National Stage

For too long, student perspectives have been overlooked in decision-making processes that directly affect students' lives and futures. A recent report, "The State of Kids and Families in America 2024," found that nearly two-thirds of 12- to 17-year-olds felt elected officials did not reflect the needs and experiences of young people. A 2022 NASSP survey found that only 11% of students report their opinion is represented "a great deal" at the federal level.

The National Student Council aims to change that by ensuring student insights drive meaningful reforms. "We are thrilled to welcome these exceptional student leaders to the National Student Council," says Ronn Nozoe, CEO of NASSP. "By collaborating directly with these student representatives, we can ensure that student insights drive meaningful reforms that truly address their needs and priorities."

A Brighter Future for Student Representation

With the formation of the National Student Council, students now have a powerful voice in shaping the policies that impact their educational journeys. As these exceptional leaders take on their roles, they are poised to drive positive change and ensure that student perspectives are at the forefront of national conversations on education. 

Voices From the Council

Here's what council members say about the chance to amplify student voices on a national scale:

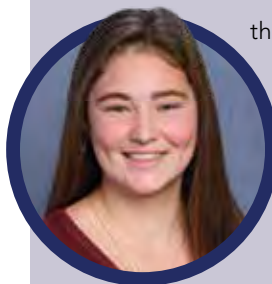
“Being the first student from West Virginia to serve on the NSC is a huge responsibility, but I am ready to take on the task. I am honored to be serving and can't wait to start this journey with my fellow officers and NASC!”

—Jamyson Posey



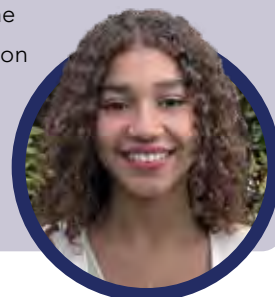
“Connection and collaboration are what truly grows student leaders across the country. I can't imagine a better organization to form those connections than the National Student Council, and I can't think of a better group than this collection of talented officers. I'm honored to be among them, and eager to start implementing our collective goals.”

—Paige Goble



“I am beyond thrilled to join the National Student Council and represent student voices from across the country! This opportunity is an extreme honor that will allow us to bring our unique perspectives to the forefront, ensuring that the decisions impacting our education are truly reflective of our needs and experiences.”

—Khadija Sissoko



Meet the Elected Council Members

The 2024–25 National Student Council Officers are:



President **Anjali Verma** is a junior at Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School in West Chester, PA.



Vice President of Service **Jacqueline Rogers** is a junior at Jefferson City High School in Jefferson City, MO.



Vice President of Leadership Development **Kaylyn Woods** is a sophomore at William M. Davies Career & Technical High School in Lincoln, RI.



Vice President of Membership **Paige Goble** is a sophomore at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Burke, VA.



Vice President of Communications **Jamyson Posey** is a sophomore at Fairmont Senior High School in Fairmont, WV.



Secretary **Khadija Sissoko** is a junior at Ocean Lakes High School in Virginia Beach, VA.



Junior Vice President of Leadership Development **Jocelyn Ridenour** is a seventh grader at Margaret Buerkle Middle School in St. Louis, MO.



Junior Vice President of Service **Evan Rawls** is a seventh grader at John P. Freeman Optional School in Memphis, TN.



Junior Vice President of Membership **Isabella Schmit** is a seventh grader at Tuloso-Midway Middle School in Corpus Christi, TX. (For more on Schmit's path to the National Student Council, see page 16.)



Junior Vice President of Communications **Jaycee Lang** is a sixth grader at Mexia Junior High in Mexia, TX.

Add your school to the National Association of Student Councils:
natstuco.org/join.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KHADIJA SISSOKO
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Student Centered



Angela Steagall is the student council adviser at Tuloso-Midway Middle School.

A CAREER HIGHLIGHT

ANGELA STEAGALL | ADVISER

WHEN I MOVED from being a high school English teacher to becoming the librarian at a middle school—and serving as a student council adviser at both levels—it was a big adjustment for me. Middle school kids are so different. They don't always follow through on the things you would like them to, for instance. And they are far less independent than high schoolers.

One thing I discovered is that student council is a great way to engage my students here at Tuloso-Midway Middle School in Corpus Christi, TX. Getting involved in student council helps them develop as leaders and start thinking more about how they can become agents for change. There's no better example of that than Isabella Schmit, who was recently elected junior vice president

of membership for the newly created National Student Council.

Isabella came to our school in sixth grade after spending two years learning online at home and not meeting many other students. When she heard my announcement about student council, she decided to give it a try because she wanted to get involved in a school activity. Isabella was definitely a leader from the get-go. In the two years she has served as a grade-level representative, she's helped other students learn what it means to be a leader, too. And she is such a great communicator. We have a core group of about 15 kids that have a stick-to-itiveness that I've never seen in another group of students. They show up, and they always do what needs to be done.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANGELA STEAGALL

When I heard about the new National Student Council, I encouraged Isabella and two of my other top students—all good friends—to apply. They made me promise to wait to see the results until we could all be together. When I received the email announcement, I gathered the three students together. With them all standing behind me in anticipation, I opened the email; they erupted in cheers when they saw that Isabella was elected. It was like they had won the Super Bowl. And it was amazing because the two girls who didn't win were also so happy for her. They were happy for each other, and that made me happy.

They weren't the only ones who were excited. This was the biggest thrill of my 33-year career. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

I'm so glad I encouraged Isabella and her classmates to apply. Unlike in high school, where students are worried

about class rank and college, middle school students are not yet as focused on those aspects of school. If we as middle school educators and advisers have students with natural leadership qualities, we must find opportunities for them to lead and to grow. These are the young people who can be absolute world changers if they have those chances, but they aren't necessarily going to know where to find those things, and their parents may not know either.

I know Isabella is very excited about this new position. It will give her the ability not only to serve on a national group but to help make some changes that will benefit lots of other students across the county. I'm incredibly proud of her. 🇺🇸

Angela Steagall is the librarian and student council adviser at Tuloso-Midway Middle School in Corpus Christi, TX.



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www.TheSensoryPath.com

TAKING MY SEAT AT THE TABLE

CRYSTAL MURFF THORPE | DIRECTOR OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

SERVING AS A middle school principal for 16 long years feels like a lifetime, but I have absolutely loved every bit of it. As a matter of fact, I often joke with people that when I retire, I'm going to write a book titled, *Confessions of a Middle School Principal: You Can't Make This Stuff Up*. I have experienced everything a principal can from the most joyful moments to times that still make me cry just thinking about them.

The principalship is one of the most misunderstood roles, and some say the loneliest. We are buffers between our central office administrators, our staff, and community. We are expected to know everything—the curriculum in all subjects, instructional best practices, new state laws and statutes, and anything new and upcoming in education, which happens all too quickly. We must balance politics with school decisions while acting as role models. Those who have been principals know what I am talking about. At times, we can become comfortable doing the mundane principal work as we have always done. But I challenge you to seek more. I myself did a few years ago, when I stepped out of my comfort zone and discovered a whole other world to school leadership that I was missing out on.

In 2021, I was named the Indiana Principal of the Year, and that same year, I began serving on the executive committee of my state's principal association, the Indiana Association of School Principals (IASP). Through those experiences, I found my voice; I realized I had something to say. But that wasn't always the case. Like many of my colleagues, my focus had been on my day-to-day job responsibilities: providing professional development, inspiring staff, and teaching students. I sat on the sidelines and watched things happen in education not realizing that I, too, can have influence.

I have always been a member of IASP, even as an assistant principal. Over the years, I have attended and facilitated conferences and participated in professional development and seminars for the organization, but I was not fully invested. In 2021, IASP sought a middle school principal to serve on the executive committee. The job entailed first serving as a vice president, then president

elect, then president, and eventually past president. I thought long and hard before I applied, due to the four-year commitment, the numerous meetings, and the requirement to attend both local and national conferences.

However, I understood the assignment as I am a lifelong learner, a service-oriented person, and someone who is deeply committed to school leadership, all of which align with the mission of the organization. After discussing the role with my family and school community, both of whom wholeheartedly supported me, I applied, interviewed, and was offered the position of vice president. I took my seat at the table.

Advocating for Our Profession

Last school year, I served as IASP president. In that role, I was a conference facilitator and presenter at both our assistant principal and principal conferences, where I met national presenters, such as Robyn R. Jackson, Jimmy Casas, and Jon Gordon to name a few. I have attended many district meetings throughout my state to learn about the concerns of our members. Through IASP, I have presented topics based upon the School Leadership Paradigm to the Indiana New Administrator Leadership Institute, the state's Aspiring Principals and Emerging Leaders programs, and the Metropolitan School District of Warren Township and South Bend LEAD programs.

I am on the forefront of preparing and shaping school leaders, which brings me immense joy. IASP supports the Principal-for-a-Day program, and this past school year, I invited Indiana Speaker of the House Todd Huston to my school, and I was able to share with him my thoughts on cell phones in schools, truancy/attendance concerns, and changing math curriculum. I am on the State Secretary of Education's Advisory Council, and I meet with our Secretary of Education, Katie Jenner, to discuss high school re-design, the science of reading, and middle school-credited courses. We collaborate to find solutions on how we can support teachers, principals, and schools.

The year I became president, NASSP CEO Ronn Nozoe and Immediate Past President Aaron Huff (my Indiana friend) attended my celebration. It doesn't get much

“I sat on the sidelines and watched things happen in education not realizing that I, too, can have influence.”

better than that. Their influence is immense, and I was honored they came to celebrate with me.

I have also used my platform to share my personal stories. My articles, “Protecting our Profession,” and “Leading While Black,” have been published in this magazine, and my post about mom guilt was published on the *School of Thought Blog*. *Education Week* also published my articles, “Why One Principal Is Asking Her Staff to Do Less” and “When Women Hold Each Other Back: A Call to Action for Female Principals.” I have received emails and letters from people who shared how my words resonated with them. I have been asked to present on a national level about the topics that I write about, invited to speak on a podcast, and asked to participate in writing a book. This has all been a dream come true.

I have also had the pleasure of working at the national level with NASSP. Last school year, NASSP Board Member Ben Feeney and I facilitated the Aspiring Principals Network to work with future leaders from around the country. I also had the honor of facilitating at the Ignite Conference in July 2023 in Denver. I served on the NASSP Nominating Committee and worked with amazing educators such as NASSP Board Members Beth Houf and Marcus Belin who I have learned so much from and consider lifelong friends.

Advocating with NASSP to change education policy has been especially meaningful. For the past three years, I have met Indiana legislators on Capitol Hill during the National School Leaders Advocacy Conference, sharing the joint NASSP and NAESP federal legislative agenda. There is nothing like speaking to lawmakers and sharing our stories on the teacher shortage, student and staff mental health issues, school safety, and the need for additional funding for professional development. As advocates, we show that we are a united front fighting for our profession.

One year while at a conference in Washington D.C., I had the honor of meeting U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona at the Department of Education, where principals and National Honor Society student leaders from around the country worked together on activating



As a principal, Crystal Murff Thorpe found advocating for the profession incredibly rewarding.

student agency and voice. When given the opportunity, our students can do amazing things.

Get Involved

Principals are powerful. The impact we have can be transformational when we take advantage of the opportunities that both the local and national organizations provide. My principal experiences and influence extend well beyond my building, and it has been so rewarding. I urge you not to be a bystander when you have so many opportunities to positively impact our profession.

Education needs you. I challenge you to stay involved, keep your memberships current, attend conferences, and consider how you can elevate your own voice. Stay connected with like-minded, visionary school principals. I am a much better leader now than I ever was. Our job is not easy, but it is always better when we work together. So, bring your seat, stool, rocking chair, bench, recliner, or whatever you have to the table. There is room for all of us. 🪑

Crystal Murff Thorpe, PhD, is the director of teaching and learning for grades 6–8 at the Metropolitan School District of Washington Township in Indianapolis, IN. She is the former principal of Fishers Junior High School in Fishers, IN, and the past president of the Indiana Association of School Principals.

A CASE FOR INCLUDING MUSIC EDUCATORS IN CURRICULUM PLANNING

GEREON METHNER | PRINCIPAL
WILLIAM BRANDT | TEACHER

FOR DECADES NOW, music education has been considered an “extracurricular,” “elective,” or “encore” subject in schools. While most principals would agree that music education contributes to student growth as part of a well-rounded, holistic education, music educators often feel that they play second fiddle to their English, math, social studies, and science peers. The focus on state test scores in reading and math further complicates this relationship and can have an impact on professional development resource allocation. Simply put, administrators can feel pressure to focus on the “core” at the expense of non-core classes.

Here at Freedom Middle School in Freedom, WI, a rural, agricultural area between Green Bay and Appleton, we have incorporated music instruction and related professional development into our school, so it is treated

the same as the core subjects. We’re a small district with about 1,600 students in grades K–12, 900 of them in a combined middle and high school building.

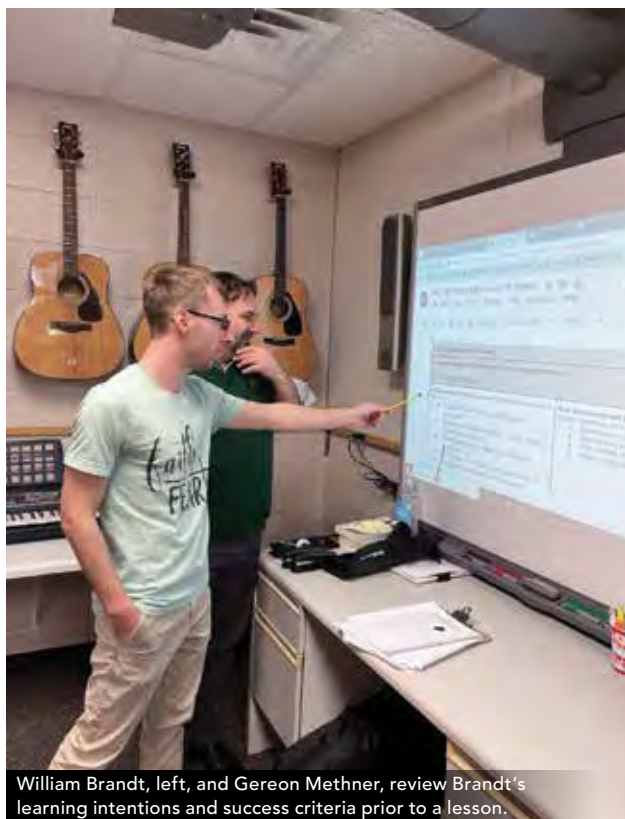
We are proud of the music courses we offer our middle school students, especially an option called “Exploring Music” for students who don’t want to participate in the traditional band and choir options. As the name implies, the students explore lots of different instruments, including percussion, strings, and keyboards, and they also learn about music culture, history, and theory. The idea is to give students the skills to not only appreciate music in the real world but also to have the musical skills to join our band or choir in high school if they choose.

Music Teachers Make the Secret Sauce

Our middle and high school have recently taken on the task of building unit plans aligned to the Wisconsin State Standards, along with adopting what’s known as the Teacher Clarity model of instruction. We strongly believe that teachers in all content areas, including music education, should be involved in this process. One challenge is that assessment and growth in music can be challenging to quantify. This is even more difficult for administrators without a music background.

I (Gereon) was an elective teacher in world languages, and I’m also a music enthusiast. I made it a priority to include elective courses into the planning because I understand just how much they contribute to the overall growth and development of the students. As William puts it: “History has shown that music teachers for the past 150 years in American education have always kind of been wizards. Principals don’t necessarily know what we do, but they know that we do it and we get results. We make the secret sauce.”

We had a lot of conversations about how to apply the Teacher Clarity model in the music setting. The model includes more explicit, written reference to the day’s learning intentions, success criteria, clear expectations, and classroom discussion about those intentions in order



William Brandt, left, and Gereon Methner, review Brandt's learning intentions and success criteria prior to a lesson.



Students play drums in the “Exploring Music” course at Freedom Middle School.

“We strongly believe that teachers in all content areas, including music education, should be involved in this process. One challenge is that assessment and growth in music can be challenging to quantify.”

to engage the teacher and students more deliberately. We wanted to compare how music students in grades six through eight responded to the model, so they were taught for three weeks with more traditional methods, then three weeks with the Teacher Clarity approach. Afterward, students were surveyed about how they felt about the two approaches.

Students Feel More Successful

The biggest difference is that students felt more successful when the learning intentions and success criteria were used. They didn’t necessarily have better scores on assessments, but their self-efficacy was higher. Basically, they felt better about being in the class. This increased sense of self-confidence is important for musicians. It’s the same as with athletes: If they have self-confidence, and they know what’s going on and why, they are going to perform better. It certainly gives us a lot to think about with the Teacher Clarity model and how it might apply to all content areas.

Music educators are a shining example of multi-tiered support for students: the way they conduct a group,

the way they provide individualized instruction, and the way they double down with kids who need more help to prepare for a performance. Regular education teachers can benefit from the contributions of music educators and their understanding of how students learn and grow.

That’s why this project has been so exciting. It brought together a principal and a music instructor to engage regularly in deep conversations about curriculum and instruction in the music setting, which has implications across all subjects. Music educators and other elective teachers can, and should, be included in curriculum and instruction work. Their voice adds to the professional discussion around teaching and learning. In addition to improving instructional outcomes, this work presents a model for music educators and their peers in other subject areas to engage with their principals around mastery of standards. 🎵

Gereon Methner, EdD, is the principal of Freedom Middle School in Freedom, WI. **William Brandt** is a music teacher at Freedom Middle School and the choir director at Freedom High School.

Empowering School Leaders to Shape the Future



33,345
STUDENT
PROGRAM ADVISERS

OVER **\$2M** AWARDED
TO STUDENTS NATIONWIDE

600
NATIONAL
HONOR SOCIETY
SCHOLARSHIP
RECIPIENTS

500
NATIONAL JUNIOR
HONOR SOCIETY
AWARD
RECIPIENTS



OVER

\$1.3 MILLION

AWARDED TO NASSP IN THE FORM
OF GRANTS TO FUND PROGRAMS AND
SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS



132K+
SOCIAL MEDIA
FOLLOWERS ACROSS
MULTIPLE PLATFORMS



108
YEARS OLD
(FOUNDED IN 1916)

Year-round professional development and leadership events for school leaders, emerging school leaders, and student leaders both in person and virtually:

Top events:

- National Student Council Conference
- National Honor Society Conference
- National Education Leadership Awards
- UNITED: The National Conference on School Leadership
- National School Leaders Advocacy Conference





12 TOTAL NUMBER OF LEADERSHIP NETWORKS



- Assistant Principals Network
- LGBTQ+ School Leaders Network
- Middle School Leaders Network
- NASSP Assistant Principal of the Year Network
- NASSP Principal of the Year Network
- New Principals Network
- Rural School Leaders Network
- School Leaders of Color Network
- Student Network on Mental Health
- Women in School Leadership Network
- Urban School Leaders Network
- Aspiring School Leaders Network

OVER
2,000 PARTICIPANTS

ADVOCACY IN 2023

OVER
4,900

MESSAGES SENT TO
FEDERAL LAW MAKERS

and

325+

MEETINGS WERE HELD IN PERSON
WITH REPRESENTATIVES AND
SENATORS



NASSP'S ADVOCACY TEAM SUPPORTED AND PROVIDED POLICY EXPERTISE TO:

50

STATE ASSOCIATIONS
AND/OR AFFILIATES

overseeing a total of

4,188

BILLS INTRODUCED IN 50 STATES,
WASHINGTON, D.C., AND 3 OF 5
TERRITORIES



16,341

TOTAL NUMBER OF
NASSP MEMBERS



17,459

NATIONAL
HONOR SOCIETY CHAPTERS



8,040

NATIONAL JUNIOR
HONOR SOCIETY CHAPTERS



1,742

NATIONAL ELEMENTARY
HONOR SOCIETY CHAPTERS



3,851

NATIONAL STUDENT COUNCILS



ISTOCK.COM/SANCHESNETI

WIN THE DAY!

Returning joy to our profession

TOM WEBB | PRINCIPAL

Are S.M.A.R.T. goals stealing the joy from the profession you have dedicated your career to? I know this sounds crazy because as leaders we have been trained to write Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound goals with benchmarks and lead our staff toward meeting them. While setting a target and moving your school to a better place is the role of the principal, I want to share a formula with you that will accomplish the same outcome but enhance the way you lead and return joy to our profession. What is this formula?

Leadership + Habits = Results

A focus on combining leadership with habits will reignite your mindset and fuel sustainable improvement, leading to results.

I have been in school administration for 17 years, and for 12 of those I have served as principal of Cartersville Intermediate School. I spent my early years in administration searching for the magic pixie dust, silver bullet, and best strategy to elevate learning and make the job of my teachers more efficient and enjoyable. The truth is that the holy grail of educational strategies does not exist. As you know, this job becomes more and more challenging each year, and I would contend that it is because we are focused on goals and outcomes versus processes and results.



Principal Tom Webb with students at Carterville Intermediate School. Webb says that the formula Leadership + Habits = Results can return joy to the profession.

“Look for interactions that reinforce the values of your school, write the person a note providing positive reinforcement, and give it to them.”

Here are the three problems I see with S.M.A.R.T. goals:

Problem #1. All winners and losers have the same goals. Every Olympian wants to win the gold medal. Only a system of continuous, small improvements becomes the difference maker for the person who stands atop the podium and weeps to their national anthem.

Problem #2. Achieving a goal is only a momentary win. Imagine telling your child to clean their messy room and they do. Yay, home team for the win! If the same habits continue that led to the messy room, in less than a week's time, you will be having the same conversation.

Problem #3. Goals restrict happiness. Why? Because happiness is linked to your desires. Goals create an either/or conflict—either you achieve and are happy or fail and

are disappointed. The purpose of setting goals is to win the game as they are focused on outcomes. The purpose of forming habits is to continuously play the game and win the day.

Applying the Formula

To apply the formula I mentioned earlier and ensure you reignite the joy within our profession, I suggest following three simple steps.

Step 1. Recognize that we are all leaders. Anyone with the ability to influence another person's actions, desires, or feelings is a leader. Leaders also have the ability to cast a vision and provide resources and support to those who follow them. Each follower is subconsciously asking themselves, "Do I trust my leader? Do they care about me?"

As a leader, if you want all your staff to answer yes to both questions and be ready to move the school to a better place when needed, open your calendar app and create a new calendar titled, "Blessings," then listen. As you move throughout your day, you will hear staff talking about things

in their lives that are meaningful to them. They might ask for a sick day as they are getting some health tests run. They may be taking a personal day to take their oldest child to college. They may have recently lost a pet, or you may learn that their husband recently got a promotion.

When you hear about these life events, take 10 seconds and add it to your blessings calendar and set a reminder. When the reminder goes off, reach out with a text and send some positive vibes for good test results, ask about the college visit, show empathy over the loss of a pet, or ask about the new job. As leaders, we are not superhuman and cannot remember everything, but this system of leadership will not only support your staff but will make you feel blessed by ensuring your staff knows they can trust you and you care about them.

Step 2. Strengthen the daily habits of those you lead.

Long ago, I realized that my time, effort, and focus were the three variables that could transform my school. As leaders, if we all put in the same time and give 100% effort, the only differentiating factor is what we are focused on. Habits are critical for sustainable improvement. They are built through consistency. Success becomes the product of our daily habits. Every new habit starts with a seed of change. Every day, a person is challenged to continue to water this seed or let it die. No one is perfect, so if you don't water today, be sure to water tomorrow.

Focusing on good habits will ensure you win the day. To create a new habit, simply identify an area within your school you'd like to improve and select a task that will lead to your desired result that you can accomplish in five minutes. For example, if you want to elevate the climate of your school and how people feel about the work, take a Post-it note with you each time you leave the office. Look for interactions that reinforce the values of your school, write the person a note providing positive reinforcement, and give it to them. You will spread joy, elevate the climate within your building, and bless yourself in the process.

Step 3. Win the day and results will come. As educators, we excel at setting goals and staying busy with activities. We can have 100 irons in the fire at the same time and manage them. In the end, we are doing just that—managing. We need to simply pull one iron out of the fire and put it to work so we can accomplish something. Ultimately, these small changes and small wins lead to remarkable results.

Focusing on results really comes down to activity versus accomplishment. When you have 15 minutes before your next meeting or are planning for an upcoming 60-minute team leader meeting, prioritize what you can accomplish in the time allowed. Forget the busy work and only focus your time and energy on tasks that can be accomplished. Many times, this approach forces leaders to make decisions—the secret sauce that nurtures the growth of our schools. Each time you accomplish something you win. Each time your team accomplishes something you win. Each time your school accomplishes something you win. Winning is contagious and it fuels motivation and inspiration to continue this journey.

Choosing Joy

It is a fact that as leaders, we can choose our mindset. We can choose joy. So, what happens when “joy stealers” attack and you get a difficult parent email or visit the first five minutes of your day? What happens when your new math series doesn't arrive at the start of school? What happens when you get the news that your middle child has Type 1 diabetes? When life attacks, hard or soft, you need some armor to protect yourself. Strengthen your armor and maintain your inner joy when life or work attacks by telling yourself one of the following:

1. I will live in the present.
2. I will choose my attitude.
3. I will only focus on what's in my control.

Focusing on things that have happened in the past only sucks the energy out of you. They cause frustration, anger, and bitterness. The future can cause you to feel anxious or fearful and we cannot be controlled by things that haven't happened yet. Living in the present is the only place you can control and by choosing your attitude in this space, you can maintain your joy.

When your leadership influences the habits of your staff and leads to results, you win the day. Win the day, and you'll win the week. Routinely win the week and you'll see results you've only dreamed of. Using the formula Leadership + Habits = Results will not only help you to win the day, but it is the secret to building your school's super system that elevates learning and returns joy to our work. 🎯

Tom Webb, EdD, is the principal of Carterville Intermediate School in Carterville, IL. He is also an educational speaker and leadership coach. Learn more at boomleader.com.

ROUNDTABLE: EXPERIENCING JOY IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP



TODD DAIN
Principal, Shawnee
Mission South
High School

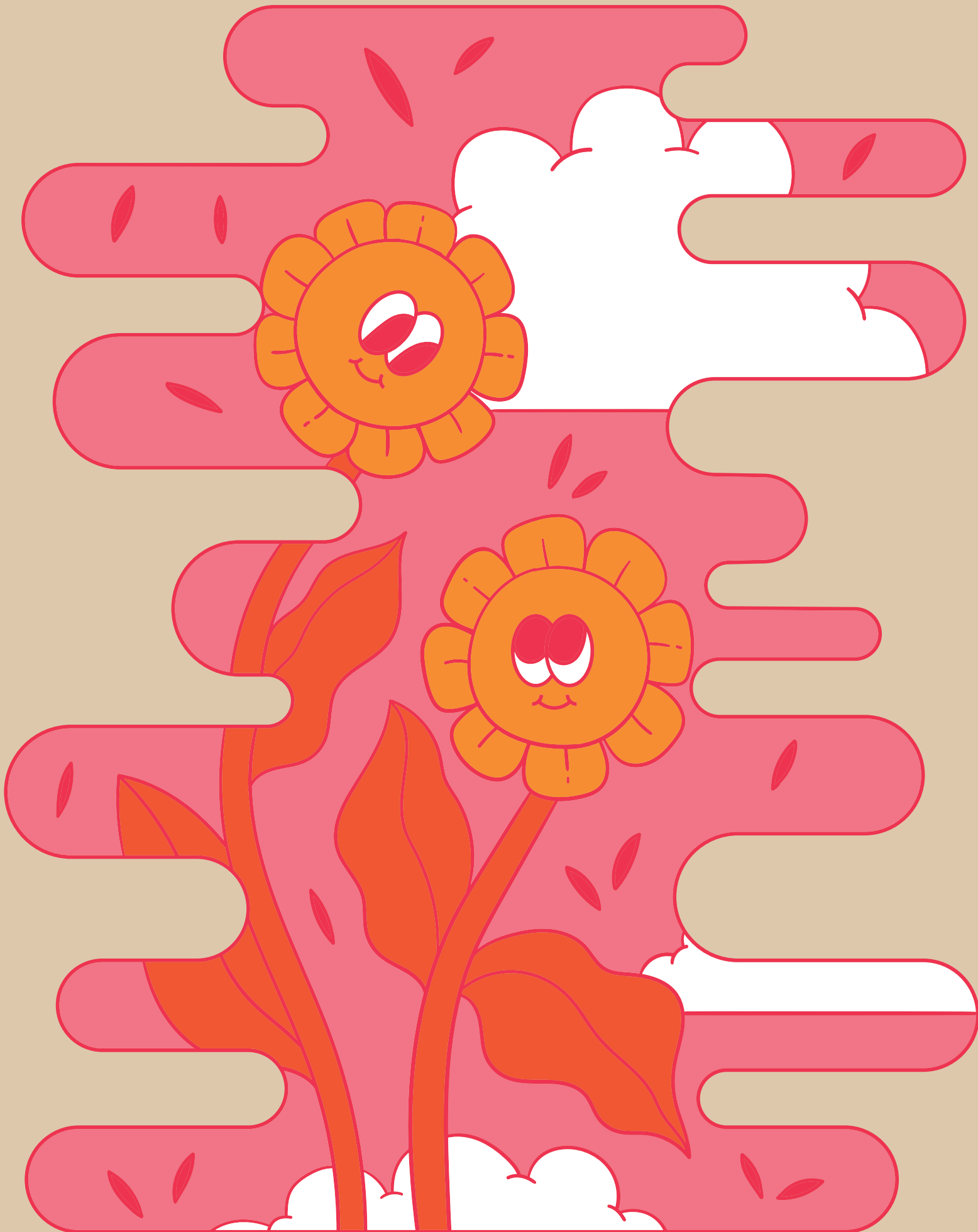


DENISHA MOODLEY
Principal, Pecos
Middle School



**KIMBERLY
WINTERBOTTOM**
Principal, Arundel
High School

In the challenging yet incredibly rewarding world of school leadership, it's important to find joy in the work, not just for your students and staff but for yourself. To learn what makes school leaders joyful and how they share joy with their school communities, *Principal Leadership* contacted Todd Dain, EdD, the principal of Shawnee Mission South High School in Overland Park, KS, and the 2023 Kansas Principal of the Year; Denisha Moodley, EdD, the principal of Pecos Middle School in Pecos, NM, and the 2023 New Mexico Principal of the Year; and Kimberly Winterbottom, the principal of Arundel High School in Glen Burnie, MD, and the former principal of Marley Middle School in Glen Burnie, MD, the 2023 Maryland Principal of the Year, and a 2024 National Principal of the Year finalist.





Principal Todd Dain with Ace, holding his "Champion of Culture" award.

Principal Leadership: Does joy play a role in school leadership, and if so, how?

Dain: I would say that joy starts with our "why." For us, our why is our students. We love all students. We show up every day for young people. I relish the opportunity to connect with young people and to see our teachers building those relationships with them. That's where the impact is, and that's what drives me. I've had some opportunities to move on from the building and go to the district level. But I don't want to leave kids because that's what gives me joy.

Winterbottom: Like Todd said, it starts with students. I would also say that right up there with students, we all must work with a dynamic staff, some who are experienced and others who are not. The joy that I find after student success comes from working with staff and especially the teachers and helping them find joy. They're the front lines, working with students daily. I revel in helping them find solutions. Whether it's a teacher who's struggling with classroom

management, whether it's an assistant principal who is struggling with organization, that's where I find a lot of my joy, helping to solve the myriad challenges that occur in any given school day, week, or year.

Moodley: For me, effective leadership needs joy because effective leaders are looking to make dynamic change. When we just view our job as a chore and there isn't joy in it, the likelihood of us taking the initiative to make dynamic change is very low. Effective leaders face challenges and rise above those challenges. Neurologically, we know whenever we experience a challenge or a hardship, our neurons release neurochemicals that cause anxiety and stress. We need to tap into our joy, so those neurochemicals shift to becoming positive ones. That shift causes resilience, another important part of effective leadership.

Principal Leadership: What brings you joy as a school leader?

Winterbottom: That there's always a challenge that presents itself. A leader's role is to work through those challenges and to celebrate the successes. Whether it's checking on a teacher that's had something traumatic going on outside of the building and just letting them know that you're aware and that you're there to support them or whether it's a student who maybe isn't a highflier in one way or the other and letting them know, "Hey, I like your sweatshirt today," and seeing them smile. It starts with us from the top down. We model that. That is a huge part of creating a positive school culture. Because the jobs that we

“I’ve had some opportunities to move on from the building and go to the district level. But I don’t want to leave kids because that’s what gives me joy.”

—Todd Dain





Principal Denisha Moodley, front and center, with students at a Hollywood-themed dance to close out a schoolwide project-based learning unit on the entertainment industry.



“Joy for me is learning about how our work as a team is impacting kids. How we’re sending first-generation students to college. How we’re sending first-generation students out into the real world to become first-time home buyers.”
—Denisha Moodley

do and that the teachers and all staff do in a school building are not easy.

Dain: I appreciate that Kim brought up culture. Seeing students exceed their expectations and fulfill their potential is what brings me joy. At our school, we’ve created a principal’s cabinet. We call them “Culture Keepers” because they really drive the expectations in our building for culture and celebrations. They’ve crafted ideas for celebrating student of the week based on nominations from their peers for acts of kindness. We also have opportunities to celebrate our staff. Those celebrations don’t come from me. They come from other staff members. They select a “Hard Hat Hero” of the week and a monthly teacher “Champion of Culture.” One teacher chooses another teacher to recognize them in front of the staff to talk about how they positively impact our culture. When I see teachers recognizing their peers that’s pure joy.

Moodley: As Todd mentioned, a lot of our joy is rooted in our why. I grew up in post-apartheid South Africa. I saw how an older generation was deprived of education and their quality of life was diminished because of that. I also witnessed the younger generation, my cousins and their kids, take advantage of their right to education and close those gaps that existed, move into sustainable housing and pursue jobs that allowed them to have good health care. So, education is very important to me because of the

impact it has on completely changing lives for the better. In our school, joy for me is learning about how our work as a team is impacting kids. How we’re sending first-generation students to college. How we’re sending first-generation students out into the real world to become first-time home buyers. Two years ago, a former student reached out to say my faculty and staff did an awesome job teaching him. He let us know he was the first male in his family to live past 23 years old. Those cycles that we’re able to break mean a lot to me and bring me a lot of joy.

Principal Leadership: How do you plan to choose joy in your work this school year?

Winterbottom: There’s not a prescription for what we do. There’s research and effective methods to rely on, but every year brings a new set of students, teachers, challenges, obstacles, and successes. That’s the novelty. What’s exciting is seeing the changes and hopefully successes of the students you know from previous years. In our school, I have students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and 99% of them stay with us. They mature, start making better choices, and become more successful academically. I find joy in watching students grow and succeed, and in supporting teachers as they develop their skill set and find their footing. I also want to say a big piece of feeling joyful is in taking care of ourselves. We must realize that everything can’t be job related. We must have outlets, recognize that our self-care is not tied to our job, and find that balance.

“We must realize that everything can’t be job related. We must have outlets, recognize that our self-care is not tied to our job, and find that balance.”

—Kimberly Winterbottom



Dain: We must choose joy every day. And sometimes that’s hard. But connecting with great leaders like Denisha and Kim across the state and across the country can help. Every time I have an opportunity to connect and network and learn from other great leaders, I always gain something, whether it’s a strategy or just encouragement.

Moodley: In recent years, we’ve focused on sharing joy and resources with our students’ families. One of the resources we use is parentguidance.org, which offers many grants for schools. They provide virtual parent coaching for families, which in a small area like ours is very popular because people don’t want to tell their business to our local psychologists. They also have monthly seminars for parents, and they have all types of intercultural and intergenerational activities, which are important for our grandparents who are serving as parents of our students. Our students’ family members live in our isolated rural community, where it can be difficult to engage in joyful activity. There’s no socialization, no recreational opportunities here. Our goal is to seek out sponsors from our community partners and transport our families to surrounding areas like Albuquerque and Santa Fe so they can engage in a bowling night or a social event in the community, so they can experience joy and build resilience and work through their trauma. We have grandparents who still remember being suspended for speaking Spanish in school. We have parents who graduated

in the early 2000s who remember being discriminated against because they were the children of migrant workers. Our efforts are not just to instill joy but to address trauma that exists specifically between our communities and the public education system here in New Mexico.

Principal Leadership: Can you share an especially joyful time in your career as a principal?

Winterbottom: In January, I had an opportunity through NASSP to visit Guatemala on a Lifetouch Memory Mission to help build a school. It was just amazing. We met students, families, principals, and teachers. We discussed similarities and differences in our education systems and experiences. It was life-changing and has impacted my leadership.

Dain: Last December, one of our sister schools in our district had an incident where a white male student used a racial slur and assaulted a black female student in school. It was a tragic situation that impacted our kids. The leader of our school’s Black Student Union came to me and said we need to do something about what happened at that school. His name is Ace. He’s a great kid. He shared how students wanted to share their voices, so we organized an opportunity for them to do a walk out to our football stadium. About 1,600 students attend our school, and that day over 1,200 students walked out to the stadium. The students had made signs and Ace spoke into a microphone and talked about how we need to support everyone and we’re not going to choose hate. He was just so appropriate. After 15 minutes, he announced that it was time for everyone to go back to class. And 1,200 students did an about-face and walked out of the stadium and right back into the classroom. As everyone was walking back into class, Ace gave me this big hug. I told him I was proud of him. He checked his phone, and several news stations were emailing him to interview him. They had parked across the street from our school. He asked if he could talk to them, and I said of course (his mom had signed a media release form earlier in the year). Then he said, “Dr. Dain will you go with me?” and I did. That was maybe one of the best moments for me. Because what could have been a really difficult situation became a great success for all our kids and a great message for our community.

Moodley: About two years ago, we experienced the Hermit’s Peak Fire in New Mexico. I live an hour away from the community I serve, and the fire ended up literally in my backyard. We got a text message around 4 p.m. to



Principal Kimberly Winterbottom, far right, with Marley Middle School staff during “Festive Friday.” Staff can submit ideas for the day, such as wearing Baltimore Orioles gear when the team made the playoffs.


evacuate by 6 p.m. on a Friday. I got home and all the fire evacuation centers in a one-hour radius were already filled. The governor then opened the state parks. That was the only option my family had on such short notice. We moved about an hour and a half away to a state park and set up camp there. When I checked my phone, I was just showered with messages from parents, students, and employees. They wanted to know how they could help. On Monday, when I showed up to school, I noticed so many cars. I was super anxious. I thought something was wrong. But all these parents showed up to bring me just tons of bottled water and canned goods for my family. These are individuals who I know struggle to have those things for themselves. For them to be able to sacrifice that for me, I was just overwhelmed with joy and gratitude.

Principal Leadership: How do you model feeling joyful at school for your students and staff?

Winterbottom: I learned early on as an educator that everything that leaders say and do is heard and observed. A simple example is I used to pass one leader in the hallway 10 times a day and they’d only say hi once. Another leader who I also passed 10 times a day would always say hello every single time. I’m like the latter. Making sure that everyone knows they’re seen and heard is my top priority. On the opposite end of that, we as leaders are not perfect and we make mistakes. We must own up to those, and I think that also equally impacts a positive school culture.

Dain: Enthusiasm is contagious. As leaders, we set the tone for that enthusiasm from day one when we’re welcoming students into the building. I learned a long time ago that there’s leadership by walking around and just being visible. My first year as a principal—10 years ago—students came up to me and asked who I was. When I told them I was the

new principal, they asked what I was doing in the hallway. I explained that I’m in the hallway every passing period. That’s how I do business. They said they’d never seen the principal in the hallway. Just little things like that show your joy in serving your school community.

Moodley: When I was in my second year of teaching in North Carolina, there was a seventh grader at my school who was going through a hard time. I lived near her, and one morning we walked to school together. She had a rough night. There was a program at our school that was supposed to promote joy. Teachers wore an apron with Velcro patches that students could choose to pull off and there would be a funny phrase the teacher would say. For example, if there was an Elvis patch, the teacher would say “Thank you, thank you very much” just like Elvis to lighten the mood. When I walked the student to her classroom, the teacher wearing the apron greeted the student. But the student refused to pick a patch. I knew why but the teacher didn’t. The teacher gave the student a sticker and told her, “We only want positive vibes at this school.” That upset the student even more. At the time, I didn’t know the teacher’s approach was what today we call toxic positivity. That’s where we push joy to a point where we’re forcing kids to ignore or invalidate their trauma and hardship. We know that to be resilient and tap into our joy, we have to acknowledge those hardships. I’m just very intentional about creating authentic opportunities for joy and acknowledging when a student is not in a joyful mood. I am intentional about not forcing them to experience joy but sitting through the process with them, being there for them, saying we’re going to work through this and that I know that what they’re going through is hard. Those authentic interactions can pave the way for establishing a genuine sense of joy for our students. 

OVERLOOKED AND UNDERAPPRECIATED

The principal-student relationship

JAMIE KUDLATS | ASSISTANT PROFESSOR



A few years ago, I spoke with a principal who had recently taken over a low-income, low-performance, high-needs school and who, after a few short years, helped his school realize massive gains in academic and non-academic outcomes. He believed his efforts to build relationships with his students provided the critical foundation for the school's growth. His students and teachers enthusiastically agreed. But when the district came to evaluate his performance, no mention was made of those efforts. Despite a glowing evaluation, he simply said that no one seemed to care, appreciate, or even attempt to understand what it took to build that relational capacity within the school and how integral his connections to students were.

The Relational Nature of Education

Educators have long understood the importance of positive interpersonal relationships in schools. Ask most teachers about relationships, and you'll likely hear enthusiastic accounts of how relationships are the key to ensuring positive student outcomes. Teachers will tell you how their relationships with students build trust and respect. They will say that relationships allow them to know their students more deeply, creating opportunities for more authentic personalization and cultural responsiveness in the classroom. They will say that relationships are the key to learning.

Most of all, though, teachers simply cherish the relational aspects of the job, describing their relationships with students as the most fun, the most meaningful, or the most rewarding part of the job. Unsurprisingly, research consistently reinforces the importance of the teacher-student relationship. It is simply one of the most critical components to improving a host of student outcomes.

Like teachers, most principals consider building and maintaining healthy relationships to be vital and non-negotiable. Unfortunately, while scholars and practitioners have long recognized the value of school leaders' relationships, leadership literature—and often evaluations of leadership effectiveness—largely minimizes or compartmentalizes that value.

Our fixation on standards and accountability when talking about principal effectiveness has relegated relationships and care to brief mentions, passing comments, and implicit suggestions. Caring in leadership is often

a taken-for-granted background condition or simply a means to an end. It sounds nice to talk about, but we still focus mainly on academic elements, such as raising standards, evaluating teaching, and student testing, when discussing principal effectiveness. Until recently, meaningful understandings of relationships and care received very little attention in school leadership research and practice.

New theoretical conceptions of school leadership, like Positive School Leadership, recognize the importance of relationships and their need to be deeply and meaningfully embedded in our leadership practice. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders "recognize the central importance of human relationships" in leadership work. After all, we are asking school leaders to promote student well-being in addition to academic success. We are asking school leaders to understand and respect each student's culture, strengths, and context to create a more equitable, just, and inclusive learning environment. However, something seems to be missing when discussing what principals can and should do to better understand their students and meet their needs.

Principals' Direct Relationships With Students

Interestingly, when we speak about school leaders' relationships, we're almost always talking about their relationships with teachers. Sometimes, we talk about their relationships with parents or the broader community. While these are undeniably important relationships, we rarely focus on principals' direct relationships with students. Why?

As a former middle school principal turned academic, I have found practically no literature discussing the interpersonal relationships between principals and students, and frankly, I was surprised. When I was a principal, my connections with students were the cornerstone of my practice. Not only was it the fun, re-energizing part of the job that constantly reminded me of my "why," I believed that it helped me make better decisions. It kept me more connected to my community. And, as I've begun to discover as I've turned my attention to exploring this relationship, I was not alone.

Historically, most principal-student encounters were disciplinary in nature, as maintaining order was a significant part of the principalship in the role's first 150 or so years. It is likely that the long history of a manager sitting squarely in the middle of a bureaucracy and tasked with maintaining order and efficiency has amplified the exclusionary aspects

of the role and made a redefinition and reperception of the principalship difficult.

But those managers, largely confined to their offices and focused mostly on order and efficiency, now seem to be in the minority, thankfully. Most principals I have spoken with or observed have prioritized relationships in their schools. Moreover, these principals specifically identify efforts to connect directly with their students as crucial to maximizing school and student success. Sure, it's not easy, and navigating the multitude of complex problems and competing demands tries to thwart those efforts at every turn. But this is still a non-negotiable for these principals. Carving out time to engage with students—even if it's two minutes here or 30 seconds there—is just as important as analyzing data or conducting teacher observations. After all, meaningful, open dialogue with students can also provide principals with valuable and unique insight into what's happening in classrooms.

What Emerging Research Says

These efforts to build relationships with students are only beginning to be realized in scholarship. While the occasional study has explored the impacts or effects of principal-student interactions, this relationship remains a rather overlooked area of research. What the small amount of research does say may not come as a huge surprise to most principals, but still, must not be ignored.

The small body of emerging literature reveals the power and potential of meaningful direct interactions between principals and students, similar to the teacher-student relationship. Direct engagement and dialogue between principals and students regarding academic issues can lead to increased motivation and perceptions of achievement in students. Principals who make themselves available to students or are directly involved in student activities are better able to feel the pulse of the school and improve the overall school culture, climate, and identity.

Furthermore, constructive, supportive, and sometimes personally profound and impactful relationships can form from direct principal-student interactions. While we like to talk about the importance of principals being visible, it's important to note that being visible isn't enough. Students can distinguish between principals who are merely visible and those who are "approachable" and engaged with students.


In a preliminary study of the principal-student relationship, Kathleen Brown and I found these outcomes reinforced. To



describe more nuanced implications and gain a deeper understanding of the influence and impact of the principal-student relationship, we found relationally oriented principals who actively pursued every opportunity to engage directly with students in positive, supportive, and caring ways.

Despite the complex demands on principals' time and the job responsibilities that pull them away from students, principals in our study recognized the importance of connecting directly with students as much as possible, even if only for a moment. To these principals, the well-being of their students and the culture and climate of their schools largely depended on those interactions. It was vital to these principals that students felt seen and understood.

And it was important that teachers shouldn't be the only ones striving for students to feel a sense of belonging. Principals also recognized their critical role in being directly involved in this endeavor. Creating this inclusive, relational culture in their schools largely stemmed from principals

 Students can distinguish between principals who are merely visible and those who are ‘approachable’ and engaged with students.”

modeling positive, meaningful relationships between students and adults. Principals showed teachers that healthy, positive interactions with students were a priority, and they modeled what those relationships should look like.


Furthermore, the moments of connection between principals and students—moments that occasionally developed into strong, lasting relationships with some students—provided principals with insights into students as individuals and as a collective. They were also enjoyable and energizing for principals. The relationships positioned principals to make more informed, effective decisions with a deeper understanding of how those decisions might ultimately affect students. Even beyond that, as evidenced by the student perspectives from the study, the principals’ efforts also appeared to have meaningful and profound effects on the students themselves.

These findings may not be groundbreaking to many principals. On one hand, that could be a good thing. It could mean that many principals are already meaningfully engaged with their students. But it could also be one reason we don’t pay it much attention and often take it for granted—it’s just something that comes naturally to most principals. They just do it.

So, while we might assume that many, if not most, principals are already focused on making connections with their students, with many likely doing it well, we can’t keep taking it for granted. It can’t continue as a background condition or a means to an end. We can’t relegate it to the margins and footnotes of our formal policies and practices. If we truly understand the value of principals’ relationships with students, it’s time to acknowledge its importance by re-centering the concept in leadership preparation programs and professional development curricula.

We also need to ensure our policies and actions reflect our understanding that this is critical to principal effectiveness. In other words, district leaders and policymakers should recognize *and support* principals’

efforts to build this relational capacity in their schools. When we talk about effective principals, we need to look at their relationships with students, too. We like to toss around the edicts like, “Get out of your office and get *into* the school,” or “Make sure you get to know your students.” Of course, you should. Who would argue with that? It sounds noble. It sounds personal. It sounds caring. But that’s about all we say. We don’t follow up on it. We don’t try to really understand it and find ways to make it happen. We don’t recognize it and celebrate it when it *does* happen. So then, do we really, truly value it?

Relationships in general, and relationships with students in particular, are arguably the foundation for everything we want to see and do in schools. If we say that we need to prioritize relationships, we must put our money where our mouths are. We need to give principals the space and support to cultivate these relationships. And we need to recognize and celebrate those principals who build caring, inclusive, relational school communities. All that other stuff, like academic growth and test scores, will surely follow. 

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BRINGING THE FUN



Principal Meghan Redmond, left, and a student pose for a photo during an activity night.



To celebrate the end of basketball season, staff members, pictured above, play against a student athlete team.

Five ways to boost engagement in middle school

MEGHAN REDMOND | PRINCIPAL

If you're a school leader reading this article, I'm sure you've faced the same challenge that we've faced at Homer Middle School in Homer, AK. Coming back from COVID, the attendance rate at our school, which serves about 200 students in seventh and eighth grades, was tanking. After a couple years of encouraging—and actually requiring—students to stay home at the slightest hint of illness (or even when they had no symptoms at all), a major change needed to happen.

We realized just how important it was for our students to physically be here in the building so they can learn. A school can have the best staff on the planet (like we do), but if the students aren't coming to school even the best teachers can't teach. We also realized just how much we wanted students (and staff) to enjoy being here at school. That is ultimately how we decided to tackle our attendance issues—by bringing the fun. As Katie Newsted, one



Students and staff participate in a "Mummy Toilet Paper Roll" during an assembly.

of our special education teachers, says, "Getting involved with students and doing activities with them that they enjoy outside of academics helps build positive relationships."

In this article, which includes significant input from our students and staff, I offer ways that you and your school community can increase attendance, bolster engagement, and strengthen school climate and culture.

1 | **Mark the end of every month with an assembly.**

The activities vary each month, but we always award a student and employee of the month and honor our sports teams at the end of each season. At the end of each quarter, we hold an awards assembly in place of our regular monthly assembly. In addition to the traditional honor roll awards, all staff members present awards that they come up with. These awards range from the serious (like "The Raven" for the best performance of a section of Edgar Allan Poe's

“ We never deny students club time as a behavioral consequence, and we never use it as a study hall. **”**

"The Raven" or "Coding Whiz" for excellence in our coding elective class) to the silly ("Why Are You in My Room?" "Most Sparkly," and "Happy Feet"). We keep track of which students have received awards each quarter in an effort to give awards to as many students as possible. At the end of the year, we ask the students to nominate their teachers for the same kind of fun awards.

2 | **Play games.**

At every assembly, and at every other opportunity we can find, we play "Minute to Win It" games. Teams consist of advisory groups, which strive to win the games, mostly for the bragging rights of earning the most points in a quarter. We have played hundreds of these games at this point, but we love "Poop the Potato," "Shake Your Tail Feather," "Mummy Toilet Paper Roll," "Musical Chairs," and about a million different relay races. For me, the best resource for these games is Instagram Reels. Pro tip: Ask each advisory group to select the game participants before you announce what the game is. It helps even the playing field.

We also play games (dodgeball, ping-pong, foosball, etc.) during an activity night at the end of every quarter. Parent volunteers help with supervision, so that staff can attend and celebrate too. We also have a parent volunteer, who happens to be a professional photographer, run a photo booth to provide our students with photo memories.

Speaking of games, let's not forget the annual staff-versus-students games to celebrate the end of our basketball and volleyball seasons. Games take place in front of the entire school. Although the staff teams usually start off pretty strong, the student athlete team's bench is way too deep for staff to ever win.

3 | Offer intramural sports. Last school year, students signed up to play a variety of sports, were placed on teams, and competed against each other. Tyler Krekling, our physical education and health teacher, and other staff members, took the lead in creating this popular program. The purpose was to give students something to look forward to when they come to school. We offered badminton, basketball, and volleyball, and we played the games during some of our advisory time.

The only requirement for students to participate was that they could not have a D or F in any classes. Because of this program, we have seen students who usually struggle to find the motivation to complete work change their behavior and make an effort to improve their grades so they can participate. We've also seen students with inconsistent attendance start to attend school more regularly so they can play the intramural games they enjoy. I am excited to see how we can continue to improve the program this school year.

We even involved staff members in some of the games. Students say the program has played a significant role in fostering better relationships within our school community. The games "provide an opportunity for teachers and students to bond outside of the classroom, and for students to form stronger connections with their peers," says Ames Kincaid, an eighth grader last year who was also student council president. "The sense of community created through these games is truly fantastic. It's amazing to see how something as simple as friendly

competition can bring everyone together and build a strong sense of unity."

4 | Create a game room. We turned an underutilized space in our building into a room for fun. Between using what we already had and shopping for items on Facebook Marketplace and Amazon, we found a ping-pong table, foosball table, and a Pop-A-Shot game. We use the space for these games and open it as a hangout option for students in the mornings and during lunch. Time in the room is also a reward that students or classes can earn. Pro tip: Find items that are easy to fold or stash away in case you need the space back at times.

5 | Offer clubs. We run ours during our advisory period. Clubs meet for 30 minutes each week for about nine weeks. Although the clubs are planned and run by staff, students have also volunteered to run a club with a sponsoring teacher. Students choose which clubs they want to join, and they must pick a different club each quarter. Clubs run the gamut from chess to P.E. games to sewing to sushi-making to coding to outdoor survival skills to neighborhood walking to mural making, and more. We never deny students club time as a behavioral consequence, and we never use it as a study hall.

For me, as principal, it is vital to have a can-do attitude when students or staff want to do something fun. It is also just as important to be genuinely excited when you do these things and to be silly and have fun right along with your students and staff.

I'm not saying that we have completely solved our school's attendance challenge because we are still not where we want to be. But making an intentional effort to ensure that school is ultimately a fun place to be, has only strengthened our school community. Last school year, our daily attendance rate increased by just over 2% to 89%. I'm certain that by bringing the fun, we're on the right path—one that makes students and staff, myself included, love coming to school every day. 🎉

Meghan Redmond is the principal of Homer Middle School in Homer AK, and a member of the NASSP Board of Directors. In 2019, she was the National Assistant Principal of the Year.



LEAD WITH A SMILE

Prioritizing school climate and culture

PHYLLIS GIMBEL | PROFESSOR
PETER GOW | RETIRED EDUCATOR



A new school year brings new opportunities to ensure students feel safe from harassment and experience a sense of belonging in schools. As educators who have held multiple positions in diverse public and independent schools over long careers, we write here to offer suggestions to foster and support caring and respectful school climates.

Building a Caring School Climate

The tone set by the school leader affects an entire school, whereas teachers primarily influence their own classrooms and activity groups. To promote a climate conducive to safety, belonging, and care, a principal must lead with empathy and develop and apply positive social skills in their interactions with teachers, staff, and students. This type of leadership, along with intentional yet benign vigilance—more focused on empathy than suspicion—can deter or help eradicate bullying and harassment. According to the website of the National Center on Safe, Supportive Learning Environments, a positive school climate is the product of a school's attention and commitment to fostering safety and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships.

Leading With Empathy

A key ingredient for leading with empathy is high emotional intelligence. In our years of working with school leaders,

we have observed that leaders most adept at building rapport with students, teachers, staff, and community are also notably effective at moving these stakeholders in desired strategic directions. These leaders consider diverse perspectives and understand other people's feelings, especially when making decisions.

Social and emotional skills also need to be fostered in students to help them build both self- and social awareness that enables them to recognize and cope with anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. Students must have meaningful relationships with their peers, their teachers, and their principal, and these relationships must contain space for students to express both concerns and joys. Otherwise, students may feel alone and even unseen by adults in roles designed to be supportive and protective—especially in situations where being known and seen can make the difference between growth and alienation. The principal needs to assess the climate of the school to identify general trends and even specific spaces and situations in which students may be having negative experiences, including harassment or bullying.

Assessing School Culture

One tool a principal can use to assess school climate is the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), administered by the National School Climate Center. The CSCI gathers data from students, staff, and families on



Phyllis Gimbel



Peter Gow

“In addition to conducting a climate survey, put a suggestion box outside your office that invites students and teachers to anonymously share thoughts, opinions, concerns, and ideas.”

14 dimensions of school climate to offer a panoramic vista of both climate and culture:

- Rules and Norms
- Sense of Physical Security
- Sense of Social-Emotional Security
- Online Safety
- Support for Academic Learning
- Social and Emotional Learning
- Respect for Diversity
- Teacher-Student Relationships
- Peer Relationships
- School Connectedness
- Physical Surroundings
- Social Inclusion
- Administration and Leadership
- Collective Efficacy

Another tool for developing useful and actionable data on school climate and culture is the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), created and administered by Indiana University’s Center for Evaluation and Education Policy. In partnership with the National Association of Independent Schools, the university has separately aggregated survey results from independent schools for some years now. The university also administers a separate Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement (MGSSE). As described by NAIS, the HSSSE measures responses from individual students to produce data on:

- **“Cognitive/intellectual/academic engagement:** Describes students’ efforts, investment, and strategies for learning—the work students do, and the ways students go about their work.”

- **“Social/behavioral/participatory engagement:** Captures students’ actions in social, extracurricular, and nonacademic school activities, including interactions with other students—the ways in which students interact within the school community.”
- **“Emotional engagement:** Emphasizes students’ feelings of connection (or disconnection) to their school—how students feel about where they are in school, the ways and workings of the school, and the people within their school.”

We believe that climate and engagement surveys such as these can very much help school leaders in identifying problematic areas where students may not be experiencing the kinds of supportive, authentic relationships with staff and peers that lead to feelings of security and belonging. They are useful, if not essential, tools for creating more positive and effective schools and learning environments.

Leadership Behaviors to Strengthen School Climate

For leaders at the top—principals, school heads, division directors, and the like—leading with empathy can engender schoolwide cultures of purpose and respect. These leadership practices can build cultures that prioritize understanding and valuing the experiences and perspectives of others. To that end, we suggest school leaders do the following:

1. **Get out of your office.** Walk around the school campus as much as possible, especially in the hallways, the cafeteria, the library, the gym, the front steps, and the

teachers' lounge. By being visible, you are showing everyone you care, that you co-exist with everyone in the school. In that way, you can say hello to students and ask their names and even find out who may need some connections with teachers and with other students.

2. When faced with student misbehavior, have a sit-down talk, one-on-one, with the student. This can help you discover whether the student is acting out because they feel uncomfortable in the school. Rather than punish a student for not following the shared vision of being safe, kind, respectful, and responsible, the one-on-one sit-down can bring the principal and the student closer as the leader models empathy and relationship-building to reach the student.

3. Eat lunch with students from time to time. Get acquainted with students and find out what is on their minds. Perhaps you can ascertain by observation or by listening to students' conversations in the hallways who might be the victims of bullying and harassment. Find out what is stressful for students and what makes them happy.

4. Go into classrooms as a non-threatening presence. Make sure teachers know they are not being evaluated when you stop by for short visits to classrooms to show students you are present. This will help inform you which students may be having trouble with learning or with anything else. And, if there are union regulations about spending less than 20 minutes in a classroom, you are not in violation. We were comforted each morning in our early years of teaching when school leaders did campus walkabouts early in the day, stepping into each classroom for a few minutes just as friendly faces. This was the leaders' way of getting to know every teacher and every student better in the actual context of teaching and learning—a powerful lesson in empathetic leadership.

5. Put a suggestion box outside your office. In addition to conducting a climate survey, put a suggestion box outside your office that invites students and teachers to anonymously share thoughts, opinions, concerns,

and ideas. And don't take negativity personally—use what you learn to shape not just policy but your own perspectives.

6. Laugh. Make sure that both students and staff see you laugh from time to time, when appropriate. The late Norman Lear used to say that "There's nothing that unites people more or better than laughter." If you want a happy climate, model it.

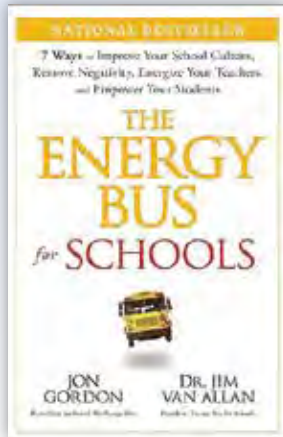
7. Offer gifts of time and support. Offer the gift of time to a teacher who may be having some personal issues needing their attention. Cover the teacher's class, find a substitute and allow the teacher to leave school early or arrive late if need be. When possible, help the teacher find resources to help them cope with the problem.

We also suggest that you not try to be "the people's pal" when you aren't. Students and staff alike know when a leader's behavior is inauthentic or just pandering. Students over the years have told us about times when school leaders act too much like students or are "too nice" to students who "mess up," pretending to be their friends. Capering in hallways, using slang, and telling jokes that are more appropriate for teenagers are some of the behaviors noted by students that mark an insincere leader. Such behaviors—which quickly reveal themselves as shams when a leader must exercise authority in serious situations—do not foster climates of mutual respect but rather of cynicism and mistrust.

As a principal, or "first" leader, keep foremost in your mind the human qualities and perspectives that made the whole idea of school leadership attractive in the first place. Recall those leaders whose candor, empathy, enthusiasm, and even simple presence have supported you in your journey. Begin each school year, and each day and each week, by considering how best to lead your school community in becoming a place of emotional openness, generosity, and engagement—a place of real and affirming relationships and exciting learning, a place of happiness and purpose. 📌

Phyllis Gimbel is a professor of educational leadership at Bridgewater State University and a former secondary school principal. Peter Gow is emeritus director of independent curriculum resources at One Schoolhouse and a former teacher, college counselor, and academic administrator.

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING FORWARD

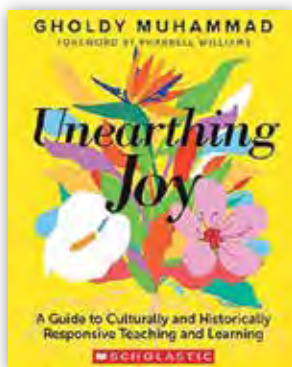


THE ENERGY BUS FOR SCHOOLS: 7 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR SCHOOL CULTURE, REMOVE NEGATIVITY, ENERGIZE YOUR TEACHERS, AND EMPOWER YOUR STUDENTS

IN 2007, JON GORDON inspired readers to take a proverbial ride on “the Energy Bus,” providing them with the secrets to overcoming adversity and developing positive mindsets to find success at home and at work. In 2024, he collaborated with Dr. Jim Van Allan to write *The Energy Bus for Schools: 7 Ways to Improve Your School Culture, Remove Negativity, Energize Your Teachers, and Empower Your Students* (Jossey-Bass), which outlines a process for creating a positive school culture. That process begins with inviting your staff on “the bus,” followed by fueling the ride (focusing on what they are doing right), loving your passengers, refueling when necessary, and then creating a fleet of bus drivers. The authors suggest that collective efficacy can be achieved simply by establishing a common language. For example, creating a one-word vision statement that can be seen and heard throughout the halls can shape school culture as positive energy cascades and spreads to others. But for the energy bus to keep chugging forward, remember that “getting the right people on your bus is essential,” the authors write. “When you need to let someone go or they get themselves off the bus, you allow it for the greater good.”

—Holly Langley, EdD | Assistant Principal

Sussex Technical High School, Georgetown, DE



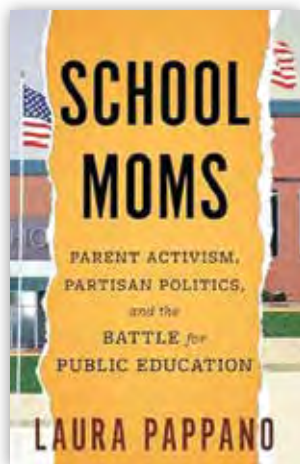
UNEARTHING JOY: A GUIDE TO CULTURALLY AND HISTORICALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

WHAT TEACHER/SCHOOL LEADER/STUDENT couldn’t use more joy?

Gholdy Muhammad’s book, *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Curriculum and Instruction* (Scholastic Professional), delivers just as enthusiastically as her previous one, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. As Muhammad, an associate professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, makes clear, nothing brings joy more readily than hearing a favorite song. Each of the seven chapters within *Unearthing Joy* begins with a “layered playlist” of songs to listen to while you read as well as poetry from the incomparable Langston Hughes that foreshadow each chapter’s tone. This book extends *Cultivating Genius* by adding a fifth pursuit, “joy,” to the original four pursuits explored: (a) identity development, b) skills development, c) intellectual development, and d) criticality development. These pursuits comprise Muhammad’s framework for empowering students, particularly Black children. As pressures mount in public schools, Muhammad says she felt the need to tap into joy as a way to bring life back to teachers, students, classrooms, administrators, and school buildings. Comparing students to flowers that must be cultivated, she reminds us to “unearth joy” or dig deep to help reveal the genius that exists in all students.

—Latrese Younger, EdD | OSQ (Office of School Quality) Specialist

Virginia Department of Education, Richmond, VA



SCHOOL MOMS: PARENT ACTIVISM, PARTISAN POLITICS, AND THE BATTLE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

IN *SCHOOL MOMS*: *Parent Activism, Partisan Politics, and the Battle for Public Education* (Beacon Press), Laura Pappano, an education journalist, discusses the role of activist groups in public education. While their proliferation may seem like a modern trend, Pappano explains that parent activism dates to the 1990s amid debates over sex education. Today, organized groups seeking to influence curriculum, instruction, and policies in our schools include the Florida-based group, Moms for Liberty, and Parents Defending Education. Both groups have organized against what they claim is the teaching of critical race theory in schools, led efforts to ban books, and advocated for “Don’t Say Gay” laws. Pappano contends that such far-right, parental activism has caused schools to become a battleground for politics, turning parent-teacher associations into lobbyists and political action groups. While many school leaders are already aware of contentious issues, they should pay close attention to the basic, but powerful ways the author cites to combat these attacks, such as attending school board meetings to provide an opposing view and accurate information. Doing so will enable us, Pappano writes, to keep public schools, “a gift from a community to its young people and a foundation of our democracy.”

—Eric Basilo, EdD | Assistant Principal

Markham Woods Middle School, Lake Mary, FL



LEAD WITH TWO RULES: FEELING GOOD & FEELING SAFE

IN *LEAD WITH TWO RULES*: *Feeling Good & Feeling Safe* (self-published), Brenda Yoho, an education consultant, writes that the “fundamental significance of feeling good and feeling safe lies at the core of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” Underscoring the critical importance of emotional well-being and security as the bedrock for personal development and fulfillment, Yoho has developed a leadership framework anchored in the idea that by nurturing emotional wellness and a sense of safety, individuals enhance their capacity to progress through the hierarchy thus leading to a more purposeful and enriched life. Central to the philosophy of “Two Rules,” is the profound concept of choice as a powerful force within everyone’s reach. Understanding the significance of choice and how our decisions not only affect ourselves but also ripple out to impact others form an integral part of personal growth and development. Before making a choice, students should ask themselves two questions: “Will this make me (or them) feel good?” and “Will this make me (or them) feel safe?” By embracing these guiding principles, school leaders can help students embark on a journey of self-discovery, empathy, responsibility, and resilience ultimately forging a path towards self-actualization.

—Nicole J. LeClaire | Superintendent

Bertrand Community School, Bertrand, NE

STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY DISORDERS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

GREG VANSLAMBROOK | PRINCIPAL
MORGAN S. KELLY | ADJUNCT PROFESSOR
JANET R. DECKER | ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

ANXIETY IS A common human experience. Children may fear separation from their parents; adults may go through stressful situations causing them worry. However, a person may be diagnosed with an *anxiety disorder* when these feelings are so significant and regular that they interfere with everyday activities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Public school leaders may already recognize that students with anxiety disorders have legal protections, but private school leaders *also* have a legal obligation to provide accommodations. This article clarifies the legal landscape so both public and private school leaders can better serve students with anxiety disorders and their families.

Prevalence and Impact

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders affecting children and adolescents. Recent findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that about 9% of U.S. children had diagnosed anxiety (2023). Considering that anxiety often goes undiagnosed, the percentage of young people who experience anxiety disorders could be as high as 15% to 32% (Chiu et al., 2016). Many students are susceptible to developing anxiety disorders, as the risk factors include experiencing stressful life events, having relatives with mental disorders, and having certain health conditions (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024). Additionally, anxiety disorders disproportionately impact students of color, students from families with low socioeconomic status, and students from other vulnerable communities.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) includes 11 distinct subcategories of anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety

disorder, panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024). Each type of anxiety disorder may have distinct triggers and symptoms, but they all have the similar potential to disrupt a child's education.

Students with anxiety disorders can exhibit a range of behaviors that cause challenges in the classroom, such as inattention, restlessness, disruptive behavior, social avoidance, and failure to submit assignments (Ehmke, 2023). Students also may exhibit patterns of school avoidance or school refusal, which is particularly problematic when public schools are legally obligated to ensure students are not truant.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a variety of mental health challenges, including anxiety disorders. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2021) reported that between January and October 2020, emergency room visits related to mental health increased 31% for 12- to 17-year-olds. In the same report, the department found that during the pandemic, "LGBTQI+



students were among those at highest risk of increases in anxiety symptoms” (USDOE, 2021, p. 12).

Accommodations Required in Public and Private Schools

Like other mental health disorders, an anxiety disorder is a qualifying disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), if the disorder “substantially limits one or more major life activities” (USDOE, 2023). Therefore, students with anxiety disorders have the right to receive accommodations in both public and private schools. A school must evaluate each student’s eligibility, using diagnoses and recommendations from medical professionals, and/or through its own evaluation process (USDOE, 2023). Accommodations are intended to allow students an equal opportunity to access their education. As with other accommodations for students with disabilities, confusion sometimes arises in a private school as to what the school is required to do.

All educational institutions accepting or benefiting from federal funds, which includes many private schools, are subject to the requirements of Section 504 (Shaver & Decker, 2017). Section 504 regulations expressly state that private schools receiving federal funds cannot exclude a student with a disability “if the person can, with minor adjustments, be provided an appropriate education” (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Handicap in Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance, 2000, § 104.39(a)). However, “minor adjustments” is a lower bar than the “reasonable accommodations” that are required in public schools. Section 504 provides a basis for litigation if a family feels that their child’s rights have been violated by a private school, but it does not require the private school to provide specific services. Neither private nor public schools are required to “fundamentally alter” programs for which students with disabilities do not meet the basic participation requirements (Shaver & Decker, 2017, p. 32).

The question of what constitutes a “minor adjustment” for a private school has resulted in litigation. In *Hunt v. St. Peter School* (1997), a private Catholic school

decided that it could no longer enroll a student whose life-threatening asthma was aggravated by an allergy to scents. The family claimed that the school violated Section 504 by not providing their daughter with a scent-free environment to accommodate her asthma. The federal district court found in favor of the private school, noting that the school had worked with the family over the years to accommodate the student by providing a voluntary scent-free environment, including education to teachers and classmates about the student’s condition, as well as allowing in-classroom monitoring by the parents. The court reasoned that these efforts had surpassed the bar of “minor adjustment,” and that when these accommodations proved unacceptable to the family, the school was then within its rights to exclude the student. Interestingly, the judge also wrote that “ [w]hile I have been unable to identify a case interpreting minor adjustment, it is clear that [a] minor adjustment is less than a reasonable accommodation. Minor indicates a minimal burden and adjustment implies a small correction” (p. 852). While these words are not legally binding outside of this jurisdiction, the decision does provide some helpful guidance regarding how courts might address the “minor adjustment” standard.

Common Accommodations

In public schools, qualifying students with anxiety disorders would typically receive a written “504 plan” from the school district, which summarizes the student’s reasonable accommodations. Although it is not legally required for private schools to create a written agreement of what the student’s accommodations will include, it may be prudent for them to do so.

School leaders should engage with the student’s family to create accommodations based on data from the student’s health providers. Accommodations should be tailored to the student’s social and academic needs (Green et al., 2017). For example, teachers could ask students to give special cues or signals when they feel they need to opt out of participation or allow them to leave class early to avoid hallway congestion. Because some students find that timed assignments can be

triggers for their anxiety, teachers might grant them extended time on tests and deadlines. Schools may also loosen their attendance policies to allow students with anxiety disorders to take extended absences, or to miss more school than is allowed for other students.

Some of these accommodations are likely to go far beyond the minimal “minor adjustment” standard for private schools. Private school leaders should, however, recognize their ethical obligation to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for their students (Bonfiglio & Kroh, 2020).

Recommendations

1

Communicate with staff about anxiety disorders and how to accommodate students.

Clarify the difference between everyday anxieties and anxiety disorders. Teach staff how anxiety disorders make it difficult for students to meet certain expectations. Considering the increasing prevalence of anxiety disorders, ask staff to make adjustments and extend compassion. At private schools, there is a lot of room for discretion with the “minor adjustment” standard, so discuss what this means with your staff, and articulate the general approach the school will take. Share examples of ways that schools have accommodated students and articulate how accommodations are consistent with your school’s mission and values.

2

Educate staff about their legal obligations under Section 504.

Because these legal requirements are widely misunderstood among private school educators (Bonfiglio & Kroh, 2020), it is important to increase the legal literacy of teachers, counselors, and other staff in both public and private schools.


3

Identify symptoms of anxiety disorders early.

While private schools do not have the proactive “child find” obligations of public schools where students with disabilities must be identified, both public and private school leaders should create systems to proactively identify students so that they can be supported.

4

Make sincere efforts to accommodate the student’s needs and be honest and upfront about what the school cannot provide.

Both public and private schools should draft and implement a written accommodation plan. However, most private school parents understand that private schools have less of a legal obligation than public schools. Therefore, regardless of the legal obligations, school leaders should reassure parents that the school is doing what it can to promote the well-being of their children. 

Greg VanSlambrook is the principal of Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis, IN, and a doctoral student at Indiana University. Morgan S. Kelly, JD, is a graduate of Indiana University’s Maurer School of Law and an adjunct professor at Indiana University. Janet R. Decker, JD, PhD, is an associate professor of education at Indiana University and a co-author of Legal Rights of School Leaders, Teachers, and Students.

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NASSP Members in the News

Grad Rates Soared at a School Few Wanted to Attend. How It Happened



By Olina Banerji,
Education Week,
June 21, 2024

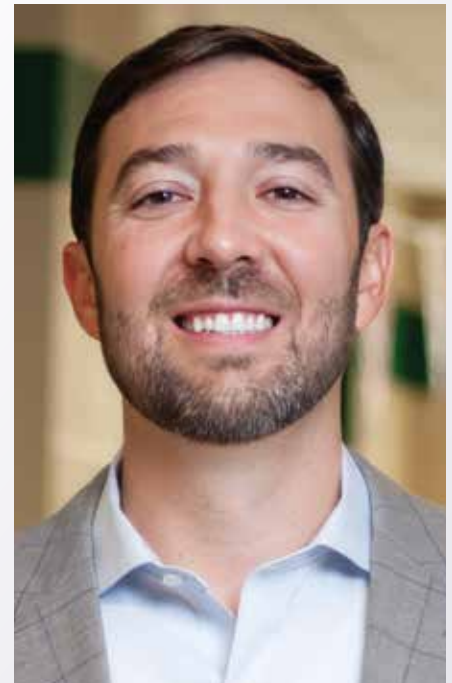
“As a school, we had to accept that there are circumstances that don’t allow our students to come to school. But that shouldn’t impact their ability to learn. We had to learn to be flexible.”

—Michael Randolph, principal of Leesburg High School in Lake County, FL, and NASSP member

Education won’t suffer if TikTok is banned.

Here’s why

By Micah Ward, *District Administration*, May 3, 2024



“No one knows about the things you’re doing unless you put it out there. We figured out who our audience was and what the best platform was for them. For parents, it was Facebook. For kids, it was Instagram and TikTok. We catered our communications to those platforms.”

—David Schexnaydre, executive director of secondary schools for St. Charles Parish Public Schools in Luling, LA, and the 2023 NASSP Louisiana Principal of the Year

Teachers and Students Need Support. 5 Ways Administrators Can Help

By Larry Ferlazzo, *Education Week*, April 10, 2024

“To me, you can only talk about changing a school culture so much. The true work depends on bringing the individuals that matter together and building a safe space for true learning and growth to happen.”

—Michael C. Brown, principal of Winters Mill High School in Westminster, MD, and president of the Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals



School principals get creative to keep their staff in the classrooms

By Cory Turner, *NPR*, April 1, 2024



“The principal couldn’t find anyone and he wound up at dinner with his wife one night, and the waitress was really engaging and doing a good job. He said, have you ever thought about being a teacher?”

—Matt Haney, principal of Mount Desert Island High School in Bar Harbor, ME, and Maine State Coordinator



“So now I have to really and truly look at how I care for my teachers. And because we’re being intentional about how we care for our teachers, we’re seeing them wanting to stay.”

—Suzan Harris, principal of Henderson Middle School in Jackson, GA



“When I had the same position open three years ago, I literally had 12 applicants. Only eight were actually qualified.”

—Raúl Gastón, principal of Gompers Junior High School in Joliet, IL, and Illinois State Coordinator



“Our starting salary in Missouri is \$38,000.”

—Beth Houf, principal of Capital City High School in Jefferson City, MO, and NASSP board member

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First confirmed keynote!

Dr. Ghody Muhammad,
Associate Professor of
Literacy, Language, and
Culture at the University
of Illinois at Chicago,
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