



# COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

## *Creating a Culture of Change Through Honor*



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### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating A Culture; Improving Instruction;  
Engaging Communities*

I was fortunate in the early 2000s to be assigned to a school that had every label you can imagine. This was a school community in a high poverty neighborhood in Seattle. This school had approximately 450 students and a staff of over 70. The community was richly diverse and filled with cultural opportunities for students and staff.

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Upon arrival, I was quickly told of the “problems” and the supports that they did not have. The staff was disconnected and lacked focus, both

instructionally and systemically. In summary, the school was in a reactive state, yet directed to make intensive changes based on student achievement data.



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My journey began with a comprehensive needs assessment, which started with individual meetings with all staff and community members. Following these meetings, I worked on a plan that was inclusive of focusing on three major areas. To the reader, this may seem too simple for a school many labeled “in crisis.”

My leadership focus was honor. From that belief, I worked with staff, parents, and students on honoring them as members and contributors to their school community.

What did this look like?

### HONORING STAFF

We embarked on a journey learning about each other, our instructional expertise, and our areas for growth, and worked to develop a strong system of support for instruction and teamwork. We looked at professional learning goals, needs for training, systems, and collaboration opportunities. We talked at length in grade-level team meetings and as a staff about sharing the “expertise” among us. We embarked on a collaborative process that today would be called “instructional rounds.” Teachers observed each other and we sent teams to visit other schools within our district and neighboring districts. We researched best practices throughout our state and collaborated with current instructional coaches, state supports, and other staff assigned to support our school change initiative.

### HONORING STUDENTS

As a leader, I implemented a system of data analysis and student support we called “Name and Claim.” This involved meeting as a school support team monthly to review the progress of every student. The team included teachers, support staff, coaches and interventionist to look at the student’s data both academically and affectively. We then aligned the student’s instructional program and supports to meet the very specific and current needs of that student. This allowed all of us to take greater ownership for the success of each student.

### HONORING PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

This began by holding parent/ community stakeholder gatherings to hear the needs and desires of the school community. Many of our families were recent immigrants to the country and had limited understanding of school culture in the United States. We gathered information from our meetings and formed a committee comprised of teachers, staff, parents and local community members. We called this...

### AUTHENTIC PARENT ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

We actually had a teacher who initiated the efforts in collaboration with a team to create opportunities for parents to become involved that were beyond traditional parent involvement. An example of such was

the creation of a parent volunteer room where parents, specifically those who did not speak English or who had young children, could come and do volunteer work for teachers in a setting where they could get to know one another, watch their young children, and contribute to the school by creating or doing a task for teachers. Teachers submitted tasks to be done to a basket located in the room. This was a tremendous success. The goal of this initiative was to ensure that all families had a voice and an opportunity to be a member and contribute to our school any way possible, regardless of restrictions that might get in the way of being part of the more traditional family involvement initiatives.

While this is an annotated description of a school culture change, the important premise is change often takes courage on the part of the leader to step out and inspire, encourage, and motivate people to see their own strengths and growth capacity. This school transformed, labels were removed, and the success was evident through the faces and voices of staff, students and family. ■

*Ann Gray had a 30 year career in education working as a teacher, counselor, principal and central office administrator before retiring from education to work for Washington state’s Department of Social and Health Services. She returned to education last July and is currently working as an assistant principal in the Shelton School District at Evergreen Elementary, a dual language immersion school.*