

- Middle school transition support will be expanded under ESSA with the design and implementation of guidance supporting summer school programs and community-based student mentoring.
- Student transitions from middle to high school are crucially important, and OSPI recognized that by including 9th Graders on-Track to Graduation as a SQSS indicator in our accountability index. If students fail just one ninth-grade class, their likelihood of dropping out of high school rises dramatically. This accountability measure comes alongside three continuing initiatives to help students stay in school: Student Learning Plans for at-risk students, High School and Beyond Plans for students to plan for their future, and the LAP Menus of Best Practices and Strategies, which offer research-based interventions for students who struggle with ELA, mathematics, or behavior.

“ One of the struggles many students face, from kindergarten to graduation, is the turbulence associated with new situations and schools.”

- Finally, OSPI works to facilitate transitions between high school and post-secondary aspirations by providing funding, resources, tools, data, and technical assistance to educators to ensure success, including Bridge to College transition courses, career and technical education and general education statewide equivalencies, career counseling, and more.

### CONCLUSION

As OSPI moves closer to implementation of our ESSA plan,

work is moving forward to design guidance to help districts and schools make decisions on how to use state and federal funds to support their goals. By braiding state and federal funds, districts and schools are granted additional flexibility to focus their supports on students in need of individualized interventions. OSPI looks forward to working with districts, principals, and teachers during our implementation year, 2017-18, and into the future to provide unparalleled educational opportunities across Washington, helping every student become prepared for post-secondary aspirations, careers, and life. ■

### LINKS:

OSPI's ESSA Consolidated Plan  
<http://bit.ly/2igYOuT>

One-page flyers on the key changes to each program  
<http://bit.ly/2hNtS1p>

# USING DATA to Gauge Staff Readiness

## Brett Willie

Principal, Hidden River Middle School

### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Planning with Data, Improving Instruction*

As a principal coming into a new building, there are a dozens of critical items to consider as we get the “lay of the land.” This onboarding process can be daunting when considering things like the formal and informal components of culture, the spoken and the unwritten norms that exist, the perceptions and expectations of all stakeholders, and the historical complexities around initiatives, instructional practice, and staff buy-in. Truly understanding

the current reality of a building is so important and can set us up for future success or, quite frankly, a crash and burn experience if we misjudge or misread any of these areas.

For most principals, somewhere buried deep within this process lies the yearning to determine next steps for school improvement, knowing where we are now, where we should head next and how ready the staff is to move forward. School improvement is an ongoing conversation and we all come with experiences and beliefs

about what works best and what the right answers are. This “where we need to head next” reality can be a delicate precipice for principals in an educational system that is littered with well-intended—yet ineffective—initiatives and unfruitful ideas. So how can we wade into this effectively?

### WHERE TO START?

When I became principal at Hidden River Middle School in 2014, this was the exact ledge I walked. I was

*Continued on page 24*

fortunate to have been an assistant principal at Hidden River the year prior and I mostly spent that entire first year building relationships and gathering information—listening, observing, asking questions, and pouring over loads of data around student achievement, staff climate, and stakeholder perceptions. In working closely with our leadership team it was becoming clear to me where we needed “to start,” but in my mind the question still remained: How ready is this staff to move forward? I believe strongly in the power of Professional Learning Communities and, in my view, any school improvement measure should be filtered through that lens. Our staff talked a good game around being a PLC, however the results didn’t show for it and the products from team meetings didn’t reflect it either.

“In working closely with our leadership team it was becoming clear to me where we needed ‘to start,’ but in my mind the question still remained: How ready is this staff to move forward?”

In early March of that year I decided to use a fairly straight-forward piece of data to gauge how ready our staff was to move forward. My strategy was to lob a simple piece of data into the middle of the table and see how the staff responded, listening very closely to their conversations. I used the following guiding principles to ensure this activity gave me the information I was looking for and also helped us, as a staff, arrive at the same conclusion around our crucial next steps.

“My message to the staff was that we were going to develop a habit of continuously using data, not to ‘prove’ anything, but to improve.”

### STEP 1 – DATA IS A TOOL FOR IMPROVEMENT, NOT A WEAPON

In Mike Schmoker’s book, “Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement,” he explains that “results — good or bad — are ultimately good, because they provide feedback that can guide us, telling us what to do next and how to do it better” (p. 3). I would venture to say that for most every staff, ours included, leading with this key concept is critical. Because we weren’t using data for much of anything, I knew there would be some hesitation, reluctance, and even some fear around it. My message to the staff was that we were going to develop a habit of continuously using data, not to “prove” anything, but to improve. Developing this muscle takes time and we are still working on it, three years later. For me it was extremely important to remind our staff of this concept as we launched into this initial data conversation.

### STEP 2 – CHOOSE THE RIGHT DATA TO LOOK AT

Choosing the right data for your staff to look at and talk about is critical. I chose to use our failure rate data because it was something that each team and teacher could engage with, as opposed to data that was specific to one subject area or specific team like math or science. At that time we had twice the number of Fs issued at Hidden River in comparison to our feeder high school — and one quarter of the number of students! I knew that this would create some

shock value for our teachers, sparking great conversation. This piece of data was also important because, in my mind, it provided a direct glimpse into where our staff was at, mentally, in terms of owning student success and student failure. In a true PLC, a staff must shift their mindset around student vs. staff responsibility and failure rate data is a great way to gauge where a staff is with their beliefs on this foundational component.

### STEP 3 – PROVIDE STAFF WITH SOME GUIDING QUESTIONS OR CONVERSATION PROMPTS AROUND THE DATA

It’s not uncommon for teachers, or even principals for that matter, to be given loads of data with no direction or focus on what is supposed to be done with it. The “data rich, information poor” adage that gets thrown around often stems from this very common experience. Because our staff was not accustomed to looking at data in this manner and for a specific reason, providing them with some conversation prompts or questions to consider was helpful to guide their discussions. For this specific exercise, I broke our staff randomly into smaller groups of six and had each group discuss the two very simple and straightforward questions below. These are open-ended questions and worded in a manner that allowed for many entry points of discussion:

- Why are our students receiving so many Fs?
- What are we going to do about it?

### STEP 4 – STEP ASIDE AND LISTEN!

This is the most critical step and really the purpose of this entire exercise. How your staff talks about the data, the way in which they do so, and the specific comments they make about it is what you need to pay close

attention to. In general (sticking with our example around failure rate data), are they being reflective, talking about things that they can control? Are they taking ownership of the data and thinking about potential next steps? Are they focusing on things that they can't control, talking about the lack of responsibility from students and placing blame on parents and previous teachers? Are they questioning why they are being asked to look at data in the first place? Or, even worse, are they making comments about the "type" of kids here and the fact that "these kids just can't succeed"? How your staff talks about the data gives you great insight on how ready they are to move forward and, more importantly, where your conversation needs to begin. For example if, as you listen closely, you hear a lot of focus on parents not doing their job and the fact that "these kids just aren't responsible anymore," this is a really good indicator that you and your staff need to back way up and begin talking about why we are here, as educators, in the first place—your purpose as a staff and school.

Your staff may not be ready to talk about interventions and support structures if they aren't in a frame of mind to realize that they have direct control over, and responsibility for, student success. Or, if your staff is focusing on the fact that "our kids just can't do this," you have an even bigger cultural and belief issue to address. In Anthony Muhammad's book *Transforming School Culture: Overcoming Staff Division*, he talks about the harmfulness of "Perceptual Predetermination" (p. 21-22) and the belief structures of "Fundamentalists" (chapters 6 and 7) within a school, both of which have extreme impacts on student learning and school culture. If this is what you hear, as you listen, starting with what your staff believes about students would be most critical. For our staff there was a few of the "these kids just aren't responsible" comments but, for the

“ Using a simple conversation structure around data is a great place to determine where to start and how ready your staff is to move forward.”

most part, what I heard was a group of passionate and caring teachers, bothered by the obvious problem of too many kids failing, yet not sure what the answer was. This was great news because what it told me was that they were ready roll up their sleeves and begin the process of shifting our thinking around how we serve students and how we work together to guarantee student success.

### STEP 5 – WORK WITH YOUR BUILDING LEADERSHIP TEAM ON NEXT STEPS

The final step in moving forward is circling back to the information gathered with your building leadership team, synthesizing the key pieces from the data conversation and then beginning to map out next steps. In addition to listening closely during that initial discussion, I had each table group capture their conversation by scribing the big ideas that emerged and questions that came up as the discussion unfolded. Our leadership team reviewed these notes together and came up with an initial game plan. It was out of this meeting that we immediately began building some critical school-wide interventions for students. This also opened the door for our leadership team to begin engaging the entire staff in some critical and foundational discussions around the type of school we wanted Hidden River to become for our kids, paving the way for a gradual shift in mindset that has occurred the past three years.

I believe that this initial data conversation with our staff, in 2014, truly was one of our key launching pad moments for what we have accomplished the last few years and the great things that are currently

happening for our students. It was out of this initial conversation that our staff began to wrestle with some difficult questions that have laid the groundwork for the way our teams serve students together, our pyramid of interventions and, most importantly, how we now own the responsibility for student success.

In looking at different data points each year we still use student failure rates as one small "dipstick" type measure for how we are making progress toward achieving our purpose as a school. In 2014 we had issued 653 failing grades by the end of the school year with an average of 36 students failing one or more classes each quarter. By the end of 2015 we issued 430 failing grades with an average of 19 students receiving a failing grade each quarter. By the end of 2016 that number dropped to 144 total Fs with only an average of nine students, each quarter, failing a class.

We still have a long way to go in ensuring ALL students are successful at Hidden River, but our staff is getting more and more comfortable using student achievement data to measure our success and our journey truly did begin in 2014 with our first staff discussion around our failing students. Just like we ask teachers to meet students where they are at, our call as principals is to do the same: meet our staff where they are and, most importantly, work with them to craft a plan for improvement.

Using a simple conversation structure around data is a great place to determine where to start and how ready your staff is to move forward. ■