

# CAN YOU MEASURE **HOPE** IN YOUR SCHOOL?



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### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Planning with Data, Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap*

**Have you ever** stood in the hallway of your school and just counted the smiles on students' faces? Yes, I just said that.

I know you spend much of your time in the hallways supervising the flow and traffic of kids everyday, but how about grabbing some data during that supervision?

And yes, I'm asking you to track data on the smiles, or lack thereof, on students' faces.

### A HOPE-FILLED CULTURE

I can hear the skeptics right now questioning why in the world someone would count smile data and what possibly could be used with such data. Well, my dear skeptics, that question usually brings a smile to my face. Students laughing, interacting with peers and adults, doors being held for each other, warm greetings, and smiles are all indicators of a positive school culture. I would even argue that not only does that indicate a positive school culture, but also a hope-filled culture.

Great, now the skeptics are saying that I've completely lost my mind because I'm talking about smiles and hope in the same article. The last time I checked school improvement indicators, smiles and hope are not on

the index. And, they are not part of the state's report card, and certainly don't sit as data points on district websites. But why not?

We all look back on our lives and can cite specific adults who were responsible for shaping, changing, and/or redirecting our paths. These student-adult relationships were based on unconditional and unwavering support and encouragement. It was this support that gave us all hope. Rick Miller, founder and president of Kids at Hope, says, "We don't control most of the risk children experience, but we do control much of the hope." So, why don't we, as a system, attempt to measure it?

### THE EXPECTATION GAP

"Hope is not a strategy" and "You can't measure hope" are two of the comments I hear most from "experts" in the field. I would argue those experts need to spend more time in the schools where they can see hope in action.

There are countless examples of schools across our state where hope is the foundation for eliminating opportunity, access, and achievement gaps. This foundation wasn't built overnight. It took consistent principal

leadership and a collective and unilateral focus on addressing and closing the most important gap first — the expectation gap. The gap that calls attention to how adults view the students in the school. Once again from Rick Miller, "Anyone can judge children by their behavior. It takes an extraordinary person to judge them by their potential."

I would argue hope is a strategy and it starts with the principal. Principals create hope for all. Principals have the opportunity to create and lead hope in their schools. They start by modeling the belief that all students can and will be successful, no exceptions. This belief is strategically developed into school-wide culture supported by hope-designed systems that ultimately creates an organization that makes the impossible possible.

As I travel the state, popping in and out of schools and having countless conversations with students, they remind me on a daily basis the important role principals play in establishing a hope-filled school culture. Students often share their experiences about the relationships they have with their principals. They cite the authentic and sincere

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interactions in classes, the lunchroom, and yes, the hallways. One student told me, “The most important thing I want in a principal is a relationship. A principal who takes the time to get to know me on a personal level.”

## GET OUT THERE!

So, where do you start? Get out in the hallways. Break away from the chains of your email inbox (which is a whole other topic) and get out there with the kids. A principal who models relationship-building with all kids is one of the first steps in building the foundation of hope. Next, examine the language adults use in your building when talking about kids. Are you referring to students as “at-risk” or “Tier 1?,” or is every student full of treasures just waiting to be discovered? This language shift is up to you.

I learned an important lesson as a principal one day when a student approached me in the hallway and said, “How come you are never smiling?”

Ouch.

That was a student comment that really struck home. It caused me to take some time for deep reflection. I always thought of myself as outwardly smiling and genuinely being positive, but a student just told me otherwise. Thanks to her comment, I made a point of channeling the stresses of running a school, and not letting that stress sit on my face. Instead, the first smile I started counting in the halls was my own... before I started counting others.

Here’s my challenge: Work on your own smile first, then start collecting smile data in your school next. Let AWSP work on getting smiles and hope added to the school report card. ■



Dr. Scott Seaman joined AWSP in the fall of 2013 after serving as the principal at Tumwater High School. In July 2018, he assumed duties as Executive Director.

# Humor me!

Created by **David Ford**, Retired Washington State Principal

