

Focusing on What Really Matters Peg Waterman

As the 2020-2021 school year approaches, there are a lot of unknowns. What will OSPI mandate? What will the health department's guidelines be? What models will schools use when they re-open? What will teachers teach? And all decisions are subject to the changing numbers in coronavirus cases. Our foundations of providing education are moving beneath our feet. We are feeling scared, uncertain, and anxious. And, that's only how educators and administrators are feeling.

During these unprecedented times, many of our families and students are impacted by issues of food or housing insecurity, domestic violence, child abuse, racial tensions, anger in the home and community, and other traumas. And, as we all know, this trauma and crisis makes it very hard for learning to take place.

We do need answers to questions like, "Will sports occur? How will we social distance within classrooms? How will we hold students accountable during remote learning? What will truancy look like?"

But the essential question right now, during this transitional time, should be: **How do we respond to student and family needs?** We need to focus our attention on what really matters.

Amid these changes, our core principles can help us steady the boat. Our values bring calm to the anxiousness and provide clear direction. These are:

- developing trusting relationships,
- caring deeply for the social, emotional, and mental well-being of each other,
- developing awareness of equitable practices, and
- caring for the everyday needs of our students and families so they have the capacity to function and succeed in learning.

As we start this school year, we need to step back and reexamine past practices. We need to clear space, not just for distancing within our schools, but for a renewed and intentional focus on relationship building. Before we jump into academics, we need to take time with students and families to see how they are getting along and what their needs are and then, if needed, help connect them with community support. We also need defined, internal structures in our schools that allow us to continue to care for the emotional, social, mental, and physical needs of our students. Without these supports, students will not be successful in learning.

Finally, it would be unconscionable if we as educators didn't rethink how we approach issues of racial equity. We must relearn how to have civil conversations in the face of differing viewpoints. We must teach our students how to identify the difference between reliable and unreliable information and how to put aside ourselves in service to our communities and humankind.

Yes, the start of this school year brings anxiety and unknowns but the opportunities to make space for attending to what really matters is infinitely greater.

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