

INVESTING TIME TO RECOGNIZE OTHERS

The phrase, ‘it takes a community, is used often in a general sense, but doing the work to recognize the members of the community well, is nothing short of hard work. When we coordinated efforts to clean up our storage space, we discovered some legacy plaques and trophies amongst the wreckage. In the main hall, there were a few scattered trophies with few updated in years. There was also a certificate from *America’s Choice Schools* on a cheesy frame stuck up in the narrow back office – out of public view. The lack of images and artifacts for recognition was something I wanted to change and felt that an award dedicated to the commitment of students, staff and parents to WEDJ school would be a good place to start. Eager to bring the Board Chair into the fold on efforts to revive a positive school culture, I recommended we name the award the ‘*John Goldman WEDJ Commitment Award.*’ When I asked Goldman to come to the assembly to announce this new honor, I was pleased he could attend. Information about the new award was shared in the PrincipalPoint WEDJ newsletter:

In tribute to the service of John Goldman, who served as executive director of WEDJ from 2010 through 2012, WEDJ has created the John Goldman Award. The award will be given at the end of each school year to one student, one parent, and one staff member from WEDJ who best exemplifies the WEDJ Commitment, below.

At WEDJ, we are committed to

- 1. The safety of all members of the William E. Doar Jr., Public Charter School for the Performing Arts community.*
- 2. Creativity.*
- 3. Preparing all members of the community to be successful in their academic pursuits, college, and life.*
- 4. Communicating respectfully.*
- 5. Honesty.*
- 6. Creating a next generation of global leaders through the arts.*

Each winner will be honored at an assembly and will receive a book, endowed by Mr. Goldman. A committee of WEDJ staff and parents will select the winners. To learn more about the award, contact WEDJ Principal Dr. Barbara Smith. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/announcing-the-john-goldman-award>)

The first year the winners of the award included our first Student Council President, Parent (and Teaching Assistant), Ms. Kamilah Wheeler, and Mr. Terence Carter, our Dean of Students, who scored a land-slide victory when the staff voted on the recipient!

We addressed recognition in a number of ways at WEDJ. In the new year (2013), to encourage further recognition, I invited all teacher leaders to a weekend meeting to discuss the possibility of developing more specific leadership roles at WEDJ. Mr. Carter and Mr. Sessoms joined us, but Mr. Manahan could not make it. At this brainstorming session, we created three ‘Dean’ roles (Dean of Special Education; Dean of Fine Arts; and Dean of Teacher Development). We also added three Vice Principal roles (VP, Student Culture; VP, Academics; and VP, School Management.) (<http://www.wedjschool.us/leadership/new-teacher-and-staff-leadership-roles-at-wedj>) Mr. Manahan continued in his role as the Chief Operations Officer and named Rita Lawson as his Deputy Head to oversee non-instructional office staff. Later, when Manahan resigned, Ms. Lawson moved into the VP, School Business position. When the Board asked me to add the ED position to my principal responsibilities, I decided to take a pay cut of \$8000 in order to subsidize the pay of the new administrators in the school. I also felt the wage would be more in alignment with other charters to ensure that more public funds could go back into the school. By the end of the first year, the lead team had expanded to eight people:

- Ms. Bradshaw (VP of Academics)
- Mr. Carter (VP, School Culture)
- Mr. Harris (Dean of Fine Arts)
- Ms. Lawson (VP, Business)
- Ms. Miles (Dean of Special Education)
- Ms. Nugent (Dean of Teacher Development)
- Mr. Sessoms (VP, School Management)
- Dr. Smith (Principal and Acting Executive Director)

We called the group of eight, Team Odyssey, as a tribute to the leadership journey we were taking together. When the idea of restructuring was first presented to Mr. Goldman, he said he thought the idea was brilliant. These were some of the only words of encouragement, I can recall in my 21 months of work at WEDJ. While we had not budgeted for increased salaries for the remainder of the 2012–2013 school year, I felt that staff might appreciate recognition for their efforts to work collaboratively on improving our school.

As a result of this mid-year reorganization, we were able to reduce some overlap by designating within the office staff specific Data Coordinator, Food Services Coordinator and Admissions Coordinator positions. Ms. Lawson would have four direct reports, including Mr. Gregorio (Technology Coordinator), rather than eight, giving her more time to conduct performance reviews and monitor a smaller team. Previously, Ms. Lawson also coordinated the afterschool programming, so technically her hours for oversight would have been from 6:30 am to 6 pm. When Mr. Sessoms agreed to

oversee the cleaning and security staff, Ms. Lawson would have more reasonable hours, and given she managed payroll and the office staff, it made sense to spread out her responsibilities. While this shift recognized the efforts of Ms. Lawson, it was difficult for the members of the security and maintenance team to accept a new supervisor.

The new restructuring kept Mr. Carter as 'second in command' in the VP, School Culture role, where he was freed up to focus on positive school behaviors and work with Mr. Sessoms on discipline-related matters. I wanted Mr. Sessoms to oversee the management of security and facilities. Sessoms set high standards and the school physical plant improved considerably. He worked during winter and summer breaks to provide oversight for cleaning, painting, and bulletin board construction as well as setting up security monitoring systems (including a new intercom) throughout the school. Unfortunately, when I appointed Mr. Sessoms to this position of responsibility, there was backlash from a number of staff members who were not pleased with this decision. There was considerable turnover in his staff and when I spoke with several of his direct reports, they suggested his tone was condescending. When I first arrived, the non-instructional staff did not have clearly defined job responsibilities, so not only did they have to adjust to set expectations and more oversight, the security and maintenance group had to report to someone who was serious about being exceptional. Mr. Goldman had received several calls from members of Sessoms' disgruntled team and asked me to let him go. I was transparent with Sessoms about these concerns, and while I tried to give him advice on different ways to approach his group, I'm not sure these challenges were going to be easy to sort through. I did, however, believe that given the right team, Sessoms would have been able to grow to be that leader people would want to work with, rather than work for. I did not shy away from removing weak team members, but for me, this was about giving people an opportunity to turn things around. While I could have made the popular decision to remove Sessoms, I could not ignore his keen sense of loyalty to the school, how much the students and parents loved him and the obvious change in the cleanliness of the physical plant that he influenced in such a positive way.

Overall, I was very impressed with the way the leadership team stepped up to their responsibilities. In our first year, everyone took on these added responsibilities with only a slight reduction in teaching. The idea that teacher leaders can model teaching while mentoring is not only an affordable way to increase leadership opportunities in schools, but it can also increase credibility when those being mentored can see first-hand that their mentors have similar challenges that they can overcome with best practices. I was so pleased with everyone's commitment, that I nominated four members of the lead team for the *Washington Post* 'Teacher of the Year' Award. I also built in the expectation of nominating educators for awards into each job description, so our lead team would have experience writing nominations, and appreciating the merits of what we all contributed together. Realizing that there would be only one winner, I provided Bradshaw, Harris, Nugent and Sessoms with their own copy of their nomination for their professional portfolios. While no one from WEDJ was selected for this teacher honor that spring, everyone seemed to appreciate the time taken to recognize their strengths.

I also nominated Mr. Carter for the Charter School Hall of Fame Award.

Mr. Carter had an amazing track record as a Dean of Students and now VP, School Culture, at the William E. Doar, Jr. Charter School for the Performing Arts. He didn't just talk about being a family, his efforts to support the students, families and staff were selfless, generous and purposeful. By January, Mr. Carter had every phone number of our families in his cell phone and many were memorized! Families trusted Mr. Carter and his presence at the school makes a difference at WEDJ. As a twenty-year veteran, Mr. Carter was that rock who made home visits, who helped parents and students make good choices and gave administration sound advice. We were proud of so many initiatives he brought to the table. Mr. Carter created a leadership course for our grade 8 students where they used Covey's text: "7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens"... Mr. Carter also taught small groups of males in specialized math support groups...Carter continued to share a love for his students and our school. I can honestly say he was the glue that held us together. Everyone needs a Mr. Carter and I, for one, believe he is one of the most outstanding educators I have met in my 30 plus career as a teacher and school leader.

That spring, the DC Association of Charter Schools STARS Tribute asked for schools to share nominations for outstanding teachers, students, parents and administrators. We submitted Bradshaw, Harris, Nugent and Sessoms as our four teacher nominations, as well as our President of the Parent-Teacher Association, Cynthia Jordan, and a grade 7 popular peer teacher, <student A>. We also nominated Student B, who was a finalist for the Hope Award. The DC Charter School Association, that sponsored the event, also featured the *Son's of Freedom Dance Troop*, led by Mr. Harris, so I was delighted to observe their talent and hear other educators and families sing their praises. I was also pleased that Mr. Sessoms came to cheer on our nominees at the event held at the CAPS Charter School. We sat with Student B's family and were thrilled when they announced that Cynthia Jordan and Student A were selected as the Outstanding Parent and Student for DC Charter Schools.

Whenever there was room to recognize our exceptional talent, I made time to support our students and staff. In addition to nominating selected individuals, we also took National Teacher Appreciation Week seriously at WEDJ. We brought in a massage therapist to give free 15-minute shoulder and neck rubs for each staff member. We also sponsored a popular bowling night social and Ms. Lawson set up a fun Caribbean style tiki dance and dinner party at the end of our staff appreciation week in May 2013.

One of the most thankless positions in a school was the Teaching Assistant (TA) role. At WEDJ we were fortunate to have ten talented folks who worked hard for low wages. I was happy to create the 'TA Tuesday' ritual where I'd bring in treats every Tuesday for our TA's, who were always willing to go the extra mile! I tried to use the bundles on an ongoing basis, to thank staff members who worked hard for WEDJ. I recall many report card nights where we stayed late to make sure over 400 documents were ready for distribution in a timely manner.