

CATCHING FIRE

Piggy-backing off the popular Hunger Games movie, we decided to use the theme: ‘Catching Fire’ to promote a focused campaign aimed at inspiring our students to prepare for the extensive DC-CAS testing in the spring. We created bulletin boards, ordered two expensive banners and integrated TenSquare’s ideas, in an effort to boost staff morale. I wanted our hard-working staff to not lose hope in spite of the negative feedback being targeted at them from the TenSquare coaches.

With all that was happening, it was surprising that the WEDJ Board, TenSquare or the Charter Board, did not take into account WEDJ parent or student voices. To the best of my knowledge, WEDJ had not conducted student or parent interviews in the past. We decided to make surveying parents a regular practice to find out what they liked and what we needed to do, to make things better at WEDJ, to bring parents into the fold as ‘fire starters.’ In our first year, we encouraged parents to complete surveys on-line:

PARENT SURVEY Research says that completing surveys matters – it matters for improving the school, but more importantly, it is evidence that you are eager to play a role in your child’s learning. PLEASE give us 10 minutes of your time, so we can help! It is easy; just click on the school website! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/january-2013-message-from-the-principal>)

A response to the electronic surveys were lower than expected, so we decided to ask families to fill them out when they came for parent-teacher interviews. I shared my lesson learned in a Principal Point newsletter:

I’ve learned that when I want parent feedback, it’s much better to co-design the survey with Mr. Carter. I tried everything to get more than 26 parents to do it digitally on our website – but I listened to you and learned that we need to make direct contact in order to ask for your input... I am persistent about hearing all voices. A huge thanks to Ms. Tiffani Johnson from the PTA, who is currently compiling them, and will share the results at our next PTA meeting!! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/principal-point-february-message-from-dr-smith>)

Tiffany Johnson did a great job of compiling the responses. Overall, we were able to collect close to 60 completed surveys. The following list of findings proved to be quite informative. Respondents indicated that they...

- like the positive spirit in the school. (100%)
- would like the school to offer second language instruction. (97%)

CHAPTER 34

- would like the school to offer daily physical education. (93%)
- like how school supports field trips to New York City to see the arts or Huntsville, Alabama to take part in space camp. (93%)
- like that WEDJ administrators teach some classes. (93%)
- like how students in PK through grade 8 have performances and displays (arts and science displays; dance, drama and music performances). (93%)
- understood that getting their child to school on time can lead to present and future academic success. (92%)
- expect the school to hire exceptional teachers that bring about proficient results on the DC-CAS. (92%)
- appreciated monthly phone calls home. (92%)
- like that students in K through grade 8 can learn Suzuki violin, learn to play the piano and other musical instruments. (90%)
- like the option of learning the arts (dance, music, drama or visual arts) from the school's arts teachers. (90%)
- plan to re-register for the 2014–2015 school year. (83%)
- like the new WEDJ report cards. (88%)
- like how student work can be upgraded to 80% or more. (88%)
- like that grades 3 through 8 students use laptop computers regularly. (82%)
- like that students in grades 3 through 8 learn how to play chess. (71%)
- like that students learn about robotics in grade 3. (67%)

We were very pleased with these survey responses that validated our work to date. We paid attention to the parent feedback and shared the results with the WEDJ community.

Plans for offering second language instruction and daily physical education, to address these curriculum gaps, for instance, were well on their way to becoming a reality.

In addition to listening to our families, we also informed them about how WEDJ was distinct from other schools. We wanted to encourage re-enrollment and communicate the hard work that had been going on. My mentor had often encouraged me to write about WEDJ, but it wasn't until we created this list, did I realize that this school achieved much in a short period of time. We let parents know about the changes and possibilities for what could be next, and let our record stand for families to decide if they wanted to give up their spot at WEDJ – or not.

Keeping the same population of students also increased our chances of improving our test scores. The history of families coming and going had taken its toll on the overall standardized testing scores, and WEDJ was now poised to make substantial improvements. To communicate our current accomplishments as well as some future directions, I shared with families my response to the question, “Why is WEDJ your best choice?” The WEDJ team:

- ... is eager to learn how to become teacher leaders;
- ... like to laugh and compete and speak passionately about their students.

- ...<includes> 12 teachers at Harvard's Project Zero's summer 2013 program.
- ...<includes> one teacher (Ms. Nugent) selected to return to Harvard as a "fellow" with a full ride scholarship
- ...<hires> teachers committed to becoming EXCEPTIONAL

In terms of our innovative offer we listed:

- New programs in 6,7, and 8th grade to keep students excited about settling in – not moving on to a different school
- Research and Technology course (where students work to become an expert in an area)
- Formal debate instruction for all grade 8's (taught by the Harvard debate team's coach)
- Portfolio development for all arts majors
- Chess instruction replaced one hour of math per week for all students in grades 3 through 8. (chess improves math)
- Peer teaching added (learn best when you teach others)
- The hiring of *additional specialists* to develop *Fab Labs* (Gr. 3 robotics); *Wonder Workshops* (PK to Gr. 2 students)
- *Customized materials and resources*
- *Daily physical activity programs* for younger students
- *Technology* support for teachers and students to increase technology use (150 new laptops are here!)

I also let families know that each member of the leadership team was expected to teach at least one hour per day. This leadership structure was a one-of-kind experience that enabled multiple members of an administrative team to share leadership and energy in order to provide focused ways of serving our school community.

I also commented on possibilities for 'what's next?' I felt the community needed to be directly involved in generating WEDJ's future. Separate from the notion of what we could accomplish in our current industrial footprint in Washington's northeast, I also spoke with Goldman about how long the school was committed to our rental agreement. Paying for too many significant upgrades to a building could be lost, if the Board decided to rent or purchase property somewhere else. I felt that being in the northeast, servicing the area we were in, made good sense. While an arts school might have been welcomed in every part of DC, I was fine with the location. Having more natural light would be something the school had to address if a capital campaign could have ever been established to purchase the site. We were locked in to over 7-figure rental payments until 2019, which was a significant drain on the budget. This was a serious question the Board of Trustees needed to address, but even when I tried to get the topic on the agenda, the topic rarely surfaced in anything but a superficial way.

Apart from what families, students and staff shared in face-to-face meetings, casual conversations and surveys, I felt it was important to share ideas out of the

ordinary that might not have been on the minds of community members as well. Not everything has to be a fixed idea that is, how the red brick schoolhouse looks and how it operates. Before cementing in a predictable list of strategic goals, a school should give students, staff and families an opportunity to think about ideas for “what’s next?”, beyond the borders of what is. A ‘Vision Quest’ type activity or retreat, where stakeholders could learn more about exceptional schools around the world, would have been a tremendous way to find out more about and consider the possibility of engaging ‘outlier’ experiences. In our leadership team meetings, we often discussed ‘blue sky’ ideas. I shared these ideas with parents and staff about “what’s next?” I tried to whet their appetite by imagining how WEDJ might:

- Develop a film/video production studio (As a leader in the arts, we need to move our arts program into the 21st century, by building and integrating technology into everything we do!)
- Build a “*Community Can Press*” business in partnership with existing businesses or, on our own, where parents, teachers and students write, publish, illustrate and promote on-line and print books.
- Create an *adult education program* with college credits to provide career-based training
- Build a *teacher education “lab school” program* (so WEDJ could be where the most current research in education is carried out...WEDJ staff would be taught how to be presenters and conference organizers, no longer just observers of other’s <and as such>*Attract and keep 100% exceptional teachers*, all capable of providing expert examples of what works in urban education.

I shared with families that there should be no limits to the kinds of changes we could address moving forward. These pictures of hope take more than one year to develop and it takes a huge leap of faith to take education beyond what can be seen now. For such lofty goals to take shape, students, staff, parents and the Board of Trustees, needed to catch the ‘fire’ and be moved to plan and own the next direction. In order to commit to improvement, they would need to take a part in it. A group of 3–5 people sitting on a Board of Trustees cannot determine where to point the compass alone. It requires all community members (staff, students, families, and responsible others) to have the courage and the will to learn and play a part in making WEDJ their best choice. As the school leader, my vision was about building a school where innovation builds on innovation, in spite of successful failures. The success of Walt Disney was all about making a path for the brave – and I believe the young people of WEDJ should have had the right to be schooled through a vision of hope. If charter schools can dream, they can provide the kind of lasting hope that moves young people, way beyond graduating in college. I often spoke of WEDJ as a great choice for families. We were committed to choosing a path for children to LEAD, rather than follow a road that leads to nowhere.

There should be no limits to a school that has a main thrust of creativity. Where there is a will, there is a way. People and resources can line up behind ideas; rarely

will generous funding come from thin goals that simple state – we will do better on tests.

The lyrics to the school song, pretty much sum up the idea that WEDJ, as a arts school, can and should be “more than” a conventional school:

I am WEDJ (WEDJ School Song)
I am *more than* I can imagine.
I am *more than* I've ever heard.
More than what some can believe.
More than what's expected.
More than what's assumed of me.
I am more. I am more. I am WEDJ.
Through knowledge and expression, I can do anything.
Outstanding. Amazing. I will be *more than* these.
I am *more than* I can imagine.
I am *more than* I've ever heard.
More than what some can believe.
More than what's expected.
More than what's assumed of me.
I am more. I am more. I am WEDJ.
– written by J. Lockhart

WEDJ was poised to catch the kind of fire that engages students, staff and the community.

Unfortunately, the WEDJ Board of Trustees, ultimately responsible for sanctioning change, did not catch fire or imagine much beyond the parochial perspectives of those who only worshipped improved test scores.