



**Washington State Association for
Supervision
and Curriculum Development**

**“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
www.wsascd.org**

**‘Critical Questions’ Series
Mid-February 2013**

**What’s in Your Trophy Case?
The Power of Collective Commitments**

When a parent walks into your school, they will be able to tell what your school values by what is in your trophy case. Will they know what makes your school a great place? Will they know what the hopes and dreams are for your students? We subconsciously communicate to our community what our school values by what we choose to celebrate.

With all the noise of modern educational initiatives, it is easy for our true values and vision to get lost in translation. Do we succumb to the ever present pull of current initiatives and focus on TPEP, CCSS, STEM, evolving changing graduation requirements, adequate funding, charter schools or, do we focus on our core mission...ensuring the learning of every child? At the heart of every learning community’s effort to meet its core purpose endures the pressing challenge of establishing and holding true to its sense of vision and mission—to make certain that ensuring high levels of learning for each child does not become a hollow axiom.

In the White River School District, we acknowledge where we need to grow, where we are good, and further acknowledge that being good is the enemy of great. As much as discussions and acknowledgement help unify and focus a staff, there exists a need for purposeful and ongoing action. The “expectation-acceptance gap” represents the difference between what we *say* we expect and what we *truly* accept. The gap is caused by excuses, both stated and unstated. If ensuring high levels of learning for all students is our mission then, what are we willing to do about it? We must realize that the challenge is not that we do not know what to expect; the challenge is, all too often, what we silently choose to accept.

In Eaker and Keating’s (2008) article “A Shift in Culture,” they ask specific questions that uncover the importance of why we must chose to unify around shared values: What do we do when a student is not meeting standard? What do we do when a staff member is not meeting standard? What are we willing to promote, protect, and defend? What are we willing to commit to and insist upon? What are our core responsibilities? The answers establish our collective commitments. Creating, upholding, and celebrating written collective commitments as a staff, unifies and focuses a team’s work around a shared vision.

The following are two examples of establishing collective commitments in the White River School District: Mountain Meadow in 2009 and Glacier Middle School in 2011.

Mountain Meadow Elementary

As Mountain Meadow Elementary staff endeavored to breathe life into their mission, they built shared knowledge and discovered there was no one right way of creating collective commitments, but there were best practices. In *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) illustrated the following ideas:

- Commitment statements must link directly to the vision and mission statements.
- Use direct language.
- Focus on behavior statements, not belief statements. What we truly value is reflected in what we are committed to do. We can control behavior, not beliefs.
- Commitments must focus on one's self, rather than others.
- Write commitments in action-oriented "We will..." statements.
- Regularly, and publicly, memorialize and celebrate commitments.

The key to collective commitment fruition lay in building the shared knowledge of a guiding coalition (the building leadership team), seeking their guidance at implementation, memorializing the commitments, and consistently revisiting our commitments through celebration of their attainment. During a Mountain Meadow team leader meeting, they discussed how to share the collective commitments effectively with the staff. The leadership team decided that each team leader would meet with a mixed grade level team during the first part of a staff meeting. During this time, they built the shared knowledge of the staff; teaching their colleagues about collective commitments and how the commitments bring life to the school's mission. Following this time, the team leaders shared the working draft of the collective commitments and sought their colleagues' input. The staff wholeheartedly embraced the key ideas of the commitments, which follow.

The Mountain Meadow Learning Community will...

1. respectfully collaborate around revising and informing our instruction based on learning data and standards
2. proactively and intentionally work with all learners and provide extra time and support
3. make learning targets clear to help each learner achieve standard and reach the target
4. model lifelong learning and the commitment to quality work with continual growth
5. actively involve parents and community in the learning process

Glacier Middle School

Staff was engaged in a back to school meeting in August where we focused on developing a collective set of commitments that focused on individual adult behaviors which fostered student learning. The first step was to develop shared knowledge with staff by reading Eaker and Keating's article (2008). Staff was asked to reflect on how they would need to behave if they were going to become the school they wanted to become. In a jigsaw, activity staff developed a series of commitments that reflected professional dispositions that would foster and support students at Glacier

Middle School. In a group discussion, they analyzed the work of the group by asking the following questions:

- a. What collective commitments did the group feel were the most important? Why?
- b. Were there any commitments that people could not commit to? If so, why?
- c. Are these commitments specific enough about how we will behave as a group?
- d. Are we leaving any commitments out that need to be included?

Upon concluding this conversation, they were able to narrow their commitments to a handful, which are listed below.

GMS Collective Commitments

1. We commit to modeling **PROFESSIONALISM**. This means bringing our best each day, engaging in school-wide collaboration, and celebrating!
2. We commit to setting nothing less than **HIGH EXPECTATIONS**. This means setting high standards, holding students accountable for learning, expecting all students to do their personal best every day, and inspiring all students to be in control of their own education.
3. We commit to the use of **RIGOR** in our lessons. This means seeking opportunities to implement higher level thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
4. We commit to using effective teaching **STRATEGIES**. This means will implement and share a variety of teaching strategies with team and in our classroom.
5. We commit to using **LEARNING TARGETS**. This means providing student friendly learning targets with checks for understanding & providing clear learning targets for each lesson.
6. We commit to having a unified **RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION**. This means identifying students most in need, approaching formative assessment with a commitment to address student misconceptions (skill gap), frequently checking student progress and respond accordingly, using data from quick check for planning and enrichment activities, and using assessment scores to drive teaching practices
7. We commit to establishing **RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS**. This means treating all students dignity respect, building empowering relationships with positive interaction with students, believing in every student, creating a caring culture by greeting students with a smile and enthusiasm 'I-Can' mentality, and engaging each student before class.
8. We commit to showing **COMPASSION** to all of our students. This means each student receives a clean slate every day and promoting and model a culture of acceptance and compassion.
9. We commit to keeping our students **SAFE**. This means speaking positively in all environments with all student staff and parents, empowering students with social skills that will create a positive environment, building physical and emotional safety, and creating and maintaining an environment where students and staff feel safe and valued.

Memorializing & Sustaining Collective Commitments

The collaborative creation of collective commitments will bolster the shared vision of one's learning community. If teams stop at the creation of collective commitments, the shared vision will erode over time. Both Mountain Meadow and Glacier regularly revisit their commitments. Both teams memorialized their commitments through art. The Mountain Meadow staff created and installed a mural in the school's main hallway, while the Glacier staff collaboratively created a visual representation of each commitment, which is prominently displayed in their library. Each school's

principal makes a concerted effort to publicize how an individual or team has personified one of the school's commitments each week in the staff bulletin. Moreover, they regularly honor teams and individuals whose efforts are enduring exemplars of their commitments through Collective Commitment Awards. For example, Mountain Meadow's first award recognized staff members who mentored a struggling reader. This student formerly qualified for special services and went on to obtain the highest score in the school on the state's fifth grade reading assessment.

What's in Your Trophy Case?

Eaker and Keating wrote, "The challenge of changing culture is the challenge of changing behavior, of persuading people to act in new ways." Though a noble goal, working to ensure the learning of all students cannot come to realization without a clear shared vision, an articulated mission, and collective commitments to act. Collaboratively creating and sustaining a schools vision, mission, and collective commitments creates and sustains powerful unified action.

Adam Uhler, Principal

Mountain Meadow Elementary
auhler@whiteriver.wednet.edu
360-829-6046

Greg Borgerding Ed.D., Principal

Glacier Middle School
gborgerding@whiteriver.wednet.edu
360-829-6158

References:

- DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & DuFour, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work: New insights for improving schools*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Eaker, R. & Keating, J. (2008). A Shift in Culture: Collective commitments focus on change that benefits student learning. *Journal of Staff Development*, 29 (3), 14-17.