



Selah School District

in Washington



 thoughtexchange

The challenge of changing school start times

Selah School District is committed to bringing innovations in education to their students. When research from the American Academy of Pediatrics suggested later school start times for senior students improved performance, the Board was eager to implement the change. Firm in the belief that sound research should inform school policy, they set out a clear position in support of the research, with plans to implement new start times in September of 2015. Because the research had such a strong and clear positive impact on student success, Selah's leadership team was confident that the community would get behind the decision.

739 participants

1,666 thoughts

25,060 stars

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But, as Selah's school leaders will attest, making any change is hard. From early face-to-face conversations in the District, they realized that this particular change would prove particularly challenging. The pushback focused on student success - the very thing the initiative was supposed to improve. Stakeholders wondered whether late start times set children up for lives of achievement, or a sense that the world should change to accommodate their needs. Further, how was the District supposed to manage the change? At what point does focusing on student success sacrifice the needs of those around them?

Selah School District was grappling with these questions when they decided to run a Thoughtexchange in the spring of 2015. Early in the planning process it became clear that rushing the engagement would not be effective. The Board pulled back from the decision to implement the change in the coming fall. The push for innovation had to be balanced with another cultural cornerstone: a sense of integrity and doing the right thing. The Board promised stakeholders in the community authentic engagement, and pushing a schedule change through without genuine listening would undermine that promise.

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Using Thoughtexchange, the District posed several broad questions to community members. *What are the benefits of changing start times? What are the challenges?* 739 community members provided almost 1,700 answers. In the Star step - where stakeholders read the thoughts of others and prioritize them - they assigned 25,060 stars to the ones they felt most passionately about. What emerged was an almost perfect split between agreement and disagreement, in both staff and parents. And the perspectives ranged widely, both in tenor and intensity.

The results of the Thoughtexchange process revealed that changing start times would seriously strain the entire community. Whether they supported the change or not, most stakeholders worried about the impact on family and personal time. Would giving students

that extra hour lead to “students [who] are alert and ready to learn, performing at their maximum potential and contributing to the learning of others” as one community member expressed? Or would it “take time away from family dinners and family events”? For the high school students who needed to work, would employers allow for the schedule change, or would those students get a hard lesson in the inflexibility of the real world?

It also became apparent that *no matter the final decision*, half of the community would need to be convinced of the value of a position they currently opposed. It was a lesson in real world leadership because in the public realm, it is the rare decision that can be wrapped up nicely with a clear direction and no contention. This is especially true when you truly commit to engage with the people you serve. You can’t often move forward easily with the results.

Is the alternative to authentic engagement better? Making a decision without public consultation might seem easier, but during implementation, the seams connecting the community turn into cracks that divide, and dissatisfaction grows into resistance. What felt efficient soon becomes bogged down, angrier because issues were ignored during the planning phase. Asking real questions and listening to the answers does not guarantee a fast and easy solution. It uncovers problems that need to be solved. Problems that can be addressed, or solutions that can be found, before starting the new program or initiative.



The Selah School District, in partnership with students, parents and the community, inspires a culture of life-long learning for all.
selah.k12.wa.us



Over time, broad engagement has a deeper impact. It creates the sense that leadership *wants* the public to inform the decisions that affect them. People feel encouraged and empowered to share and this builds trust. Trust that will transfer into broader support for the mission and vision of leadership, because the public knows their perspectives were used to inform that mission and vision. It is with this kind of culture that support can be garnered for the innovative programs that set districts apart in our competitive world. Engagement builds trust, trust supports innovation.

For Selah, the decision to pull back and authentically engage was not the straightest or easiest path. In fact it was pretty messy. However, it did provide the District with an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to acting with integrity – even when the results weren't convenient. When they promised authentic engagement, that is exactly what the community got. This circle of action following words is what will continue to reinforce their culture and lay a strong foundation for their future of innovation.

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