



Students work on a hands-on project at the Waukesha STEM Academy.

THE SCHOOL Leader PERSPECTIVE

Principals of the Year
discuss leadership
and school success

Each year, the Department of Public Instruction and the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators (AWSA) recognize outstanding school leaders as Wisconsin’s Principals of the Year. Research shows that school leaders, specifically principals, have an enormous impact on a school’s success.

“School leadership has a profound impact on the climate of a school and the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “Our Principals of the Year take this fact to heart as they work to ensure every student is learning and progressing toward college and career readiness.”

“More than being a leader of a school, principals serve to provide support for teachers to shine every day in their jobs as instructors,” said AWSA Executive Director Jim Lynch. “It is an honor to have so many exceptional leaders in our schools.”

We reached out to the 2017 Wisconsin Principals of the Year, who were honored at the 2018 State Education Convention, and invited them to share their perspectives on public education and school leadership.

2017 PRINCIPALS OF THE YEAR

JAMES MURRAY

Waukesha STEM Academy – Saratoga
Campus, Waukesha School District
(secondary principal of the year)

DANIEL H. WESTFAHL

Brookfield Elementary School,
Elmbrook School District
(elementary principal of the year)

DOUG CROWLEY

DeForest Area High School,
DeForest Area School District
(associate principal of the year)

JAMES MURRAY

2017 Secondary Principal
of the Year, Waukesha

“At the Waukesha STEM Academy, we have completely flipped the way that we “do school” on its head.”

A New STEM

When students walk through the doors of the Waukesha STEM Academy, they begin to embark upon a new journey in their lives — they begin to Solve Today’s Everyday Mysteries (STEM). While most educators and professionals in the field consider STEM to represent science, technology, engineering and mathematics, at the Waukesha STEM Academy, we have completely flipped the way that we “do school” on its head.

Visitors who make the journey to our school have been overheard saying, “When you go to some schools, you have to look for STEM but when you come here, you have to watch out for it and step over it!

It’s everywhere you look.”

The truth in this statement couldn’t be any more powerful and accurate to the students and teachers who spend their time inside our school. For one thing, our school looks different than others. It’s a deconstructed facility with open and flexible learning spaces where our students have created some of the most fascinating inventions and projects ever seen in a school setting. Many of these projects have won statewide and national competitions, such as the Future City Competition, STEM Forward, the Google Science Fair, the Chicago Toy and Game Fair and several other innovative events across the nation.

In a seminar-based course catalog named STEM-Pathways, our students

are able to choose which track of learning they want to explore based on their own interests and their potential college and career choices. Students are able to choose from seminars such as Fab Lab, the Business and Marketing of Video Games, Jewelry and Metalsmithing, and a world cultures seminar named Global Social Action. Students are able to explore not only the areas of focus that are interesting to them, but more importantly, those that are relevant to their own personalized, life-long goals.

We want to enable students to explore areas of interest to see if they want to continue to pursue courses within this track. If courses within a certain subject area are not a great fit for their personalized



2017 Secondary Principal of the Year James Murray with State Superintendent Tony Evers (left) and AWSA Associate Executive Director Joe Schroeder (right) at the 2018 State Education Convention.



learning experience, students are able to take an interest inventory, along with a selection survey that helps them to choose other courses.

Our course and seminar-selection setup is very similar to choosing courses in a collegiate and technical school setting, but they are also condensed to six-week sessions, so students are able to enjoy up to six seminars per year. Not only does this enable students to explore and pursue pathways of interest and relevance with not just breadth, but some serious depth while also covering all requirements for state mandates that are set for middle school students.

The least common denominator and bare minimum is that our students will leave our school with the same baseline knowledge of any middle school student across the country. The accelerant and key benefits are that students will also participate in collaborating, thinking about, planning, innovating, creating, testing and finding an overall need for the application of these skills on a daily basis in order to truly master each skill. We are not just creating masters of content, we are growing experts in context.

Students can also propose their own project ideas as part of their capstone project, which takes place every 12 weeks. Students who are not interested in the capstone project topics that are offered can propose

their own project ideas and dictate how they share their project and demonstrate mastery in what they are researching, designing and creating.

Each round of capstone projects culminates with a STEaM Gallery Night, where the “a” in STEaM represents the application of skills and demonstration of knowledge to a public audience. The power in the STEaM - Gallery Nights, is that these events allow for students to receive feedback from their peers, parents and teachers while encouraging them to present and teach others publicly, all while the potential of a risk of failure is present. This is real life and this is preparing them for the world

that extends beyond the walls (or lack thereof) of our school.

To support project-based learning and collaborative efforts to succeed both in and out of school, our students have also seen a steady increase in service learning and social action opportunities. These activities include donating vegetables grown in the school’s gardens to local food shelters, weeding and cleaning up local farmlands, raising money and collecting food and clothing for local women’s centers, partnering with nearby businesses to volunteer at retirement homes, as well as partnering up with mentoring programs with younger students.

It’s more than just completing some homework, taking a test, or creating a project for a grade on your report card that drives these students to go above and beyond. It’s about learning about life, working with others and taking an idea and creating a product to help increase the quality of life around them that reigns supreme and fuels the fire for knowledge, building relationships, fostering a strong community and creating an ecosystem of trust that flows through the building, organically. Welcome to the Waukesha STEM Academy, where every student deserves, discovers and helps create their very own, unique personalized learning experience. □



Students collaborate on a project at the Waukesha STEM Academy.

DANIEL WESTFAHL

2017 Elementary Principal
of the Year, Elmbrook

“My work at Brookfield Elementary School has allowed me to grow as an educator, inspire as a leader, and continue to live the dream that I had as a child.”

Call Me Principal

Ten years ago, a well-respected colleague guided me from the classroom to the principalship by stating these simple words: “It’s time to make your classroom bigger.” After serving for more than 16 amazing years as a first-grade teacher, I took the leap to administration, and am now completing my ninth year as a principal. My work at Brookfield Elementary School has allowed me to grow as an educator, inspire as a leader, and continue to live the dream that I had as a child.

There was never a doubt what I would be when I grew up. I was enamored by my grade school teachers and revered them as most young boys honor sports figures. While others were playing GI Joe, I was building school houses out of Lego bricks. In high school, I returned to my middle school to help some of my favorite teachers, and while my friends were debating what they would study in college, I knew I would end up in a classroom.

I loved being a teacher. In addition to reading stories, playing math games, dressing as a silly scientist, and helping all children grow and



succeed, I held numerous leadership positions in our school and district. I developed our school schedule and assisted our principal with budgeting. I wrote curriculum for science, spelling, and reading and started a number of programs and events that continue today.

More than just teaching children to read and write, it was my job to help children to think deeply, to problem solve, to care about themselves and others, and to love learning. I approached each day with reverence, ensuring that joy and novelty were a part of our routines just as morning meetings and read

aloud. I knew that I was successful as a teacher when students informed me that they were entering the education field because of the influence I had on them in our first-grade classroom.

As a building principal, I hope to bring this same joy and inspiration to the 75 adults and nearly 600 children with whom I am privileged to work. In addition to the staggering array of varied administrative duties, I view each day as an opportunity to connect and inspire. Whether it is providing an article for a teacher to read on a topic of interest or discussing a classroom observation, I hope my experiences in the classroom help our teachers to continue to grow and improve. Sharing stories and conferencing with students during writing workshop time help me to connect with kids and keep me grounded in the most effective teaching practices.

I find joy each day in sharing silly lunches with students or wearing silly socks to celebrate a school-wide milestone. A closet full of costumes means our families get to see Zero the Hero or the Cat in the Hat visit our hallways. Every day is an opportunity to create moments with our students and staff, and a chance to observe our school from the inside out.



2017 Elementary Principal of the Year Daniel Westfahl with State Superintendent Tony Evers (left) and AWSA Associate Executive Director Joe Schroeder (right) at the 2018 State Education Convention.

My time is best spent outside of the office and inside our classrooms, engaging with students and families, learning from and with our outstanding teachers, and identifying areas we can continue to grow.

I will always be a teacher, and because of that I will always be a student. I draw inspiration from learning something new every day, from reading and studying, discussing and debating. As the world of education continues to grow, it is my job to maintain current with research and

practice, and to share this information with our staff at every opportunity. It is also my responsibility to be visible for our students and teachers, and to do whatever I can to ensure that their time in front of students is maximized and efficient. It is vital that I am able to practice what I preach, and to help our teachers find inspiration in the areas they deem necessary.

Joe Schroeder, associate executive director of AWSA, recently quoted John Saphier in stating that, “The greatest leaders are vulnerable and

strong at the same time. And they use those qualities to mobilize irresistible collective action.”

This seemingly contradictory dichotomy is another reason the role of a principal is engaging and exciting. Every day, I seek to find balance in leading our schools without knowing the answers, modeling what we hope to happen without being able to predict the results. It is this juncture that compels us to find areas of improvement while still celebrating successes. □

DOUG CROWLEY

2017 Assistant Principal
of the Year, DeForest

“At DeForest Area High School, the “titled” leaders have worked hard to create a culture where staff *and* students feel comfortable...”

■ The Layers of Leadership

Leadership (noun) is defined by Merriam-Webster as the “capacity to lead” or “the act or an instance of leading.” As a principal, an assistant principal, or director at the district office, leadership is “there” for your taking; you are viewed as a leader by virtue of your title. At DeForest Area High School, though, the “titled” leaders have worked hard to create a culture where staff *and* students feel comfortable and, I dare say, entitled to find ways to lead.

It’s taken years of building trust, allowing staff to try things and, possibly, fail, and letting them know that we, the principals, are OK with that. It’s taken time after time of asking staff to “just try this” or saying, “The district office has asked a building to pilot this. I said we would do it!” It’s taken meeting upon meeting of sharing data with staff (numbers don’t lie) so staff members understand that a problem exists and we all need to be part of a solution. But, in the end, that time is well spent and there is a sense of empowerment in the building.

In the last three years, staff have identified problems, developed

solutions, and then, after the fact, asked administration if it is okay to go forward and do something. For example, our academic data as well as our discipline data was disproportionate with various subsections. What should we do? Well, staff created a Cultural Diversity Committee (CDC) to identify where the gaps fell, what our options were, and what to do to try to improve them.

■ Uneven Growth

Leaders grow in uneven spurts, we know that. The CDC group looked to make changes quickly, but soon realized they needed to adjust their thinking from wanting to make changes in how some students thought (not being culturally sensitive, for example) to making sure we had all staff members “on board” and trained in culturally sensitive teaching practices.

All the while, CDC leaders gave tips on what staff could do in classrooms to be more inclusive, got students to share their stories in a panel discussion format, and continued to gather data. Now, today, our leaders are leading multiple book studies, have dedicated time in each staff



meeting for a report, and have started to stretch their arms around other buildings in the district to develop teacher leaders at each level.

This group’s goals have bled into other teacher-piloted groups and we are seeing a great deal of cross-committee growth. We have a “Transparent Teaching” group that is encouraging (and demonstrating) other teachers to get into classrooms across the building to see what colleagues are doing with some of our initiatives and how they are working with students they may share. Additionally, we have an Advisory Lesson group that is looking to our CDC for ideas on what to teach students

in terms of culturally sensitive practices.

■ Student Leaders: Yes!

What about our students? We have dedicated leaders like any high school: the class presidents, the club leaders, the Student Council. But our student leadership doesn't end there.

Taking a cue from our CDC, a group of students from last year's panel came forward looking for a way to call students to action and discuss "real world" topics impacting them. After their meeting, the students' advisor wrote me that, "There was an hour-plus discussion around goal, purpose, recruitment and whether or not it would be open to all. Students changed the name to Ethnic Student Union (ESU) after wanting to encompass all students." Our students need to learn how to find a passion, find a voice, and find solutions. At DeForest Area High School, we try to cultivate this.

Finally, we have a group of junior and senior students (Norski Mentors) that lead our freshmen orientation (held this year on the last day of school). These students apply and are from all social circles in our building — they are a pretty true representation of our student body. With help from their advisor, students planned a three-hour "Welcome to DAHS" including a tour, a walk through of freshmen schedules, and a lesson on how to not get crushed in the Homecoming victory cheer.

Leadership (noun) can also be defined by Merriam-Webster as "the leaders of an organization, country, etc." At DeForest Area High School, we are most proud of that definition of the word as it really captures the essence of what everyone (students and staff) are hoping to be or are helping to do already. Developing a community of leaders should be a goal of any school. ■

2018

PRINCIPALS OF THE YEAR

Earlier this year, the Department of Public Instruction and the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators announced the 2018 Wisconsin Principals of the Year. They will be recognized at the 2019 State Education Convention.

Secondary Principal of the Year

Mike Kruse, Stoughton High School, Stoughton School District

Elementary Principal of the Year

Scott Walter, Riverside Elementary School, Menomonee Falls School District

School District Assistant Principal of the Year

Justin Szews, Lakeland Union High School, Lakeland Union School District



"The EMC Milwaukee Branch is so responsive. It's nice to call a local Wisconsin number instead of a national number. It really feels like EMC is a Wisconsin-based company."



Luke Francois
Mineral Point School District
Superintendent

Work with an insurance company that's right in your own backyard. Our underwriters, claims personnel and loss control representatives are experts in school insurance and operate through our Milwaukee Branch office, giving you the local attention you deserve.

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