

Finding hope in difficult times



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The school district has been hit hard lately with the deaths of several loved ones in our school community, including the recent tragic loss of one of our high school students. It has left many of us feeling a deep, visceral sadness – and for some, a feeling of hopelessness.

And yet it's at times like these when hope is so important.

A better tomorrow

As I've written before, hope is something we spend a lot of time thinking and talking about in our district. We're in the business of preparing young people for a bright future, so it makes sense that we want to instill hope in the work we do.

The research on hope is compelling. It provides a strong rationale for making hope a priority.

Hope is positively correlated with academic achievement and increased self-esteem. When children are hopeful, they tend to be more persistent, more confident, and, ultimately, more successful in school and life.

It's all about relationships

In our schools, we emphasize the importance of relationships as a vital hope-building mechanism. When we connect with students at an individual level – when we recognize their strengths, gifts and potential – we can help build them up. That leads to a sense of value on their part – and a belief in a hopeful future. This takes place in different ways:

- Teachers this year asked students to write a note about themselves and share something special they wanted their teacher to know.
- At one school, staff members each year put up all student names on the wall and place a dot next to the name of students they

know well. They then make an effort to develop a relationship and learn more about students with no dots by their name.

- The high school girls' swim team this year did an activity where they had each member of the team come forward on a different day, while her teammates all said something uniquely special about her. Elementary classrooms have done this same activity.

- The visioning team for the new 6-8 middle school has made relationships a central part of their focus. The team is determined to ensure that AMS is a school where hope flourishes as they help guide adolescents through the middle years.

- We have an ongoing conversation in the district about how to further connect students to clubs, sports and other activities at school because we know nurtured relationships often come from those extra-curricular activities.

Showing gratitude

Another pathway to hope is gratitude.

The link between gratitude and hope is clear-cut. Research has found that those who regularly take time to note and share gratitude in their lives develop less stress and feel more hopeful about the future.

Accordingly, one school has launched "gratitude journals" this year where staff are encouraged to write specific things for which they are grateful. When staff enter each day with hope, it trickles down to the children. The impact we have on one another is profound.

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Individual and community support

Of course, being hopeful is more challenging for some students than others. A number of our students face mental health challenges, significant adversity at home or other life obstacles.

To give them hope, we need to provide professional help through school counselors, mental health therapists and our social worker. Community supports for these programs, including recent auctions by the Anacortes Rotary and Soroptimist International, have been amazing. Anacortes Schools Foundation also provided support for mental health sessions for ASD students last summer to make sure students stayed connected while school is out.

Add to that Ready to Learn Fair, Food to Go, Learning & Lunches, before-school programs, mentors and Island Hospital's ongoing mental health partnership, and the community connections have been incredible in helping us build hope. Of course the work others do outside of school – through churches, Boys & Girls Club, the family shelter, community mental health providers and more – is all part of the "hope" fabric.

At the end of a recent memorial service, one of the speakers said: "We choose hope."

Let's continue to make that commitment as a community.

Let's commit to being grateful.

Let's commit to being kind.

Let's commit to helping each and every child – and every adult – in this community see a future for themselves where they can thrive and be happy.