

# Stay Interviews

Listening to your employees can help improve your district and employee satisfaction

*Christine Hedstrom*



**H**ow do we as leaders in the education business address employee retention? Over the past several years, the School District of Waukesha has experienced a growing number of resignations as opposed to retirements. People are not staying in one spot as long as they used to. We've heard a variety of reasons for this — some vicariously and others directly. We've made assumptions about pay, benefits, the impact of Act 10 and the resulting “free agency” among teachers and administrators, but what do we really know about why people leave?

The School District of Waukesha has conducted exit interviews for a number of years. However, it is lagging data (information received after the fact and the employee has

already left the organization). A more proactive method is to find out what is important to employees before they want to leave.

That's why we engaged in a “stay” interview process this school year. About 70 employees participated and provided us with honest feedback about their personal satisfaction working in the district. Participation was voluntary and employees could choose to respond via an online survey format or in a face-to-face situation.

Senior leaders with the school district engaged these 70 employees who came from different employee groups: teachers, administrators, secretaries, and custodians. The majority were teachers across the district. The feedback received — 189 pages of data — was broken down into some common themes.

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being

most satisfied, the majority of employees rated their satisfaction levels in working for the School District of Waukesha a 7, 8 or 9. Likewise, when we asked participants to rank the district overall, the majority gave the district a 7, 8 or 9. Even with these high rankings, we learned there is room for improvement. Several things need to happen for the district to earn a 10. This is where the major themes from the surveys come in.

## Common Themes — What We Heard

The “big rocks” in terms of employment satisfaction could be summed up in a half dozen bullet points, but the value of the conversations meant being able to dig deeper and learn more about what people cared about.

For example, our employees really love that Waukesha is innova-



tive and on the cutting edge of education. Everyone felt invested in their work and found it meaningful. They appreciate the district's collaborative culture.

Yet, amidst all of the positives we heard, and there were many, we also heard what our employees struggle with — stress levels, the workload, and pressure.

Teaching used to mainly entail planning a lesson, teaching it, and moving on. A teacher could go home at night knowing he or she accomplished the day's agenda. Today, teaching has become much more complex. Most employees could not pinpoint specific district initiatives as the culprit for the increased workload; instead there

seems to be a perpetual state of re-prioritization. Efforts to improve reading, and math and infuse technology are not new initiatives, but they are recent improvement efforts and we need a system that under-

professional learning communities so that teachers can share resources, assessment and instructional best practices working smarter, not harder.

**Curriculum.** The curriculum used to be a book telling the teacher what to do each school day. Now we have standards that guide the work we do and teachers spend a lot of time finding resources that align with the standards. One of the great things is the amount of resources we have available; but curiously, this can also be a challenge because there is so much to choose from!

The bottom line is, teachers understand how important it is to engage kids and that takes a lot of work. The work does not end because the opportunities are endless.

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stands the framework of working in that environment. To help our teachers deal with these added responsibilities, we want to focus on maximizing our collaborative time in



Based on this feedback, our curriculum and instruction department has more clearly outlined the curriculum design process. We now house all syllabi, common benchmark assessments and resources in one place so teachers can easily access

this information.

**Communication.** There are pockets of good and bad communication, often dependent on building leadership. Some said they are feeling isolated or out of the loop. However, many employees said they do feel

they are in the know and are aware of changes when they occur. People want to understand the district processes, especially about change.

With this feedback in mind, the district leadership team is working to model more frequent communication via our weekly blogs and other sources to help promote and celebrate our mission and vision to all stakeholders. Employees subscribe to our weekly e-newsletter, Connect, to receive up-to-the-minute information.

**Professional Development and Educator Effectiveness.** Time is a valuable resource in our district. School leaders and educators are trying to do more with a limited amount of time. How do we create a culture of learning within the constraints placed upon us? State mandates, such as Educator Effectiveness, are taking up large amounts of staff time. Staff also gave us feedback on how our walk-through tool could be improved. A walk-through tool is a classroom observation document that gives targeted, immediate feedback to teachers on the domains of instructional practices and classroom environment. Teachers seek to receive more concrete responses to how they are doing, particularly what they are doing well.

Our commitment to continuous learning is highly valued in the School District of Waukesha. We have developed a self-directed program that provides teachers a rolling tide of opportunities to learn and grow throughout the school year at the time and place that is right for them.

**Compensation.** With compensation, it has become clear that working without a published salary schedule is detrimental to the working environment. With a salary schedule in place, teaching employees are better able to understand the pathway for higher earnings, and recognition for work and leadership. A salary schedule, in essence, takes money off the table and allows employees to focus on the creativity required to do a great job working and supporting students.

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Our board of education appreciates this perspective and one of the goals this year is to have a compensation plan completed and fully implemented for 2015-2016. That said, some employees were clear they want merit pay; others just want a raise.

We are deep in the planning and implementation stages of our strategic compensation framework. Through a collaborative effort of teachers and administrators, this innovative model, built to develop teacher leadership and honor teacher performance and student achievement results, will provide a clear path of compensation for teachers and administrators in our system.

### What We Learned

Overall, taking the time to meet face-to-face was a worthwhile effort. Employees appreciated that adminis-

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tration took the time to connect; administration appreciated the opportunity to get to know employees on a more personal level. However, some of our questions turned out to be a bit unclear: for example, when asked about trusting or respecting the leadership, were we asking about the building, the department, or the senior leadership? And, there were questions we wished we had asked; like how many total years of service in education did each participant have, and how many years of local service? We anecdotally observed that employees who had worked elsewhere generally ranked our district higher than employees

who had not.

You can learn a lot about your employees simply by asking for their input. Among other things, we learned that our internal communication efforts can be

improved and that time, or the lack of it, is one of the biggest challenges facing our employees. We plan on continuing these interviews and expanding upon them. Stay interviews not only give the perspective of your employees but also give employees a way to communicate their thoughts on district operations. In a time when school employees are often moving between districts, we hope these interviews help us improve our district not only for our students but also our employees. ■

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