

## The Principal

GREG VANDAL

### A Better Measure of Effectiveness

Last December, I spent a Friday afternoon compiling a report on recent PSAT results from our school. I hoped to convey to the local Board of Education that our system is growing academically stronger, that we are keeping pace in a world intent on measuring schools by objective criteria. Our test scores are strong, but our registration guide describes no Calculus course and no Advanced Biology; I fear we may fall victim to "economy of size" reorganization efforts.

But are test scores and advanced classes really the best ways to measure a school's effectiveness? Hard data indicate only a narrow range of performance. Much that is good about a school requires tests of a different sort. We had been, a few weeks before that Friday, measured by a more difficult standard.

Our challenge began on a cold and snowy November day. Two exchange students, girls from Japan and Germany, left school after their first class bound for a Youth for Understanding weekend retreat. They set off in high spirits with a young host parent. At noon, a somber phone call brought us tragic news: The minivan was crushed, the two teens killed on impact, the exchange mother and her four-year-old critically injured.

Our response to this disaster was immediate. A crisis team formed nearly spontaneously. No plan existed to guide us through such a tragedy, but we understood the importance of quick and meaningful work. We phoned the hospital and the state patrol to verify the grim news, then conveyed our sorrow to the stunned host families. We contacted the regional Youth for Understanding exchange director, who was expecting the girls to arrive at the retreat; he set the international machinery in motion to notify their families.

We quickly divided our building, each crisis team member taking a section, so that we could personally inform our 400 students and teachers of the tragedy. Many were related to the host families, and everyone had come to know our international sisters in the three months since they had arrived. We designated one classroom as a safe, quiet place for those who were grieving. School counselors staffed this room; and teenage "Peer Helpers," trained for action and armed with extraordinary personal bearing and conviction, offered gentle consolation to our grieving students.

Our veteran staff rallied in natural and wholesome compassion to help kids and colleagues process painful shock and grief. Our jobs have seldom been as important as they were that

day. Few words were spoken, but great lessons were taught. We cried together; we were angry at our loss; we gathered strength to continue.

Later, the community planned a memorial service. A weary and wounded family from Japan arrived to participate; their German counterparts were sadly unable to attend. On a tour of our building, we saw a mother in black ceremonial kimono quietly weep at her daughter's science station. We shared a father's sorrow as he gave us gifts his Buddhist daughter had intended as Christmas surprises. Quiet and demure, a Japanese family bowed low to us in respect and appreciation. We, staid and American, bowed to them in return.

Measure us, if we must be measured, by our response in the face of tragedy. Chart our compassion along with our test scores. View our performance in terms of universal kindness and international understanding. By any standard, mark us well.

In my study of our PSAT results, I could not demonstrate in any quantitative fashion the effectiveness of our program during those grief-filled days. Our response can't be packaged for a marketplace that focuses only on a bottom line. Yet I know in my heart that our scores as measured in human experience are far more important than those numbers I recently tabulated for my report. In death, and in life, we pass the test. □

*Author's note:* Youth for Understanding is a fully accredited international student exchange program headquartered in Washington, D.C. Eden Valley-Watkins Public School is a frequent host for exchange students through this and similar programs.

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