

How have you embedded the needs of each student as a guiding value to inform organizational decision-making?

This is a great question, especially coming off an unprecedented pandemic. As I am completing my twenty seventh year in education, I am sitting here reflecting and thinking that I had seen and experienced most possible issues, concepts and or things that one can have in education. All of a sudden, in March of 2020 the world and the world of education was tipped upside. The past year and half has been a time that has forced educational institutions to reflect on their organizational decision-making processes. Fortunately, during my sixteen-year tenure at Kenai Middle School we have been able to embed the needs of each student as a guiding principal in our school decision-making processes.

Through the shared collaborative leadership at Kenai Middle School, we have been able to build upon and add to our great learning environment. By doing so, students have a much greater buy in and their educational product produced is unmatched. By providing a sense of “normalcy”, during this time of COVID, Kenai Middle School has actually flourished. When many schools were losing enrollment, Kenai Middle has had significant gains in student enrollment. When many schools were cutting back on course offerings and only delivering core curricular classes, Kenai Middle found a way to deliver all course offerings, keeping that sense of “normalcy” for students and staff. The one area that we struggled with as a school was lunch. At first, we were not able to provide a sense of “normalcy” for our students until we utilized our embedded process to problem solve and meet our students’ social and lunch needs. We did not have a method to feed all students and keep them safe, as our cafeteria area is very small. By utilizing our embedded processes, we were able to form a partnership with the City of Kenai and they provided us with two huge circus tents along with picnic tables constructed by our local state jail residents. This allowed kids to spread out and socialize while they ate lunch in a safe environment. The tents also ended up being extended classrooms so students could socially distance themselves.

Understanding and knowing your school population is crucial for a school to be able to know how to get the most for all students. Kenai Middle School student population is very diverse. Many people do not realize that Kenai Middle is composed of 33% Alaskan Native/Native American students. We have close to 60% of our students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. We have approx. 20% of our students on an IEP’s. We often have up to 15 students living homelessly. If it hadn’t been for my years of teaching special education and my 6 years as a principal in a southwest Alaskan village and my sixteen years at Kenai Middle, I do not believe I would totally understand the population and its needs of Kenai Middle School. Last spring we were fortunate to use our embedded processes to hire a new assistant principal. The school

community chose a teacher who had been at Kenai Middle for over 20 years as a teacher and leader within the school.

Our community partnerships have been critical to our success in meeting our approximate 130 Alaskan Native and Native American student needs through our schools decision-making processes. We have two strong partnerships with the Kenaitze Indian Tribe and the Salamantoff Tribe. The Kenaitze Tribe has three tutors daily in our school. They also provide an after school program complete with cultural activities. We also have mental health clinicians that come to our school to see the kids rather than parents having to take students out of school to attend a counseling session. The Salamontoff Tribe collaborates with our school in an educational moose hunt where students learn how to harvest and preserve the meat of a moose. Our school science programs partners with engineers from the oilfield industry. One of the engineers runs an after school math club. This math club has produced the number one math student in the state at the Math Counts competitions.

Over the past years, school funding has been stagnant and school districts have had to make significant cuts to teachers and curricula offerings. Kenai Middle suffered many of these same cuts as well, but utilizing our organizational decision-making processes, we have been able to keep all our course offerings to meet student interests. With most teachers teaching an elective class and creative scheduling, we are able to offer more than most middle schools. Below is a sample of elective offerings:

- Career Technical Education
 - Traditional shop classes
 - Home Economics classes
 - Robotics/coding
 - Project Lead the Way
- Performing Arts
 - Band
 - Chorus
 - Drama
- Art
- World Language
- Journalism
- Advanced PE
- Hunters Education
- Leadership

Along with the above laundry list of elective offerings, we also have academic offerings to meet our diverse student population. We offer advanced classes at each grade level and classes earning high school credit. While progress monitoring the past two years, we have noticed a significant need for more remediation/intervention classes. Our school went through a significant change three years ago when we added an Intensive Needs program to our school.

Up until the past three years, our intensive needs students were bussed to another town. After listening to our community, it was evident that our stakeholders wanted its students attending Kenai Middle.

After surveying our students using a school climate and connected survey, it was overwhelming how much are students were hurting. In working with key staff, we have implemented a Sources of Strength program to our school. Our SOS program ran by our school nurse and counselor has been able to do some wonderful things for kids. Our teachers have also been more cognizance of the Social Emotional Learning of our students. By going through this process for our students, we realized we needed to do more for each other as a staff.

The past few years I have been fortunate to work with Alaska School Leadership Mentor program mentoring principals. I feel very strong about the program and want to give back to the profession so that students across the state can experience the quality education that is offered at Kenai Middle. As you can see, I am very biased and speak very highly of Kenai Middle School. I am blessed to have a staff that rivals any schools in the country. I feel totally supported by the community, students, staff and district office. In so many ways, it is best for me to get out of the way and just provide support for the incredible people that call Kenai Middle School home. Every day, I am so lucky to be able to get up and go to a place that understands what is best for kids because of the traditions and culture that are in place.