

## How To Survive the “WCEA/WASC Years”

We, here at St Paul the Apostle School, have just finished another WCEA/WASC Evaluation. It was a two-year adventure and at its beginning even our most tenured faculty members shuddered when our principal said, “From time to time it is helpful to look inward and see what we are doing well, and what we can improve”. We all knew exactly what she meant; it was a WCEA/WASC year!

For us, the key to getting things done with a minimum of wasted time was in the planning. We looked at the school calendar and organized faculty meetings to make the best use of time. The selection of a leadership team to guide discussions based on the WCEA/WASC instrument was critical. Our team included department chairpersons, the principal, and the assistant principal.

Groups for each chapter were constructed to include a variety of grade level, subject area, extracurricular, and administrative personnel. Every group had a leader, note-taker, and someone who kept “war stories” to a minimum. Following the meetings, note-takers typed up the main points and answers to specific questions. They also summarized areas of strengths and weaknesses. These notes were distributed to the large group for clarification.

A simultaneous gathering of the data requested in Chapter One came from our school’s history, demographics, test scores, etc. Chapter One proved to be challenging for us. We found the wording to be vague so we decided to check-in by phone with our WCEA/WASC chairperson to be sure we had understood how much information was expected. I would have to say that this was one of the best decisions we made. Our chairperson was happy to “check in” with us and answer the questions we had to this point, and let us know where we had misunderstood what was being asked. We also got to know each other before the actual visit.

The entire faculty and staff reviewed our Philosophy, Mission Statement, and Essential Schoolwide Learning Results (from previous WCEA/WASC Evaluation). As a group, we decided that language had to be updated in both the Philosophy and Mission Statement, but that we still strongly believed in the content of both documents. Our ESLR’s needed to be evaluated to see if we were able to assess the behaviors they described. We decided that active verbs needed to replace some of the passive ones. This was done in small groups. Proposed changes from all groups were summarized for the large group, and our ESLRs from 6 years earlier, became our current Schoolwide Learning Expectations as called for in this new WCEA/WASC process.

In chapters that required a level of expertise, for example, In-Depth Studies in Language Arts and Religion, financial/ administrative data, or student services, groups were formed to include relevant personnel, including staff, parents, clergy. Their findings were presented to the large group for information, understanding, and explanation.

The chapter that evaluated progress on previous "Action Plan" items summarized our accomplishments of those items over the past six years. This was done in small groups by personnel involved directly with the item or designated in the Action Plan itself. These summaries were then discussed by the large group.

The questionnaires that made up parent and student surveys were reviewed by each staff member and questions were added that would benefit our school. Clergy surveys and faculty surveys were completed individually. Tabulating the responses to the larger surveys was done by cutting apart the responses, organizing them by number and then having small groups summarize each set. All original responses were kept as evidence that the surveys were conducted.

In many chapters of the WCEA/WASC instrument, the faculty prioritized strengths and weaknesses in the area being reviewed. This was a daunting task with a faculty/staff of over forty people. We were able to make it simple by writing all of the characteristics on strips of paper, hanging them on the wall in our meeting room, and giving each faculty member colored "dots". After reminding the faculty and staff that the good of the whole school was to be considered, and not one's own personal agenda, each person voted for his top choices. They placed a colored dot on the statement that represented their priorities. Later, the leadership group counted the "dots" and the prioritized lists were constructed. Once the prioritized list of weaknesses was made, the entire faculty voted on those items that would become our "Action Plan" for the next few years. We read the list, discussed it with one other person and then in small groups. Finally, the same "dot" process was conducted. A shorter list of the most vital items emerged from the vote.

The leadership team met to review the items on the basis of what would constitute a true "Action Plan" item. Those that could be accomplished either in a short amount of time, or through regular faculty meetings, were removed from the list but put on the agenda for Spring faculty meetings. Those that remained were re-checked for the format and wording and sent out to the faculty at large.

It must be said here that over the past 3-4 years, teachers had been collecting "evidence" that related to SLE's, and other criteria described in Chapter IV. Teachers were able to present this evidence in file boxes, scrapbooks, or any other organized method of their choosing. Examples of student work, graded assessments and portfolios were part of this evidence. Disposable cameras had been available to the teachers and many teachers chose to use photographic displays for their evidence. The principal organized other "evidence" that related to the school's history, impact in the community or relevant demographic reports.

By the time the team came to visit, we had looked at the very heart of what we were doing and how well we were doing it. We found that, indeed, there were some areas in which we excelled, and some that needed improvement. Sister's words from our very first meeting were true... honest self-evaluation makes you a

better teacher and a better school. For us, the visiting team saw more in us than we actually saw in ourselves. They acknowledged a job well done, and supported our efforts to improve in those areas we described. If only we could remember this validated feeling when the next WCEA/WASC year rolls around...