

WOW Blog  
Everett School District  
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Okayed by Susan Snyder February 25, 2014]

### **The WOW that Keeps on WOWing**

It turns out creativity is contagious. At least it is at Everett School District in South Central Pennsylvania where one creative idea grew to encompass the entire community.

Like many schools last year, Everett was struggling with budget cuts. Two of their four elementary schools were closed. Morale was low. Parent involvement was slim. Teachers were concerned. After 21 years at the district, Reading Specialist and Literacy Coach Susan Snyder decided things had to change. She was determined to come up something special on Opening Day of school to set a more positive tone for the year.

Included in Susan's shipment of course materials from PLS3rd Learning was a complimentary copy of the first edition of my book *WOW: Adding Pizzazz to Teaching and Learning*. She began reading it and ideas for Opening Day began to bubble up. A "wow," she learned, was something that added fun to a situation or event. It piqued curiosity and attracted attention. Novel and intriguing, these brief enhancements create positive emotions and tickle learning.

Susan liked the idea of creating an Opening Day to resemble a Hollywood gala. This first-day "wow," described in the book, suggests using red carpets, paparazzi, music, and people cheering as students arrive at school. She met with her colleagues and, together, the collective power of creative and caring teachers developed not only the first day WOW for students throughout the district, but one for their teachers arriving for an in-service the previous day.

"We'll need a red carpet," said Susan. "I've got one!" said a colleague. "I've got some big gold stars," said another. "Let's put one big star on each of the teacher's classrooms," chimed a third. But why stop at Opening Day? they asked. Soon their ideas morphed into a year-long focus on creating positive learning experiences that accompany events, fundraisers, holidays, parent conferences, bus trips, and just regular ol' school days. They decided to name the experience **Wonderful Opportunities 4 U @ Everett**.

It was decided they would put their logo on t-shirts, signs, and banners for Opening Day.. Their music teachers' husband had access to the t-shirts and a place to print them. Susan's son had access to a graphic sign machine. Everything seemed to come together magically once their creative juices got going. It was almost as if creating this year-long "WOW" was a "wow" in itself.

### **Opening Day**

As teachers arrived for their in-service the day before school started, they were greeted with cheering students and parents on either side of a long red carpet. Paparazzi were seeking their autographs, as if they were movie stars. As teachers went to their respective classrooms, they saw their gold star welcoming them back to a new school year, one that was beginning to feel different somehow – better in some way.

On the first day of school, each of the elementary schools and the high school put up WOW banners, laid the red carpet, and lined the way with cheering teachers and parents. By now more teachers and parents were involved, clapping and cheering along the sides of the red carpet. A teacher in one school greeted students wearing a long gown and a tiara, taking her role quite seriously. T-shirt sales were brisk, and the school year got off on a positive, upbeat note.

Meanwhile, the initial group of colleagues formed a Positive School Climate Committee and began reviewing district events with an eye toward adding a WOW whenever possible. A large, rural school district stretching over 300 miles, parents had to travel a long way to come to parent workshops. Usually, they were lucky to have seven parents there. The team decided to create Parent Family Fun Nights that included a theme, dinner, door prizes and workshops for parents. For parent-teacher conferences, parents arrived to a café complete with tables, chairs, and refreshments. Parents could enjoy visiting with other parents as they waited to talk to a teacher. In that setting, any otherwise disgruntled parent softened and enjoyed the wait time.

On another occasion, bus drivers were given a hot “to-go” breakfast and thank you cards from the students. In their annual fundraiser for cancer awareness, they added some pizzazz to the event by having those donating a Penny wear a Party hat; if donating a Nickel, a Necklace or Necktie; for a Dime, wear Dungarees (jeans) and so forth combining both a WOW experience with some vocabulary lessons.

As for cost, all services and supplies were donated. Even the initial outlay of cash for t-shirts came from the high school’s Renaissance Program. This program receives donations all year from faculty and staff, whatever anyone can afford from 50 cents on up. This cache is used for rewarding student achievement and some was used to fund the startup of Wonderful Opportunities 4 U @ Everett event.

As for morale at school, Susan says it has gone up considerably. While they have not equated the year-long WOW events to test scores, the experience of Wonderful Opportunities 4 U @ Everett has made everyone a stakeholder for the students. There is more support as teachers work together with parents, doing things for one another. Community and business leaders also got on the bandwagon. Ultimately, the students benefit from the positive atmosphere, learning that despite difficulties in life, positive interaction is always possible.

As for how long the team can consistently deliver a year full of WOWs, younger teachers are already adding their creative ideas. There seems to be an endless supply of them and next year’s calendar has already been created.

“As long as I am here,” says Susan, “we’ll keep adding WOWs that bring learning, sharing, laughing, having fun together. I’m passionate about this.”

And that’s clearly very contagious.

[955 words]