



WISCONSIN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS

*Fostering effective school board
practices for student success.*

ORGANIZATIONAL SERVICES REPORT

PREPARED FOR

WATERFORD GRADED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Provided by:

Organizational Consulting Services

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Introduction

The Waterford Graded School District engaged the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) to assist the district with an Organizational Study to assess factors affecting school district climate and operational effectiveness. Specifically, the study will look at factors and actions by leadership and staff that have been instituted and what reactions may be occurring within the school system to impact the school district climate and operational effectiveness.

In order to conduct this study, it was suggested that staff complete an online survey in order to determine the direction of the focus group questions. After the data from the survey is analyzed, further information will be based on perceptions gathered through the use of interviews, focus groups, and a review of district information. Groups and individuals interviewed were: school board, superintendent, district office staff, principals at all buildings, teachers and support staff, and former teachers. The interviews ranged in length from thirty to forty-five minutes depending on whether it was an individual interview or focus group. The validity of the information is dependent on the honesty and openness of the interview and focus group participants.

Significant change has taken place in Wisconsin school systems over the past several years. The Waterford Graded School District has initiated some of these changes while other changes to the work environment, including Act 10 and teacher effectiveness, have been created by legislative action that has impacted employees in all Wisconsin school districts, which translates on a daily basis into school climate and operations. Thus, it is critical that in judging any work environment an analysis be undertaken to determine whether reactions are due to change, educational atmosphere beyond the local school district control, and whether the reactions are worth the end result of the change. Every action has some type of reaction in a school system.

Protocol of the Study

The first step in conducting this study involved a web-based survey developed by School Perceptions and district administration. Staff were given the opportunity to respond to closed choices related to the topics: planning (top five priorities), programs/services, change readiness, student achievement, engagement, work environment, communication, culture, development and recognition, compensation and benefits, principals, district administration, school board, and overall satisfaction. The WASB Organizational consultants will not offer any analysis of the results from the School Perception survey.

Once the survey was completed the WASB consultants analyzed the responses to develop specific focus group questions. On-site individual interviews and focus groups were held. The Waterford Graded School District is a small sized elementary school district when compared to other school districts in the State of Wisconsin. The school district's staffing size raises some confidentiality issues in relation to the responses of individuals that have been interviewed. Therefore, it is strongly urged that the Board of Education, in conjunction with legal counsel, carefully determine how much of this report must be released and, when a public release of the report occurs, what information (if any) may be redacted as allowed under Wisconsin Statutes.

Individual interviews of approximately thirty minutes were conducted with members of the school board, administration, district office staff, and department staff. In addition six focus groups were held with professional and support staff from the four school buildings and one focus group was held with former employees. There were approximately sixty people interviewed in the focus groups over the two days with interviews being over forty-five minutes in length. The study sample included approximately seventy staff participants from a 169 member teaching and support staff. In addition, administrators, board members and some former employees were also interviewed. It should be

understood that the individuals selected for interviews were either volunteers or identified by the school district to secure a representative sample.

The WASB Organizational consultants greatly appreciated the cooperation and candor of the individuals interviewed. It is evident that each and every participant was concerned about returning the Waterford Graded School District into the exceptional school district it has always been.

Summary of Observations

The intent of this study was to assess factors affecting school district climate and operational effectiveness. It should be pointed out that the Board of Education contracted with the WASB Organizational Services consultants to analyze concerns that have surfaced within the school district. It is helpful and necessary at times to analyze operational activities and internal systems with a vision to improve the school district from a non-district employee perspective. The individual interviews and focus groups provided an opportunity for different perspectives and opinions to be openly expressed.

School district staff needs to function effectively on a daily basis. The study was designed to identify key points and issues which may be contributing to any distractions and/or obstacles that may be preventing an effective school district operation. In an effort to provide succinct information, the comments have been grouped into four major themes. The themes are: professionalism/respect, communication, leadership, and trust.

Professionalism/Respect

The first theme that emerged was professionalism and respect. Professionalism is defined as the conduct or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person. Respect is a positive feeling or deference for a person. When you

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respect the people that you work with, you value their input and ideas, and they value yours. This is a sampling of the comments:

- Culture needs to be changed, we need a higher level of respect
- Staff are rarely recognized for being valuable
- Never get the positives only the negatives
- Board is telling master degree teachers how to do their job when they (board) don't know how to do it
- No recognition for doing a good job
- We have no say in how things are done and there is no buy-in to the programs and changes made by district administration
- Programs are always being changed and staff and students are never allowed to relax, enjoy, and have fun
- Professional development is limited to what the district provides and we are not allowed to go to conferences or meetings outside the district
- An administrator was demeaning to a teacher who was running a meeting
- No professional development that is relevant to the teacher, has to be an area that the district decides
- An administrator schedules meetings and is often late
- District is secretive and people are put in positions without posting them or don't give staff who have expressed an interest in the position a chance to interview
- Staff strives for excellence and when you see other staff members targeted it isn't done in a nice way and it affects everyone
- Professional development has been stifled
- Test scores have increased drastically but staff isn't recognized, instead they are written up for leaving their lights on
- No opportunity for professional development - people are afraid to ask as they have been told no in the past
- Limited professional development so it would be fantastic if all district personnel had times to get together

- Have Friday morning professional development but it isn't scheduled and people don't know where they are supposed to go, also the offerings do not coincide with what people need to know
- We are not treated as professionals
- Administration doesn't support the staff – had a teacher who was terminally ill and they were working on a performance plan as she was dying
- Staff doesn't feel valued – the way teachers are currently feeling has a negative impact on the district
- Feel overwhelmed by everything that is going on and it has caused disconnect at the building level
- Trying to keep the ship afloat and not receiving any support
- Staff on performance plans are not a learning process but it seems like they have been targeted and you can't ever achieve the goals on the plan

Communication

The second theme that emerged was communication. Effective communication is essential for understanding a person or situation and enables organizations to resolve differences, build trust and respect, and create environments where creative ideas, problem solving, and collaboration can flourish. Effective communication skills are fundamental to success in many aspects of life. A summary of the communication comments expressed were:

- At the building level communication is strong but there is little communication from the district office
- District administrator communicates mostly by email
- Administrators need to be more visible in the building
- District administrator sends emails to people that don't pertain to them and sometimes they don't get an email when they should have
- Communication isn't working because there is a lot of animosity among staff
- Communication is top down to the building level

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- Beginning of year kick off was a PowerPoint presentation which was not very inspiring for the first day of the new school year
- Staff do not feel they can ask questions when working with the assistant superintendent – they are told they are professionals and should know the information or be able to figure it out
- Will take a long time to build an open communication system
- Staff members are discouraged from attending school board meetings
- Communication with the school board is very limited
- Communication is the number one thing that is important
- Need to have high expectations for the district that are communicated
- Listen to what we are saying – don't feel like we can talk to anyone
- District administration sets the tone and the relationship for the district and we don't have a solid foundation of communication, collaboration, or team work
- Would like a voice in how the district is going
- Need district-wide communication so people receive consistent information across the district - people are being told different things in different buildings
- Board communication has often been negative about staff when talking to media
- Have not had opportunities to communicate with the board
- Cannot talk with district administration about what is happening in the district
- Staff told there is to be no communication between school board members and staff
- Don't want to talk to the district administrator as it is better to “fly under the radar”
- Can personally communicate with district level administration – but sometimes you don't feel that you can talk with them without other people wondering what you are talking about – should be able to talk to district level personnel without feeling like you are being watched by other people and the perception that you are doing something wrong

Leadership

The third theme that emerged from conversations with staff was leadership. Definitions of leadership are somewhat elusive. Warren Bennis writes in On Becoming a Leader that “leadership is like beauty: its hard to define, but you know it when you see it” and that “The ingredients of leadership cannot be taught. They must be learned.” One of the keys to leadership is accomplishing the tasks at hand while building relationships. Building relationships is about caring for people, and caring is thinking about people, their needs, and their aspirations. Comments by people interviewed were as follows:

- Need real transparency, should involve stakeholders in decision making
- A leader not a manager, which is what we have now, vs. a leader who is going to inspire people. Someone who motivates people.
- A leader leads by example, is approachable, honest, fair.
- I want a person I can go to and talk to about concerns without being yelled at, not someone who is punitive at every turn.
- Someone who is welcoming, is compassionate
- Leading by fear instead of by example
- A leader needs to be the face of the District
- Leadership needs to be approachable, whether its me, a parent, or a community member, be supporting but not micro-managing.
- Being able to stand up for staff in face of criticism from board members
- I like to feel comfortable about talking to leadership, a high level of system and processes and communication systems in place.
- Fostering professional freedom, follow procedures.
- Empowering other school leaders in decision making and leading in their areas of expertise.
- People not allowed to speak to the board, board is lead to believe what the leader manipulates
- Demands of administration are unrealistic

Trust

The fourth theme to emerge from the interviews was trust. Trust includes the confidence, reliability, and faith demonstrated when working with people involved in the school system.

Summary comments by individuals interviewed were:

- We don't want to live in fear that we will get a performance plan and then we will be gone
- Teachers get "pigeon holed" – they get put on a performance plan that can't be accomplished and then they will be nonrenewed
- District administration plays a "get you, gotch you" game as you don't know if you did what you were supposed to do
- Staff members are targeted for getting rid of
- Had an assistant superintendent who was in the classrooms, worked with teachers, and cared about them, he was current on educational initiatives and you could talk to him - then he was gone
- District administration does not trust the staff to be professional
- Delivery of non-renewal notices have been delivered in a nonprofessional manner with little regard to timing or compassion
- Negativity on the part of the school board
- Frustrated by board member saying teachers are unprofessional
- Concerned that the district has done surveys before and nothing changes on the part of the administration and school board

Research/Analysis

In Researching the Waterford Graded School District several measures indicate that the district has some trends that impact the operation of the school district. They are as follows:

1. Enrollment

2009-2010	1647	students
2010-2011	1616	students
2011-2012	1573	students
2012-2013	1527	students
2013-2014	1498	students
2014-2015	1505	students

This is a decline of 142 students over a six-year period. It has also contributed to the reduction of total staff in the district, (administrators, teachers, support staff) from a high of 204 employees in 2009-2010 to the current 177 employees.

2. Tax Levy (Fund 10)

2009-2010	\$ 8,274,944.00
2010-2011	\$ 8,274,944.00
2011-2012	\$ 8,274,944.00
2012-2013	\$ 9,229,355.00
2013-2014	\$ 8,598,648.00
2014-2015	\$ 8,498,791.00

The Tax levy was maintained at the same level for three (3) years then took a significant jump in the 2012-2013 school year and has declined each of the last two years .

3. Fund Balance

2009-2010	\$ 4,446,719.00
2010-2011	\$ 5,139,977.59
2011-2012	\$ 6,138,759.00
2012-2013	\$ 7,218,636.00
2013-2014	\$ 7,712,050.16
2014-2015	\$ 7,712,050.00

The numbers indicated the District has an extremely healthy fund balance that is well above the recommended range, and increased by over 3 million dollars during the six-year period.

4. District Report Card

2012-2013	Evergreen Elementary	78.4
	Trailside Elementary	77.4
	Woodfield Elementary	82.7
	Fox River Middle School	75.4

2013-2014	Evergreen Elementary	82.4
	Trailside Elementary	76.1
	Woodfield Elementary	82.9
	Fox River Middle School	78.3

The District Report Card shows that all four (4) schools Exceeded Expectations in each of the two years and almost all showed growth from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014

Recommendations

The Waterford Graded School District has enjoyed the reputation of being an excellent school district – its staff, test scores, and parent-community relations. The District has always been on the forefront of educational change and initiatives with the ultimate goal of providing a positive learning environment to help students achieve academic excellence. The School Board engaged the WASB Organizational consultants to assess factors affecting school district climate and operational effectiveness.

Specifically, the consultants looked at factors and actions by leadership and staff that have been instituted and the reactions that may be occurring within the school system to impact the school district climate and operational effectiveness.

It is apparent that there are concerns in the district that have impacted the ability of the leadership team to function effectively. This in turn is impacting communication and morale throughout the district. The consultants have outlined recommendations based on the four themes that emerged from the focus groups and interviews.

Theme One – Professionalism/Respect

Professionalism encompasses a number of different attributes and together these attributes identify and define a professional. These attributes include: specialized knowledge, competency, honesty and integrity, accountability, self-regulation, and image. Building a culture of respect begins with respect. Respect is needed if task planning, delegation, collaboration, and trust are to be in existence in any school system. Working together the district can develop solutions based on the staff's collective insight, wisdom, and creativity.

There is general agreement that a great teacher is the difference between success and failure for a district, a school, a class, and a child. Teachers are professionals. They have spent enormous amounts of time developing lessons to make them relevant and exciting for children to learn. During the interviews teachers commented that they are

not allowed to differentiate their instruction as everyone has to teach the same thing in the same way in order to work toward the district's goals. The perception here is that teachers are not treated as professionals to develop their own lessons that will promote student learning.

State and federal initiatives have a major impact on school district operations. Currently districts are working to meet the Teacher Effectiveness initiative. Interviews with staff revealed that they don't feel overwhelmed with the initiative as outlined by the State but the push by the district to accomplish more than what the initiative requires has added additional stress to the staff. Staff members are concerned about whether they will be able to keep up the pace to always have to do more than is required. Comments indicated that the professional development to accomplish these initiatives is lacking.

Professional Development is the continuous process of acquiring new knowledge and skills that relate to one's profession, job responsibilities, or work environment. It plays a key role in maintaining trained, informed, and motivated employees. Staff needs to be actively involved in their own professional development. Administration and teachers would benefit from working together to plan and provide professional development. This should include opportunities within the school district as well as opportunities offered by professional associations and other educational agencies.

The interviews revealed that staff members are feeling overwhelmed and stressed. The tension and the lack of respect between the administration and staff have affected the work environment. Employees indicated that when they are ill they are afraid to miss work so they come to school sick. Staff members who are overwhelmed and need a "chance to breath" in the work environment generally express these types of comments. The district should not overlook the value of promoting a healthy work environment that includes respect for staff and valuing them as active members of their students' learning and achievement.

District leadership wants to do what is best for students. They work toward organizational excellence but are too focused on the accomplishment of production and not on the people who can help accomplish the goal. The effective leader has a concern for production reflected by successful planning skills and a concern for people reflected by effective interpersonal and communication skills. In order for the district to maintain its reputation for excellence and its high assessment scores the administration and staff need to work as a team. The district would benefit from some team building activities, which can be used to create a climate that encourages and values the contributions of its team members.

Theme Two – Communication

Great communication is a key to any successful organization. Today we have so many ways to communicate with each other and yet communication is one of the biggest concerns addressed by the people we talked with in the district.

Communication needs to start at the top of the District with the school board being able to set goals for the district and then being able to communicate those goals to employees of the district as well as other stakeholders. After the school board has set some district goals, the Administrative team must function smoothly and be able to give a consistent message throughout the rest of the district. It is important that each school, while operating separately, must still have the same overall goals and mission of the district.

Staff needs to feel comfortable in their communication with each other, administration and the public. They need to feel that their communication and ideas are valued and that it is okay to have a healthy discussion over issues and ideas that arise within a district without being labeled a troublemaker or have fear of retaliation.

From what we observed there seems to be a lot of correspondence in the district, but not much personal communication between the different levels or buildings. While

emails are quick and easy, they can often be misinterpreted and actually lead to a lack of understanding. One should never underestimate the value of personal communication and building relationships with people, which go a long way in promoting understanding and trust within an organization.

The saying that “sometimes it is not what you say but how you say it” is very important. Communication needs to be timely, sincere, authentic, and what you say in an email, for example, must be how you act in person as well. It was indicated to us that people do not feel valued, that their expertise is not respected and they feel that no matter how hard they work, it is never good enough. Besides communicating expectations, the district needs to do a better job of recognizing the successes of the district and staff and be realistic in their expectations.

Theme Three – Leadership

Leadership can take many forms and there are many different styles of leadership, but leadership is the ability to get people to buy into common goals and then work collaboratively to achieve them. In the Waterford Graded School District that leadership must start at the top with the school board. The board needs to work together to do a better job of promoting the district and being role models for the type of behavior and collaboration they would like to see from their staff. The roles of board members and administrators need to be clearly defined.

Some specific recommendations in the area of leadership include.

1. A working retreat between the school board and all administrators with a facilitator to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each and how that is going to be communicated to the rest of the staff.
2. While it is great to have high expectations of students and staff, leadership needs be more compassionate and understanding of the time demands placed on educators and students today. We need to put the word (fun)

back into our daily routines and allow for more creativity and other team building activities in our school buildings.

3. **Micro-Management:** There is too much micro-managing by the board and in return too much from administration down to the individual schools. The individual principals need to be free to manage their staff and building and should be given the resources to do so. Once again, having some building budgets controlled by the principals might be helpful in this area.
4. **Leadership vs. Management:** If you look strictly at the district's finances, test scores, achievements, you might come to the realization that the district is a well-managed school district, which in many ways it is. The question the district must answer is how do we move forward to change the work environment so that people continue to be successful and students achieve. To do so in an atmosphere of respect for each other and at the same time begins to rebuild the ability to once again trust each other.
5. **Review Policies and Procedures:** The district could review the staff handbook and see how changing some wording and procedures might lead to people feeling more respected and treated like professionals. In addition, the pay for performance and merit pay has led to division in the staff and been a detriment to staff climate.
6. **"Meet and Confer" meetings:** After reviewing handbook areas pertaining to communication and complaints, the district should consider establishing a system where the views and concerns of staff members can be heard and brought before management and the board for consideration and resolution. See Appendix B for further explanation of meet and confer meeting procedures.

Theme Four – Trust

Trust is hard to define but it is observed as a confidence level that you have in the people that you work with on a daily basis. The foundation of every good relationship is trust. When you trust your team and colleagues, you form a powerful bond that helps

you work and communicate more effectively. If you trust the people you work with, you can be open and honest in your thoughts and actions, and you don't have to waste time and energy "watching your back." While trust is hard to define, it is even harder to earn back trust once it has been broken.

At this time in the District there is not a lot of trust between the district leadership and the staff. This lack of trust encompasses the leadership of the school board as well as district administration. The staff does not consistently trust the district leadership and this is beginning to funnel down to school leadership. On the whole, staff are very comfortable in their respective building environments but there is evidence that this is beginning to change, as staff are beginning to not trust and be suspicious of each other. This has led to an environment that is not healthy to work in or educate students. Staff seem to lose confidence in the system as one moves up in the decision making ladder.

The Board must rebuild trust with the employees. The District has conducted two surveys prior to the current survey with School Perceptions and the focus groups with the WASB organizational consultants. The perception among the staff is that the survey results have not resulted in any changes in the district. The overwhelming no confidence vote at the annual meeting and the perceived lack of action to the vote has impacted the trust of the staff has in the Board. In addition, the trust with district administration has continued to decline. A major factor in this decline occurred when a dying teacher was put on a performance plan by the district administration.

It is critical for the District to rebuild trust or the negative work environment will continue. The District has always been respected for being a leader in educational excellence but this will decline as teachers continue to leave the district. Rebuilding trust must occur at all levels. The Board would benefit from a refresher workshop about school board responsibilities and duties. In order to rebuild trust with the staff the Board will need to bring in an experienced administrator that has demonstrated trust in this district or is

known for their integrity in a previous administrative experience. This person will need to rebuild trust between the Board, school leadership, and staff.

Summary

As stated earlier the Waterford Graded School District has many great things going for it, the dedicated staff, great facilities, high student achievement, and sound financial position make it an attractive place for parents to send their students. In today's educational landscape parents have many choices and districts must promote their successes and provide the best learning environment for students and staff.

The district has conducted several recent surveys and studies that have identified some disturbing trends in regard to school climate, declining enrollment and staff morale. It has seen a high rate of staff turnover and its reputation as a great place to work has taken some severe hits recently. At some point the turnover rate among staff and the work environment will begin to have a negative impact on student achievement. These issues are bigger than one person, and it will take some significant changes in the way of doing business in Waterford Graded to begin to rebuild relationships, improve communication, and rebuild trust among all the stakeholders of the district.

Appendix A

Waterford Ungraded School District - Focus Group/Interview Questions

1. What do you consider the strengths of the Waterford Ungraded School District?
2. If a parent asked you about moving into the district, what would you say?
3. If someone wanted to apply for a position in the district, what would you say?
4. What things do you believe need to change in order for you to feel valued as a member of the school system?
5. Once the district has developed its academic goals, how do they support educational innovation (creativity) to accomplish the goals?
6. What are your expectations for school district leadership?
7. Why do you think staff are leaving the district? What do you think could be done to keep quality staff?
8. Looking ahead, what do you see as the biggest challenges the district faces in the next 5 years?
9. What changes could the school board implement to improve the work environment in the district?
10. How could communication between administrators and staff be improved?
11. What are your suggestions for improving professional development including the District's in-service days?
12. Reading achievement is essential for student success. What does the district need to do in order to improve reading achievement?
13. What issues/events have happened in the district that have had a negative impact on the district?
14. What can the district do to promote open dialogue around difficult issues?
15. How has compensation and fringe benefits changed since the implementation of Act 10?
16. Do you feel that you can communicate with district level administration and/or the board? Why or why not?
17. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Appendix B

Meet and Confer Procedure

During meet-and-confer, the staff and management exchange views and discuss issues, which can lead to an agreement that is likely to affect outcomes even absent a legally binding collective bargaining contract. The key distinctions between the term “meet and confer” as used in this context and “meet and confer” in the context of “collective bargaining” are as follows: 1) there is no legal requirement to “meet and confer” with the Education Association or exclusively with the Education Association; 2) the meetings are not covered by the procedural requirements in Wis. Stats. 111.70(4)(cm) [e.g. initial exchanges of proposals, mediation, etc.]; 3) there is no legally binding contract that results from the “meet and confer meeting”; and 4) the Board ultimately decides the issues to put forward for a “meet and confer” meeting absent other legal constraints, for example, modifications to a teacher’s individual contract.

It should be noted that the Board could have “met and conferred” with employees on matters beyond base wages even if the union recertified. This is due to the fact that collective bargaining for teachers is limited to base wages. The Board would be prohibited from collectively bargaining on matters beyond base wages, but the statute does not prohibit the District from “meeting and conferring” with employees. The “meet and confer” meetings would be in open session unless the subject matter referred to a specific employee or other permissible reason for a closed session under Wis. Stats. §19.85. In such a situation a properly noticed closed session could occur to discuss that particular issue in closed session. The “meet and confer” meetings would also need to have an agenda that provides the public with adequate notice of the topics that are going to be discussed and any items that may be acted upon at such meeting. Such a posting of the meeting should be treated similarly to other Board meetings and align with the open meeting law requirements under Wis. Stats. §§19.81 - 19.97.

It is further our suggestion that if the District endeavors to implement a “meet and confer” process that the Board and Administration apprise staff of the goal to have items brought forward at the appropriate level and forum before being placed on a particular agenda for a “meet and confer” meeting. From a practical standpoint, as noted above, only those items placed on the agenda by the Board and Administration could be considered at a “meet and confer” meeting. From an operational standpoint, encouraging the informal resolution of items under the Certified Staff Handbook can help facilitate more efficient operations and resolve items at the lowest level. Items of concern that arise under a Staff Complaints Board Policy should appropriately follow those paths to conclusion before being placed on a “meet and confer” agenda unless the Board perceives the issue, for example a workplace safety issue, is of broad concern and is more appropriately

addressed at a “meet and confer” meeting. By integrating the handbook provision, the respective policies and the “meet and confer” meetings together, items that are operational can be handled at the lowest level in the District and policy determinations could be brought before the Board and Administration at the “meet and confer” meeting. The Board and Administration may look to schedule periodic meetings, for example once every 3-4 months, for “meet and confer” meetings in order to maintain a fluid engagement process with staff.

