

An Unexpected Journey: An Investigation into Attendance

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ABSTRACT

Denver city schools have met many challenges this year. In an exploration of how to support students and families with chronic attendance issues, an unprecedented event in the Chan Fellowship program gives the problem of practice a whole new meaning. This story is a trial and testament to our personal growth as leaders at West Early College.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of practice we would like to address at West Early College is how to increase and sustain the attendance percentage of our middle school students. We believe the struggle with attendance is linked to the mindset around institutional racism that past generations of Cowboys have experienced in combination with an inconsistent system around attendance expectations. Our goal is to change the mindset within our school community around attendance.

If we go back to the year 1969, you will find a story about the West High School Walkout. During this time, Latino students on the West High School campus decided to walk out because of some major racial tensions in the building. Several students engaged in this walk out because they were being mistreated in their school. One specific teacher made racist comments towards Mexicans and it was swept under the rug. This was the catalyst for the Latino students to demand change and equity in the school community. The students set up a staged walk out where they demanded equity in education and they were supported by the families, neighborhood school students, community members and Crusade activists. This group of people were met by Denver police armed with gas masks, billy-clubs and tear gas canisters. This was the beginning of an era of racism in our school where mistrust with parents, students, and the community began to grow.

The same type of institutional racism towards our Latino students on the West Campus still existed as of the late 90's. The staff perpetuated this stigma in various ways. Firstly, students that were Hispanic were assumed to be second language learners and learning English was a priority. They were not given equal opportunity to succeed in the Math and Sciences. Also, parents of Hispanic students did not need to receive the same communication from the school. Teachers and staff assumed that the families did not care, have interest in their child's education, or that they did not speak English. All of these assumptions made by the school promoted an overall lack of engagement from our Latino students and families. The most

measurable piece of evidence is reflected in their attendance at West High School: it was right around 75%.

With that historical background stated and on a more positive note, West High School can celebrate that it currently has the largest Alumni population west of the Mississippi. This is partly due to our location in the “Golden Triangle” of downtown Denver, CO. We are surrounded by several businesses, technology companies, health facilities, including the largest hospital in the Denver Metro area, that are within walking distance from our school. We are located next to the Auraria Campus which hosts 3 large colleges/universities and provides opportunities for our students to take college classes. If you went to West High School, it is very likely that you sent and will send your children there because of the school’s prime location. Many alumni live in the neighborhood, are present, and part of the everyday West community.

West Early College is in a unique situation where we are one of two schools in the historic West High School building, that was founded in the late 1800’s. West High School has had its academic ups and downs through the years, and the original West High School was shut down due to poor performance in 2011. At that time, Denver Public Schools asked the community what they wanted to do with the school. The community decided that they wanted to reopen the building and have different options for students. Therefore, the school was reopened with two different schools in the same building. To add more complexity to the situation, the two schools needed to create their own feeder programs to attract students and families from several middle schools in the area who were also closing.

Currently the West High School building has approximately 1,400 middle school and high school students that could either be in a program with West Early College or in a program with West Leadership Academy. The two school share the entire building, share space, share classes, share staff, are on the same sports teams, and most importantly work with each other to provide the best learning environment for all students.

West Early College is a state accredited grade 6-12 early college, which means that as a school we focus on the behaviors of students, as well as academic checkpoints that are used to guide students toward college and career readiness. This innovative program is a design based on David Conley’s work around the Four Keys to College and Career Readiness. We challenge our middle school students to be college and career ready and to take the college entrance exam at the end of their 8th grade year. Our students are then allowed and encouraged to start taking college classes in a concurrent enrollment environment as early as their 10th grade year. Furthermore, students are given feedback on their college and career readiness every week, by every teacher, in every class to guide them toward success. We are 1 of 7 schools in Denver Public

Schools that has been recognized as an Early College. We are the only school in the nation that is using early college as a turnaround strategy.

The West Early College Mission is to lead all students through a rigorous education plan beginning in middle school, while giving them opportunities to develop a growth mindset and follow pathways toward high school and college requirements. Each student, regardless of background or skill level, will be provided with the academic and social-emotional supports to develop the skills necessary to achieve mastery and demonstrate success in high school, college, and in their chosen career.

West Early College demographics:

- 85% Hispanic/Latino students
- 10% African American students
- 5% White, Native American, and Asian students
- 98% Free and Reduced Lunch
- 45% English Language Learners
- 20% Special Education student

As previously stated, the entire West Campus was deemed a failing school approximately 8 years ago. Listed below is a brief timeline of events from 2011 to present day:

2011-2012: The district decided to close down the West High School campus due to performance and then reopened two schools, one being West Generation Academy, ranked lowest performing (red).

2012-2013: West Generation Academy did not increase student achievement and did not provide the community with what they wanted, maintaining lowest performing status (red).

2013-2014: The district, once again, threatened to close West Generation Academy. The district told the school, the teachers, the students, and the community that if they did not see growth in 1 year they were going to close down West Generation Academy.

2013-2014: Kurtis Quig was hired as the middle school principal to help lead the turnaround process of West Generation Academy.

2015-2016: The executive principal of the high school, Ana Mendoza, and I changed the program and the name of the school to West Early College and created a new innovative restart program without having to close the school, still maintaining lowest status (red).

2016-2017: 27 new teachers were hired to give the early college model some momentum. District reports showed that WEC had not shown growth and that the school was under evaluation for closure. WEC barely passed the district checklist in order to prevent closure. WEC was the only school of 4 in the area that was able to prevent closure.

2017-2018: In August 2017, district reports showed that WEC moved from a red school to a yellow school (two performance bands) in one year.

2018-2019: In August, district reports showed that WEC moved substantially within the yellow band, only 3.5 % points away from green performance status. We anticipate this growth by the end of this school year. At this current moment we have only 1 other school in the neighborhood that scored above us and is listed as a green school (to be noted that it is also a school of choice).

In summary, West Early College was able to move from a red school to a yellow school in a 1-year period. This accomplishment was recognized by Denver Public Schools as having one of the highest growth on our SPF (School Performance Framework, or report card) in the district. This timeline and growth scorecard are mentioned because attendance is directly linked to our school's SPF. The school receives a certain amount of points towards growth if we meet the district's attendance goals of 95% for middle school and 90% for high school. As leaders, our desire to push for continual growth and improvement was another driving force that lead us to our problem of practice.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

We are determined to break down the stigma that West High School is a low performing school, with non-compliance, and is a place for students that are not engaged. Our staff care and love our students, but our current attendance rate does not reflect that our community sees it the same way. We have identified 15 students and families to hear their perspective, identify supports needed, identify specific barriers and beliefs, identify the root cause, and the overall goal is to increase the students' individual attendance rate. As leaders, we hope to gain staff and community buy-in as listeners and individuals who can provide supports and build

trust. At the end of this school year, we want to see a large impact on our overall attendance rate, a more connected school community, more of our parents and community involved, students that are happy and want to come to school, and most importantly we want the stigma of West High School change within the community.

Historically, the parents of our students created a culture of low attendance (i.e. high alumni population that send their kids to our school). The average attendance when they were in school was around 75% and the graduation rate was in the 60% range. Our current attendance for the middle school is 90%. This is a considerable amount of growth since the 1990's, but it still does not meet our school and district goal of 95%. Having students that have lower than a 95% attendance rate in the classroom provides its own challenges for students and teachers and directly impacts learning. Studies continue to show the direct correlation between low attendance rates, drop-out rates, and low academic performance, including test scores.

Historical Attendance %'s

<i>1970's</i>	<i>1990's</i>	<i>2000's</i>	<i>14/15</i>	<i>15/16</i>	<i>16/17</i>	<i>17/18</i>	<i>current</i>
<i>75%</i>	<i>78%</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>84%</i>	<i>86%</i>	<i>89%</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>90%</i>

Currently, there is no immediate consequence in place for a student who does not attend or is late to class, nor is there a reward system for those who meet the goal. Also, for this group of students there is an overall lack of interest, engagement in subject matter and extra-curricular activities, a lack of purpose, and little ownership of learning. To complicate things even more, the transportation system provided from the district is limited because the majority of West students live in neighborhoods that are not adjacent to the school. We have students that show up tardy on a daily basis and have learned that this is acceptable behavior and other students follow suit.

We have tried to provide incentives and consequences, have made daily phone calls and held conferences with parents. We feel that we have tried everything possible to increase our attendance on campus. Even though these strategies have helped a little over the past 5 years, we are concerned that we are not actually addressing the root cause of the problem. Some trends to note include that the months of August and September have the highest attendance rates in the school year, the middle school has a better overall attendance than the high school, we are below the district attendance average %, and finally noted is that our parents do not communicate absences with the school. Further investigation and research is necessary around

attendance in order for WEC leaders and teachers to foster an urgency around the 95% expectation and for students to internalize the importance of attending school every day.

This initial data has prompted us to ask this question to drive our problem of practice: ***In order to meet our 95% goal attendance at West Early College, how can we shift the mindset of students around the need to be in the classroom for learning and shift the mindset of institutional racism for our families?***

Focusing on this problem at West Early College will benefit our students and our community, but it will also benefit both of us as leaders. We feel that we have never made or had sufficient time to really narrow down the root cause of this ongoing issue. Examining this problem of practice will provide an opportunity to support parents and students in gaining trust back in our school. Setting up a communication line between the families and the school will help build that trust as we listen to our parent's concerns. The most important portion of leading is listening and supporting. Sometimes we do not stop enough throughout the day to truly listen and support the people that we lead. We want to create a habit around searching for the root cause of any issue by listening and questioning our colleagues. Addressing these concerns will facilitate our efforts in meeting our attendance goal. We have already made time to discuss idea of listening and have seen evidence that this project has already impacted us in other areas of our work.

METHODS

The initial strategy to address our problem of practice in September was to identify 15 students whose attendance was in the "bubble" range, meaning that they were within growth range of the 95% expectation. The intention was to educate the students and the families on the importance of attendance as it relates to their child, discover and provide supports, and listen to their individual needs. We currently have a system in place where we will track every student's attendance on a weekly basis. Our 15 target students will be closely monitored in order to identify any trends or to give an insight to certain family dynamics. Immediate next steps included creating a meaningful parent survey and a timeline for meeting with parents around the need for breaking the cycle of apathy in regards to attendance. By listening to the responses of the community, we hope to identify any parallel root cause as compared to when they were in school.

The first step in our methods process was deciding how to share our project and its purpose with staff in order to create a sense of schoolwide engagement. We wanted to open up the communication line with our community, family, and staff in order to build trust in the work we were about to do. The parent liaison had a very important role in the beginnings of

this process, followed by the creation of an attendance committee meeting on a weekly basis, and finally sending out weekly emails to staff in regards their mindset around attendance issues.

By the beginning of October our parent liaison was the first to connect with 3 of the 15 families to start off the conversations with questions such as, “How are we doing at WEC?” and “What could we do better?” Instead of the principal calling the family, the liaison asked if they would come in for a more in-depth conversation around how to support them with the goal of creating a continuous cycle of relationship building. Based on the feedback from just these few questions, we began to form a more structured questionnaire for our formal parent meetings. We quickly learned and gained a deeper understanding of our situation through our conversations with these families and knew that these families had to ultimately find a sense of belonging to the school.

With the assistance and input of an attendance committee formed from administration, social workers, the parent liaison, and the attendance liaison the questionnaire began to take shape. We compiled the questions from several accredited resources and testimony, including: <https://www.attendanceworks.org>, <http://www.k12.wa.us/attendance>, the Success Mentors Program, researching other high schools in the Denver area who met attendance goals, and conversations with other Chan fellows who had worked on a similar project. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions in two parts: the first asking parents about their child’s goals, fears, and concerns they may have this school year and the second addressing attendance issues, specifically (appendix). Our goal as a committee was to build this questionnaire with a focus on mindset, but other goals of the group included things such as calling home, discussing proper documentation, truancy reports, and continued discussions around moving forward as we noticed trends from our parent meetings.

We meet on a weekly basis with our attendance team to talk about students, their attendance, interventions to put in place, and most importantly what we have learned from our families during our meetings. This “Plan, Do, Study, and Act” cycle was powerful as we were able to share what we learned from our meetings so that they could utilize it within their meetings. This Disciplined Inquiry Cycle supported our thinking as we were able to do these cycles quickly. After the first couple of meetings, we changed our cycle to reflect a more “Building a Relationship” approach with our families. We were reminded of a few key fundamentals: (1) parents need to trust us, (2) the connection/relationship is what is the key factor in changing behaviors of students and families, (3) It is important to know what resources we have as a school to support the families with what they need before we begin to talk, (4) and students will engage if they have a sense of purpose and belonging. We believe that this

mindset will have long term positive outcomes on student attendance and we would continue to collect weekly data to support our theories.

A SHIFT IN METHOD

December came with its own list of unique challenges for West Early College. Our middle school principal and Chan Fellow Kurtis Quig, resigned for personal reasons. Everyone in the school and social community was at a loss as to how this was going to affect our next steps as a school, what it would do to the momentum of our efforts toward academic growth, and what this meant for each of us personally. We came to the table as an ILT and had to reorganize, prioritize, and absorb the weight and responsibilities that Quig carried among the remaining leadership. His shoes would never be filled, but we decided wholeheartedly to continue to share his vision and goals for the middle school through the end of the school year. Quig's concern around attendance was a part of that vision. As a proud leader of West Early College, I chose to continue the work we had started together in order to support and improve outcomes for my school community.

A shift in methodology and ownership in the work was affirmed after some thoughtful reflection of Young's presentation in NYC in December. Young spoke to the idea that change will inevitably bring about disequilibrium in which people want to work towards solutions. Also, the approach of setting up an attendance committee and having meetings with parents were both technical solutions to the problem of practice, not necessarily adaptive ones. I had to be honest with the idea of, 'Does it just look like we are doing something to monitor attendance?' when actually there was no impact or movement toward identifying or providing evidence for the root cause of the problem.

Young's ideas combined with an ILT meeting in early January where we had some conversations around our school's "Scorecard", which includes attendance percentages, was also an indicator that we were not entirely addressing the root cause of attendance at WEC. Initially, the ideas that were suggested began to sound like the 'same old' ideas that Quig mentioned the school had tried before. I was able to identify them as technical solutions but the difference for me in this particular meeting was that I was able to listen to other leader's thoughts through the capacity of an adaptive lens. I was able to listen with regard to what I am in control of vs. what I have no control over. These two events were both catalysts for me in thinking around the project and a new approach, or method, I was about to take.

What I concluded from listening to my peers in ILT was that there could actually be another factor contributing to the culture around our attendance. Quig may have had his

perspective of the root cause, but others at the same leadership table had different theories. Our team reflected on the following questions: (1) Are teachers following the school wide expectation to greet students each day at the door?" (2) What do "favorite teachers" do and does their student attendance reflect that? (3) What is the language students hear from teachers when they are coming and going each day? (4) How does teacher attendance correlate to student attendance? Multiple research studies tell us that students may not remember exactly the 'what' that was taught or learned, but young people do remember how teachers made them feel. That is one of the many powers and responsibilities of being an educator.

Ultimately, could low attendance be somehow attributed to teacher mindset and how they engage their students?

The final challenge in this project with respect to the transition of leadership WEC was to decide next steps without abandoning the work done around student and parent mindset and the effects it has on attendance. There was no reason to abandon the work already done when there was still strong leadership and community in our school yet it was time to adopt new perspectives. I discovered from some reflection that parent mindset does in part attribute to poor attendance, but it is only a sliver of a larger issue. "Hearing their stories, hopes, and opinions of those in our community moves us emotionally, reminds us of the moral imperative behind our work" (p. 135, Wagner, Kegan, et al.). How do I take what we have discussed as an attendance committee and create accountability school wide? What method should I try now to integrate the many theories from the leadership table so that it brings me closer to an answer for our problem of practice?

I found a new think partner for support with the Cahn project and decided that Brian Dardis was the best candidate based on his current work with the Success Mentors Program. Brian was able to share his knowledge about the philosophy of the program, the overall structure and checkpoints in the school year, and how the program might improve overall attendance. We thought about key elements that we might be able to incorporate into moving forward with engagement as our new focus. Some other ideas included correlating parent and student questions around mindset and look for trends, looking at the data he had collected so far in his program, and by looking at student perception surveys (SPS) and looking for a correlation between student answers to teacher Learning Environment (LE) scores.

After discussion of these ideas about growth and capacity mindset combined with a new perspective of the root cause led us to four possible, immediate, actionable steps:

1. **Use SPS data to facilitate teacher reflection:** 'Facilitates Learning' is the lowest scoring category, overall. Have teachers look at SPS scores around these specific questions: (1) My teacher helps me learn new things, (2) My teacher explains what we are learning

and why, (3) My teacher encourages me to share my ideas, (4) My teacher makes learning interesting. Ask directly, “What implications does this data have on your classroom attendance each day?” Why should this be meaningful data to teachers? How do we gently acknowledge that teachers have learned behaviors, as well? Create a protocol for this discussion.

2. **Schoolwide PD’s around the way (both positive and negative) we speak to our students.** As an ILT, how do we “disappoint people at a rate that they can absorb”? (Young) In other words, how do we not point fingers, blame, or shame those who do not use positive narration very often, but instead bring them to awareness, and provide them with support? (LE indicators for classroom environment are low scoring). The key is to integrate positive narration into instructional strategies that we are already working on. For example, how can teachers use positive narration as they are actively monitoring students to promote mastery of grade level tasks (ice. give teachers specific sentence stems)? What can we plan on narrating to students as we go through the DDI (data) protocol and prepare for the reteach?
3. **Provide social and emotional supports for students as we prepare for testing season.** How can we build this into our PRIDE each week (and are teachers still meeting this school wide expectation of addressing college and career readiness each week, along with our core values? Why or why not?)
4. Creating a stronger connection between middle school and high school for those students with chronic absences: send students down to the **career center** to discuss dreams, goals, desires and have discussions around the importance of being in class each day and how that will help them achieve their goals (becoming action oriented). Then, teachers can receive some specific feedback around what is engaging for particular students. Create a protocol for this teacher/student discussion.

At this time in the school year, we had to be reasonable about which action step to take and what our intended outcomes would we want to see. After bringing the four ideas to the ILT meeting and listening to feedback, Brian and I chose to focus on providing social and emotional supports for students as we prepare for testing seasoning. Our intentions moving forward with the project combined with our previous actions were: (1) for teachers and parents to build capacity for trusting relationships, collaboration, respect, and reflection on their own mindset, (2) for teachers, parents, and staff to foster a culture of empathy, (3) for teachers to engage in difficult conversations about student perceptions and list next steps to engage students each day, and (4) for teachers to use SPS data and research to provide a clearer sense of the needs, gaps, and urgency for a change in mindset around attendance.

Providing social and emotional supports for our students during testing season meant that Brian and I needed to put our attendance committee into action and determine what data to gather in order to show that our supports were successful. We decided on implementing two strategies that would require teacher support and the support of the committee. For the

academic support piece, teachers were asked to make a list of test-taking strategies and divide these strategies up by content area (appendix). There was an agreement that each content area would focus on their specific strategies so that we had assurance that every student was receiving the same academic supports. The second implementation would be a week of three advisory lessons, led by committee members, where students would rotate by grade level. There was a lesson on general logistics of CMAS so students would know what to expect each day, a lesson on anxiety and coping strategies, and a lesson on perseverance. These three topics addressed in these meetings were intended to provide emotional support to our students during test taking time.

In order to gather a body of evidence, we looked at the student perception survey (SPS) given to students in October, which was divided into three sections: Facilitates Learning, Supports Students, and High Expectations and created a student friendly survey. The questions were modified so they were appropriate for students during testing time (Appendix). The intention of the survey was to compare how students were feeling before and after testing and if their academic and emotional needs were being met. Students were given the pre-survey on at the first advisory lesson and the post survey on the last day of testing.

RESULTS

By examining the data collected from the fifteen students from September through April, a few trends were noticed in regard to the intended outcomes of parent meetings (see Appendix). Of the “bubble” students chosen, only one was able to reach the 95% attendance goal that we set out to accomplish. This student did have consecutive check in meetings/parent follow ups throughout the year and the data shows that our conversations with this family did have an impact. The meetings/check ins were not as consistent with all fifteen students as intended. Three of the students that were tracked became chronic attendees, meaning that these students either stopped coming to school all together, were not dropped from enrollment, or they switched schools without notifying anyone, which negatively impacted attendance data by an average drop of 26.31%. Another noticing was that first semester attendance was much higher than second semester, overall. This may have been in part attributed to parent meetings first semester or that traditionally the first few weeks of school at WEC have higher attendance and engagement than any other time during the school year. In comparison with their last year’s attendance, six students increased by an average of 3.4% overall and six students showed a decrease in attendance from the previous year by an average of 6.65%. These mixed results help to conclude that there is no direct correlation between our efforts to change parent mindset and its effects on student attendance.

The student survey results from the implementation of social and emotional supports during testing were a little more eye opening (see Appendix). A celebration that is evident is that students scored high overall on the pre and post question, “My teachers care that I do my best.” This shows that students are aware of teacher’s positive intent and that what they do matters. One trend we noticed was that 6th grader’s positive opinion dropped overall in comparison with 7th and 8th graders. This may be attributed to the fact that they are just transitioning into middle school and were not necessarily sure what to expect from the testing experience. Another wondering that resulted from the survey is around the anxiety questions. Based on our presentation and feedback we were unable to tell if students truly understood what anxiety is, how it plays a role during this critical time period, if they were able to reflect and identify coping strategies, and if they are aware of how teachers process emotions during high stress situations. There was also some speculation around how one of the statements was worded in the survey: “My teachers listen to what I am worried about.” It is possible that these scores were lower overall as ‘listening’ can be interpreted in different ways. Some students may feel that if they do not get what they want, then their teacher did not listen to them. Some students may have not expressed any needs and unaware of how to answer this question. In retrospect, this question could have been more specific around what listening means in the context of the survey. Finally, there was a long discussion around what “doing your best” looks like and if teachers are being explicit about modeling for students in a content specific environment. The scores for both pre and post survey were positive overall for all grade levels, with a slight percentage decline for the post survey. In one class it may look like having your materials ready while in another it may be the ability to work independently on a task. Adults can project those expectations in various ways and it will be important to reflect on this statement as we consider the implications and next steps in our shift around mindset at West Early College.

REFLECTIONS

This project resulted in an introspective journey on what it means to lead. There were several challenges this year that indirectly took their toll on attendance, for both students and teachers. In all honesty and reflection, this project began with the intention of finding solutions for improving low attendance at West Early College but instead my interpretation of this academic year was more like an abrupt, yet powerful, movement into leadership. The problem of practice evolved from a quantitative practice, something that could be measured and tracked, to a qualitative study on how I was going to help support my colleagues. It seems like the downward spiral began with the resignation of our middle school principal and Cahn Fellow Kurtis Quig in December, followed the Denver Teacher’s strike in February, the resurfacing of the Columbine tragedy in the spring, and finally the personal struggles that we each carry with

us into our buildings throughout the year. So, the problem of practice has really become, 'How have these events changes the course of my leadership at West Early College?'

Our school community was in disbelief when Kurtis Quig decided to resign as middle school principal in early December. This was an extremely emotional and challenging time for most teachers, admin, students, and families. Our school structure would remain intact, as already having an executive principal and vice principal for the high school, although the middle school would undergo a shift in direct leadership. Quig's responsibilities had to be delegated among the leadership team, meaning that we decided to incorporate his initiatives and continue "the movement" forward while being intentional about finding a way to keep the morale of the teachers and students intact and present, both in body and in mind, for the remainder of the school year. This meant that my personal movement into leadership might happen more quickly and abruptly than I anticipated but I was willing to step up and adapt to the change in priorities and personalities of a "new" leader with a different leadership style. I knew moving forward that there would be leadership challenges that would be easy to identify, yet that there would be some that I could not anticipate as each day my role as senior team lead was evolving.

Quig's absence meant that I had to decide whether to take ownership of the Cahn Project and continue the journey towards the problem of practice or to abandon the project all together. His departure was unprecedented in the Cahn Fellowship Program but fortunately I was given the opportunity to continue the work towards finding solutions for my school. My growth and "aha' moment was affirmed after some thoughtful reflection around Young's presentation in NYC in December and was helpful in my decision to move forward. Young spoke to the idea that change will inevitably bring about disequilibrium in which people want to work toward solutions, as being in limbo about expectations is never ideal. Also, the approach of setting up an attendance committee and having parent meetings were both technical solutions to the problem of practice, not necessarily adaptive ones. I had to be honest with the idea of, "Does it just look like we are doing something to monitor attendance?" when actually there was no movement toward identifying the root cause for low attendance. Upon return to WEC and after discussions with the leadership team I had to ask myself if it was time to take a new direction with the project after such an emotional semester, redefine my purpose based on what was speaking to my "gut", find a new think partner who would provide support and perspective, and decide next steps for my actions and research around a shift in mindset.

After the slow recovery from our loss and the feeling that things couldn't get worse, they did. In February, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), with overwhelming support from underpaid teachers in the union, decided to go on strike. These 4 days were filled

with mixed emotions from teachers, students, and parents. Student attendance was only reaching 68%, on average, while approximately only 50% of teachers were showing up to school each day. The administration at WEC was extremely supportive of each individual teacher's needs and concerns, yet our culture as a staff was shaken as each teacher had a different perspective on what was the right thing to do and how the lack of adults in the building would cause a domino effect of unfair delegation of responsibilities. Some of those that decided to cross the picket line were inside the school monitoring large groups of students without instructing and were frustrated. Some that did not strike were grateful that others could represent them, as they could not logistically afford to. Those that decided to strike showed their support in different ways, including standing on school grounds and chanting or making their way to the capitol building to form a united voice.

Since I was both in a teacher and leader role this past year, I chose to strike but felt ostracized from my peers. In hindsight, I believe that this was my processing of events and not necessarily my colleague's opinions about my choices but it was difficult to tell with all sorts of emotions surfacing. In my role as a leader, I felt obligated to support the leadership team in organizing efforts towards the activities in building during this time. However, the teacher side of me knew that after 14 years in a district, I was deserving of more compensation and recognition for my dedication to the profession. I chose to strike and yet encountered some personal battles around how others would view me as a leader based on my decision. This was a challenging time for everyone and it made me think about teacher attendance and the effects that it had on students wanting to be at school during this time. I learned that part of leadership is allowing others to 'do what they need to do,' so to speak but to also be attentive and reflective on how one person's opinion can make or break a school climate and culture.

I have learned that part of my job in leadership is to listen to concerns of other people, to gain trust, and build stronger relationships. I had a personal challenge this year that definitely tested my ability to be my best in the classroom and as a leader. I found out that my mother had stage 4 cancer. During this time there were moments when I felt at my emotional limit and just unable to process any other problems around me. I was not receptive to others' needs as it was such an overwhelming time for me personally. I was concerned about a few things: How was my own attendance going to affect that of my students? Would I be able to maintain and build my relationships with those around me when I just needed some time for myself? Was being in a vulnerable place an acceptable quality in my position?

My learning from this experience was that these personal challenges are not specific to only me. After some time and processing, I thought about my colleagues and how we all have our own personal something going on, whether that be a new baby, loss, divorce, just to name

a few. Each one of us, no matter what our teaching skills may be, are human beings first. In this new leadership role, I always need to consider the human before the teacher and create the capacity to listen to the needs of those around me, even when I have my own. At WEC we are aware that we need to support students with trauma, but I needed to consider teachers that experience trauma as well. My learning is that I need to be an empathetic listener, being in a vulnerable place is ok, and that I need to support those that work hard right next to me each day no matter the situation.

To those of us who have been at West Early College for the past few years it may seem as though these three challenges would have jeopardized where we have come so far from a red and school and divided our culture as a staff. The teachers and community had been working hard towards a “movement” of parent mindset, student ownership, and a cohesive culture and that is why we had been successful and were able to show growth and success in academics. One of the missing pieces in this movement was concerns around attendance. Attendance is a piece of the pie but the big learning is that we are going to achieve this is by focusing on the environment our teachers create in order to engage students. The reality is that I can use what I have learned through our challenges this year as a starting point to prepare and plan for the next, give purpose to our efforts, and the need to refocus and continue our work toward a succinct climate and culture that engages our teachers and students. Specific plans for next year include providing year-long professional development around the culture we want to see at our school. Our leadership team hopes to give purpose for this focus on culture and create buy in for teachers around the need for a culture that is sustainable. I hope to do this by sharing my research results with staff and put myself in a vulnerable place where we can be honest about our struggles. ILT has also begun to a plan design of how school culture will specifically fit into the entry plan for our succession principal for next year (appendix). This plan has monthly goals where we can hold ourselves accountable and share equity in expected outcomes. We can expect next year to be a continual growth and learning cycle as we redefine what we want our culture to look like at West Early College. Finally, the leadership team will create professional learning around some resources found during our inquiry and discussions around the Cahn project, including *Choice Words* by Peter Johnston, which supports teachers and staff in how we speak to our students in order to form strong relationships with them and create a safe place where they want to be each day.

The Cahn Project has allowed for my personal and professional capacity in a few ways as I move forward. First of all, I am certain that I have had a valuable impact in ILT and feel more comfortable and capable in my leadership position. I know that I am heard. I feel I have earned the respect of my colleagues by the contributions I have made and the questions that I have asked to push the team in thinking about the root cause of this problem of practice. Attendance

will still be a topic of concern. Secondly, I have learned that change can never happen unless you “name the elephant.” Being honest and vulnerable about the reality of a situation is what will drive the change and impact the mindset of those around me. It is an uncomfortable place to be but creating positive outcomes from a challenging situation is part of growing into leadership. I am capable of creating a positive climate through leadership at West Early College. Finally, the network of resources that I have gained from this experience are boundless. I have been able to gain insight from discussions with other leaders from all over the country who have supported me in this whole process. I have a new insight on how to approach my colleagues by reflecting on the ways of knowing as I choose my words for next year’s tasks. I am charged with a new sense of responsibility as I create goals for my learning and promote mindset capacity at West Early College.

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Finally, a big thank you to Kurtis Quig who nominated me as an ally in the first place. I wasn’t quite sure why I was chosen to accompany you in this project, but it soon became evident that you saw something in me that I wasn’t able to see until the very end. Somehow you taught me everything I needed to know about becoming a leader before I knew your intentions. It was my job, once you left, to not just listen to your words of wisdom, but to transform my experience from this project into action.

APPENDIX

1. Social /Academic Supports Pre and Post Survey

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1fPVbkOLr4zNH2w3i979x-pTall_Jeh5obwX71S3fgxk/edit#gid=863611828

2. Creating the Survey- Possible Questions for Students

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VLNLoYNs8AU0xY1U2b389EAciApts3tBY52xEDK-PZm4/edit>

3. CMAS Logistics (1 of 3 advisory lessons, example)

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xsn1DSEIEGWjSEGmNCS7mCiMumz9CP84DZXCloJVcPA/edit#slide=id.p>

4. Example Questions for Parent Meeting [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-Y6nMr8-rzVmb4wgThWvgIJ9iVdeLW2Doqn3oYQ_Pwk/edit)

[Y6nMr8-rzVmb4wgThWvgIJ9iVdeLW2Doqn3oYQ_Pwk/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-Y6nMr8-rzVmb4wgThWvgIJ9iVdeLW2Doqn3oYQ_Pwk/edit)

5. WEC Entry Plan (p.4 Culture and Climate column)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HahBO-xgOK8u387xRLmEMt3VzigKWdT8rqY8Aw5xTok/edit>