

Success Story

Winchester Public Schools District Tackles Tough Salary Issues Using Clear Processes



District Information

Winchester (VA) Public Schools (WPS) is a city school system in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. It serves more than 4,300 K-12 students in seven schools. Its richly diverse student body is comprised of students from all over the world. Approximately 62% of students qualify for free or reduced meals, and 19% are enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages.

Recap/Key Points

- Building capacity facilitates collaborative problem solving and cooperation across departments
- Using a clear and transparent process can defuse emotional reactions
- Taking the time to “get it right the first time” pays off in broader acceptance and commitment



Problem/Challenge

WPS leaders were seeking to enhance decision-making within the district and improve the pace, surrounding communications, and final outcomes of the decisions themselves. Prior to using Decision Analysis, some decisions had to be revisited or changed, leading to confusion and inconsistent implementation.

District leaders determined they needed more consistent protocols and approaches. Thus, more than 40 senior leaders including Superintendent, Cabinet, school-based administrators, and instructional coaches were trained in TregoED processes. To maximize results of the training, WPS implemented a structured fidelity plan where each leader committed to facilitating each process in their area and sharing learning and insights. Thanks to this committed approach, TregoED processes quickly became embedded in the district.

Problem/Challenge *(continued)*

During FY19 budgeting, the district faced a challenging decision which could easily have been derailed using former approaches. The district had allocated money to give a raise to divisional support staff and grappled with the question: *“How do we best allocate the money?”*

With a significant amount of money budgeted, different factions quickly began to advocate for why one job should receive more than another with certain job types able to justify larger increases based on the surrounding market for similar jobs. Furthermore, due to the 2008 recession, there was internal inequity between new hires and WPS veterans. These differences were leading to increased tensions and distrust.

Solution

Understand the situation—The district used Situation Appraisal (SA) to better understand the issues and set priorities. This work prompted the need for collecting additional data and information.

Data collection—the district hired an external consultant to perform a salary study of each job type within their geographical market. The study quickly identified which job types were closer to the market value than others. The district also analyzed which employees had been affected by disparity caused by the recession.

Identify criteria and weights—the SA work helped identify factors and issues that needed to be taken into consideration in the decision making. Setting the criteria and weights allowed the rest of the process to be mathematically driven making it more “efficient and effective.”

Going into the decision making, the assumption had been that it was most important to address long-term employees whose pay had been “frozen” during the recession. However, weighing the criteria illustrated how critical it was to focus on recruiting and retaining staff in critical need areas. Thus, the final solution was to focus on a market-based approach. Each job category was put into one of three tiers to receive a differentiated increase based on the “distance” from the market rates.

Results

Use of a shared, credible, transparent approach helped avoid the conflict inherent in situations where groups of employees may otherwise be pitted against each other. Each stakeholder group understood the rationale behind the decision and trusted the process that was used, ultimately supporting the final outcome. The presentation to the School Board was seamless and garnered immediate support for the solution. Remarking on the clarity and completeness of the approach and supporting data, one school board member noted that it was the best presentation they had ever had.

Success in using TregoED processes on such a tough and potentially divisive decision, solidified the district’s commitment to using them across departments. Consequently, the TregoED processes are consistently being used formally and informally and leaders hold each other accountable for using it effectively. Use of a common language and approach has helped: produce more effective decisions, build more effective leadership teams and improve morale, and efficiency.

“TregoED has provided a common language and process for leaders and leadership morale has improved along with our effectiveness and efficiency.”

Dr. Jason Van Heukelum, Superintendent
Winchester Public Schools

