Looking back as we move forward

The recent warm and sunny weather signals the beginning of summer, which is such a wonderful time of the year. I recently took a walk with my wife and our dogs. We both had to stop and marvel at the beauty of the morning. Birds were singing, the smell of flowers were in the air and everyone we passed seem to have a spring in their step and smile on their face. I love the change of every season, but summer seems to bring a sprint of renewed optimism as I look forward to the warm evenings and the abundant time for outdoor activities. For students and teachers, it is a sign of the end of another school year. It is a time to review the year while we plan for the future.

This year marks the first year of our new strategic plan, “Together we are SoWashCo.” The plan is a six-year endeavor comprised of two focus areas. The first focus is to develop and enhance our efforts to personalize the educational experience for every student. I describe the ultimate vision of a personalized school experience as a system where every staff member knows and treats each student as if they were their own children. What that will mean for the student is that our staff knows each student personally. Teachers will know what students like and dislike and what their hopes and dreams are for the future. They will understand how their interests guide learning and motivation, where their students struggle with concepts not simply because of the mechanics of learning a new skill, but due to their thought processes and past experiences. We will understand their culture and their outlook on a variety of issues. We will know what accountability measures make a difference in changing behavior without implementing a one-size-fits all approach. We will know them as the person they are; shaped by their experiences in life and their dreams of the future. Using our knowledge and understanding of our students, we can provide the needed instructional strategies, motivational approaches and academic interventions to help every student succeed at the level every parent wants for their kids.

As you read my description of personalized instruction you may think to yourself, isn’t that what teachers already do. The answer is “yes” in many ways, but the complexity of learning, the volume of content we teach in one year to meet grade and course level standards, the pace of the day and school year, and the multitude of diverse life experiences our students bring to the classroom make it difficult to accomplish the goal of true personalization.

Our second focus area is to enhance the positive culture and climate in our district for both students and staff. I believe the two focuses are closely intertwined. Without a positive culture and climate in our classrooms, we cannot create the personalized educational experience we strive to implement. Without a positive
working environment, our staff also cannot do their very best work and meet their goals for helping students succeed and thrive.

At the end of May, we brought together 48 community and staff members to review the progress of the first year of implementation of the plan. Each objective has several yearly priority statements and action steps to help move the plan along. During the review, staff members responsible for implementing the action steps presented the work their committees completed throughout the year. Data was presented to demonstrate and validate their progress. The review committee analyzed the data presented and provided feedback. The feedback is being reviewed and will be used to develop the priority statements and actions steps to be implemented throughout the 2017-18 school year.

Our plan is designed to identify priorities and action steps to be implemented and accomplished each year. The incremental yearly progress is meant to move us closer each year to realizing our vision of what a personalized educational experience can look like through the development of a positive and vibrant culture and climate.

As the school year comes to an end, we are celebrating many successes while we look forward to continually improving in the future. The recent graduations of nearly 1,300 students is the perfect reminder that what we are doing is positively impacting the future of our communities’ youth. Have a great summer!