

Curtis Slater

Principal

Wyoming Elementary School
Wyoming, Minnesota

The stats:

- Years as a principal: 5
- Years as an associate principal: 12
- 2018 NAESP National Distinguished Principal

Education:

- Moorhead State University, B.S.
- Saint Mary's University, Masters in Educational Administration

School details:

- Grade span: K–6
- Enrollment: 590 students
- 90.3% white; 27.6% free or discounted lunch
- PBIS program fosters being Respectful, On-task, an Achiever, and Responsible (ROAR)
- Makerspace has “recharged the school’s pedagogy”

Connect on Twitter:

- @Slater_Curtis_
- @Mr_WyWildcat



Walking in a Superhero's Shoes

Minnesota principal finds building relationships more effective than dispensing discipline

Curtis Slater is known as a charismatic leader who's passionate about creating a great learning environment for his students. He has made considerable contributions at the school, district, and state level to guide the implementation of PBIS, and his work has led to concrete academic gains at Wyoming Elementary, which was named a 2017–2018 Minnesota Exemplary School.

Slater believes in building relationships and makes a point of addressing the concerns of disengaged and frustrated parents to bring them into the school community as active participants.

On what he remembers about principals from his years as a student

I never saw the principal unless I was in trouble, we had an all-school assembly, or sometimes in the lunchroom. I remember my parents telling me, “You see that person? You don’t want to be in their office, and I’d better not get a phone call from them!” It was a weird feeling to be afraid of the person that was supposed to be the leader of my school.

On his first year as a principal

Staff, parents, and the community wanted me to create an environment that made students fear to see me in my office. I had one role: to hand out discipline to kids who struggled with social and emotional skills. I hate to admit it, but for my first year, I succumbed to peer pressure and focused on handing out discipline and on students’ weaknesses. I started to hate my job and all of the negative energy that I was creating.

On how he learned to loosen up

It was a Friday morning, and I went to put on my dress shoes, but my feet hurt so badly that I decided to grab a pair of purple basketball shoes. I wasn’t ready for what happened next: Students started talking to me about my purple basketball shoes! “How big are your feet, Mr. Slater?” “Do you have blue basketball shoes?” “How many pairs of shoes you have?” “Will you wear my favorite color tomorrow?”

Parents and staff loved the shoes, too, and many of them asked the same questions. As I reflected on my day, I figured out that I didn’t have to be a principal who looks like the ones I had when I went to school, hands out discipline, and reacts to issues instead of being proactive. I’m much more comfortable in my shoes as an instructional leader who focuses on building relationships with students, staff, and families.

On the superpowers of a principal

We all have certain superpowers, and I hope you use them; your school deserves to see the real you. Don’t try to be someone you are not, and remember that the students we serve need us in their corner. You can be the principal of your school—or you can be the principal of your dreams. 