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ONcall

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Developing empathy as a board member

The challenges of the pandemic have impacted everyone. It is an understatement to say it has caused disruption to daily life and routines. Significantly, it has also had a widespread adverse mental health impact on a variety of people.

While we have all tried to adapt and persevere, the effects are worse in some fields and for some people. Healthcare professionals, grocery store workers and educators are front-line staff members whose jobs require them to provide direct services to patients, customers and students.

Schools have become a flashpoint of emotions. Understandably, parents are worried about their children's education and safety. School staff members have concerns about health and safety and the new challenges of adapting to remote, then hybrid, then disengaged classrooms. District staff must meet the demands of delivering quality programs in an environment of uncertainty and concern while keeping staff and students in their care safe. And finally, school board members, those generous volunteers who help shape education in their communities, are on the receiving end of criticism from all sides over decisions they make or mandates they follow.

It's an emotional time, and people may be saying or doing things out of character because of stress and worry. We could all use a little empathy. And we should practice empathy because we do not know what other people are going through or the struggles they may be dealing with.

Ricky Emerson, School Board Chair in White Pass, Wash., shares the following reflection based on the comments she's heard and the challenges she's seen during this time. There are no easy answers, but recognizing that people are doing the best they can during a challenging time — and thanking them for their efforts — is a caring act of empathy that can help people feel seen and heard.

Do I really get it?

Do I get the daily challenge of how many kids will be able to show up in your classroom?

Do I get that your lesson plans seem to have a perpetual "to be continued" in felt marker across the top?

Do I get the revolving door of who was at school last week, or even who came to class today?

Do I get the phone calls, printed seatwork and follow-ups trying to stay in touch?

Do I get that some days you feel as if you can't do one more day of "this"?

(Over)

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Do I get how many creative ways you've asked a student to wear their mask on AND up?

Do I get that your "to-do" pile has grown MILES higher than your "ta-done" pile?

Do I get that you might be confused about if it's five days out, 10 days out, or if it is now five again?

Do I get that who is teaching what, where and to whom today might be different than yesterday, or perhaps even "yet to be determined" for today?

No - I don't fully "get it."

And yet, I know our teachers, support staff, bus drivers, students and families are dealing with ALL this and so much more.

I can say that stress has now become a "four-letter" word.

I can say that I really, really appreciate you!

I can say that you are still making a difference.

I can say that your co-workers couldn't do this without your contribution each day.

I can say that I am glad to have seen patience and fortitude in action – which likely you have renewed numerous times daily.

I can say that I am glad for the resourcefulness you have exhibited to those around you.

I can say that I realize you care, you are committed and you are doing the best you can.

I can say, with a grateful spirit, THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart.

*Submitted with respect for each one who reads this.
Ricky Emerson, Board Chair*