

Lee Ann Buchanan & Associates

Creating a High School Culture of Success

*An Analysis of Six Focus Groups with
California High School Teachers*

September 2007

METHODOLOGY

This report represents the results of six focus groups conducted in July 2007 in Sacramento, Hanford, Santa Maria and Long Beach with teachers representing Hiram Johnson, Luther Burbank, Hanford West, Santa Maria, Compton, Norwalk and Montebello High Schools. The purpose of the research project was to gauge reactions and gather input from teachers toward the CTA-IFT Appreciative Inquiry Student and Parent Interview Project. Sixty-four teachers participated in the focus group discussions.

Readers of this report should remember that focus groups are a qualitative tool designed to explore issues in depth with a small group of qualified respondents. The results of focus group research help in understanding the range and intensity of opinion but cannot be used to provide statistically reliable projections to an overall population representing the broader audience under study.

Verbatim responses from participants (in quotation marks) are used in this report to provide texture and reinforcement of the findings. They are representative of what was said in the groups and were selected to reflect key findings, but they are not all-inclusive.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Reactions to the “Culture of Success” Principles

At the outset, these focus group participants praised the effort to interview successful students and their parents through the Appreciative Inquiry Student and Parent Interview Project in an attempt to uncover the underlying reasons and motivating factors for student achievement. Also, applauding the use of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, several participants said they appreciated the project’s focus on the affirmative over the more traditional focus on “problems to fix.”

“I was pleasantly surprised to see the focus on success and not on problems to fix. I liked the approach of being positive.”

“This is something that resonated with me for quite a while. We are dealing with human beings and when you try to get them to go in a certain direction it is the motivational techniques, the positive reinforcement techniques that get them going, not the negative, not the problem solving.”

“I like the part where you are talking about trying to be on the affirmative, rather than identifying problems...that is what I liked about this.”

“This made me rethink what we are doing well. I like that. Then we can say, I can do a little bit better. But I like starting with the idea of what is it that we are doing that is working, then go from there.”

“Motherhood and apple pie,” “very thorough” and “impressive” were some of the words these teachers used to describe their initial reactions to the Guiding Principles (GPs) developed through the interview project. At the same time some teachers expressed concern that some of the GPs are very “idealistic” or “perfect world thinking,” and too difficult to “translate into action.” Yet, all seemed to agree that if the principles outlined here could be integrated into the values systems of the stakeholders in their high school communities, a “culture of success” would result. As such, participants were willing to brainstorm and explore how these principles could be implemented in the effort to bridge the gap between what their high school culture is now and what it could be in the future.

“It was nice to have all these things identified...as attributes of successful schools or successful learners...these are things we could actually work at.”

“I thought it was very thorough. I thought it covered all the different areas for success. I was impressed at how thorough it was.”

“This all sounds wonderful and these are goals we might shoot for, but how we get there is the tricky part.”

“I don’t know if there is anything here you would disagree with but some of what is being said here is really in the details, the implementation.”

“This is all very optimistic, almost pie in the sky.”

When asked if the Guiding Principles align with their own values and beliefs about what it takes to create a culture of success in their school, most participants agreed that the ideas presented “are on target” and “easy to relate to,” both valuable and thought-provoking, and in some cases “things teachers are already trying to implement at our school.” Some teachers were intrigued by the idea of digging deeper to explore “beliefs, values and progress, culture and success” in the school environment in order to “capitalize on that...by developing a whole culture, a whole family.” And many were impressed by the project’s “focus on parents,” often noticeably absent in school improvement efforts.

“There seemed to be two big areas of emphasis – the teacher-student relationship and parent involvement. Both are definitely achievable but the parental one is going to take a lot more work, a lot more time, a lot more effort to develop, but I think it will be worthwhile.”

“We can provide a school community and we can provide more reasons for parents to get connected but we can’t control for all of it. I think we can learn from this and we can try to do more of what works.”

“I think we are trying and I think to a major extent this is the intent or a mirror image of the smaller personalized learning community effort.”

“If the parents are involved, the students are committed, the teachers are committed and all these groups are working together, you are going to have more success. I believe that.”

“I liked that it focused on the parents. This is one of the first times that I have ever seen anything that has to do with school improvement that puts so much emphasis on the parents.”

The principles that resonated most strongly with these participants included focusing on the future, valuing education, strengthening the work ethic and increasing family involvement. Throughout the discussions, participants pointed to and referred back to these principles as the core to the mission of influencing the culture at their schools.

Another dominant theme to emerge from these groups centered on the idea that both teachers and parents play a critical role in helping students visualize their own future and understand the value of education in accomplishing their dreams. Participants talked at great length about the teacher’s role in inspiring, supporting and encouraging students to set goals, work hard and believe in their own ability to succeed. Throughout the groups, these teachers focused on strategies for developing the student-teacher relationship in the effort to motivate students to succeed and they offered numerous ideas for nurturing or fostering that connection.

“These are great things but the bottom line is connection, connection, connection with the kid. And you have to find good teachers that can do that.”

“I like these ideas and principles because they would apply whether it is 1900 or 1970 or even today because laws may change but principles don’t. These ideas would be applicable to anybody at this point in school... they are motivational points or attitudes about education.”

“I think the newer teachers are centered on this idea. I want to have a relationship with my students. I want to motivate them to do well. I want them to succeed. That is what my goal is and I approach my students on a personal basis...these principles are a range of where you need to go and what schools might need to know more of.”

“I think it is even more important in high school to have the teacher-student relationship.”

At the same time these teachers recognized that while schools and teachers cannot always “control the relationship between the student and the parent,” they can influence that relationship by providing support to parents, creating opportunities for quality parent-student connections and effectively communicating with parents.

“Being able to paint a picture for kids... getting parents involved so they see the bigger picture. Some of them don’t have too big of dreams for their children because they don’t know themselves. So I really like the idea of including parents in the ideas, seeing the picture, what is out there for their kids.”

“This would be great if we could get our families to do all these things listed, but we have no control over what families do.”

Challenges

Resistance among these teachers to the Guiding Principles centered on the challenge of “implementing” or turning them into “daily activities.” Some explained that the GPs are good “starting points” but they need to be more specific with a “flushing out” or elaboration of “avenues” or “examples” on how to incorporate these ideals into the classroom. Also, some teachers wondered whether the GPs apply to all students, especially those who are struggling, and questioned how to make them relevant to meet the needs of the “wider population.”

Starting earlier in the education process to effectively reach students was mentioned by some participants who noted that “high school is too late to change the culture kids bring to high school.” And, as previously mentioned, some also expressed apprehension about teachers and schools being asked to tackle problems – like parent involvement and child rearing practices – that are “outside of the teacher’s or school’s control.”

A few participants in the groups suggested a challenge schools often face is that the cultural values their students bring from home can be a hindering force to student success – for example, cultural attitudes that do not value education or expect high achievement. Or, on another front, one group noted that some cultures embrace the “teacher rules” value which explains that because parents trust the teachers to make the right decisions, parents are not involved in the schools. Schools, some participants concluded, need to find ways to overcome or bridge these cultural gaps.

“I have noticed that when they are recent arrivals from any country, the kids and the parents seem to have a sense of ‘we have made it, we are in a better place, that is good enough.’ And convincing them

that there is even more is not that difficult, but it takes a while...There is a dream out there, you can attain it...education is going to take you even further.”

“There is something missing in this focus on future – students enjoy challenges and work hard to achieve their goals. The thing that maybe should change is or be different are the goals that are expected in high school, the curriculum that is taught. The reason is that for some African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos who don’t succeed is because it doesn’t make sense to their culture. The things asked of them, the things that are expected...Other cultures, they have different goals, family, providing for the family, so I guess you have to bridge that.”

“I think sometimes we as educators feel that when parents don’t contact us then they don’t really care. But it is not part of the culture. They feel that once their children are in high school they are more like adults and they are entrusting you as their teacher, their caretaker...in Mexico, that is how it is...the teacher rules...they want to know more if their kids are respecting you. That is their first question because that is a direct reflection on them. The academic question is your responsibility, they are leaving it up to you, you are the educated person.”

When asked what was missing from the list of Guiding Principles, participants most often mentioned teacher collaboration, peer influence or peer pressure on students, technology skills for students to compete in the future, student accountability or student responsibility for their own education, vocational education opportunities (“going to college is not the only measure of success”), instilling the values of cooperation and teamwork, and the role of administrators in supporting teachers in their efforts with students.

While not specifically asked about challenges to implementing the Guiding Principles from a systemic perspective, participants did suggest a few areas where systemic changes could make a difference in creating a high school culture of success. For example, they advocated that smaller class sizes would provide more opportunities for teachers to connect with their students and develop quality relationships with them. Others suggested a shift in focus from the current “test results based environment” would also go a long way in changing the culture in the high school. Still others suggested that providing teachers more opportunities for collaborating with each other about teaching strategies and individual students would be beneficial. And a handful recommended giving teachers fewer preps to foster creativity in their teaching.

Next Steps Recommendations

Most of these teachers concurred that it would be valuable to continue moving the “culture of success project” forward. However, a common refrain heard from all the groups was that the list of Guiding Principles is “too long,” “overwhelming” or “repetitive.” Many suggested the list be pared down or condensed to focus on three or four key concepts to make it more “user-friendly” and accessible.

Also, in response to the concern over whether these GPs are relevant to all students, many participants suggested the interview project be expanded to the students, and their parents, who are struggling or falling behind in the high school environment. Additionally, a few recommended interviewing students who are successful in ways other than GPA, such as

student leaders, athletes, musicians, artists, etc. A few participants also advocated that administrators be included in the survey or overall discussion.

“It would be interesting to hear how the low achievers have found success in one or two classes, or certain experiences they’ve had, like choir or football, where they do well...and see how that matches up with kids doing well overall.”

“I’d like to see the same thing done with students that are not successful asking the same questions. Ask them, what do you think they could do to help you be successful.”

“I notice that the kids involved in this already have in their mind success. The things I am looking to change are the kids and the families who accept failure, where failure is an option.”

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Focusing on the Future

Guiding Principles

- 1) **Students are goal orientated and see a positive future strengthened by a school environment where all learning and teaching reflects real world experiences.**
- 2) **Students admire success in themselves and others. To increase student success and to challenge, support and encourage each student, the school provides a community of mentors.**
- 3) **Students enjoy challenges and work hard to achieve their goals. Therefore, the school and community acknowledge, encourage and support each child's ambitions.**
- 4) **Students have a vision of the future. Parents reassure their student's future. Parents support their children by devoting their energy and time to their children.**

Participants directed most of their attention to the first two sections of the Guiding Principles – Focusing on the Future and Strengthening the Work Ethic – and offered numerous ideas for turning these principles into action.

That “students are goal orientated and see a positive future,” and “students have a vision of the future” were the ideals that resonated most strongly with these participants. Teachers also added the idea that “students value education” and recognize that education is a key component in the path to achieving their dreams. They elaborated that students need to look “beyond the weekend” and visualize their future so that they can set goals and work toward achieving those goals step by step. Many agreed that the effort in high school to encourage students to set goals and look to the future must begin with ninth graders, who are at a “good turning point in their life,” are still open-minded and often lack direction.

Participants agreed that teachers can play a role in helping students “develop a stronger sense of self...and help them believe in themselves,” as well as “help students understand school is a stepping stone as far as moving on into the workforce or the community to be successful.” To do that, teachers can serve as role models and establish connections with students to inspire them and help them “find out who they want to be” and “help them get the help they need to succeed.”

Implementation Ideas:

Students are goal oriented, see a positive future, have a vision of the future.

- Offer students a course, or instruction, on goal setting – how to set achievable goals, how to set short-term goals, how to set long-term goals, how to deal with peer influence on achieving goals

- Create a summer program for at-risk 8th graders and work with them on goals
- Create a 9th Grade Village or 9th Grade Academy that includes extensive work with 9th graders on setting goals and achieving goals – i.e., graduation goals, college and career goals, taking responsibility for their own education and their own grades, developing a plan for getting into college, creating a vision of the future, exploring careers, updating goals
- Assign students in class a paper to write “five goals that they want to accomplish this year and five goals they want to accomplish in their lifetime and then put it up on the board with their picture”
- Model goal setting as a teacher by outlining own goals for class and show commitment and follow-through on those goals
- Involve counselors in goal setting projects with students on annual basis
- Employ a “fun and powerful” exercise in the classroom where you “acknowledge kids from the future so the student actually visualizes his/herself in that future moment...and then students acknowledge each other from the future...which creates a future that becomes real and possible and experienced in that moment”
- Create classroom discussions or activities that give students an opportunity to see how education can help them achieve their dreams
- Ask students to identify their goals upon high school graduation and invite community members whose careers or experience match those goals to speak to the class
- Discuss with students what they are passionate about and encourage them to follow their passion
- Talk to students about all the opportunities there are for them and encourage them to take advantage of those opportunities
- Allow students to submit college essays as assignments
- Share with students own personal stories about college or getting to college
- Encourage students to keep trying and never give up, even when they say “I can’t do it” or they do give up
- Keep parents informed how a student is doing toward their college goals through programs like TES (Transcription Evaluation Service)
- Provide agendas or planners to students beginning in 9th grade so they can learn to organize themselves and set goals for themselves
- Provide a Colleges and Career Center to expose kids to the myriad of opportunities available to them
- Invite freshman to observe senior project or senior portfolio presentations so they have goal in mind for their own senior projects/portfolios
- Sponsor college campus visits and tours beginning in 9th grade so students set college goals early on in their high school career
- Invite college students to work in classrooms and serve as role models
- Offer college day and/or career day on campus each year
- Offer professional academies – i.e., Business Academy, Law Academy, Medical Academy – so students can learn about various fields and set goals for a profession in that field

- Demonstrate a pathway to success by celebrating the success of students who graduate from various academies
- Encourage students to pursue college even if they did not do well in their freshman year
- Schedule counselors to visit classrooms and discuss college paths and opportunities – i.e., cover courses required, financial aid, individual transcripts, questions
- Stress with students that teachers are here to help them achieve their dreams

Implementation Ideas:

All learning and teaching reflects real world experiences.

- Create an engaging project that is real world – i.e., build a roller coaster in physics class and then go to an amusement park as a follow up
- Bring careers into classes by developing lessons with real world applications, i.e., measuring lumber to build a cabinet
- Prepare math lessons (or classes) that focus on math for different career segments, i.e., construction, medical
- Create assignments for students to apply what they've learned outside the classroom, i.e., a Spanish class student is required to initiate a conversation with a native Spanish speaker or watch a Spanish TV channel
- Invite community members and alumni to speak before the class (or school) and give students “an honest picture of their job,” and “tell it straight like it is”; include speakers from “non-traditional professions,” and “from different walks of life”
- Invite undergraduate students from local colleges to visit classrooms and talk about what they are doing at the college level to get high school students excited and see “big picture relevancy”
- Require students to work in the community or participate in community service
- Establish a relationship with an elementary class and write letters back and forth, providing a real audience and appreciation for how important education is
- Demonstrate to students what will be expected of them in a job setting by requiring them to “call in sick” when they are going to miss school, and teaching them how to be responsible and be on “good behavior”
- Establish a contract with kids about attendance and being on time and explain to them how this is what employers are looking at – “you show up on time and call if you are sick or late”
- Provide activities in that class that connect history to an occupation or career, i.e., students perform as a TV anchor, news reporter or director
- Require class to participate in a major research project – i.e., survey students and parents on an issue of importance
- Provide more work experience opportunities for students
- Focus on engaging activities that students relate to
- Teach students how to introduce themselves, interview for a job, what to say or not say in an interview, how to talk to adults

- Offer the History Alive curriculum that puts kids in different situations in history and requires them to act like certain countries or certain people in history
- Encourage students to think about how they present themselves to others by requiring them to make a presentation or perform a solo
- Connect different pieces of literature to modern day movies or books
- Require English students to write resumes
- Teach students communications skills to help them interview for a job
- Tie what goes on in a classroom to what goes on in a real job
- Offer a Career Pathways class that includes speakers and field trips
- Create real world applications for math and science
- Create projects that students identify with – i.e., expose Spanish-speaking students to Latino American, Chicano, Mexican American writers they can identify with; tie lessons back to their own history
- Give students a real life science problem that they have to study, figure out a solution and present it to a panel
- Provide literature that is interesting and connects to real life
- Expose students to successful adults from their own cultures
- Role play different vocations in the classroom
- Share photos with kids of vacation and relate it back to being successful and being able to travel

Implementation Ideas:

Students admire success in themselves and others.

- Give students opportunities to succeed daily and/or weekly
- Recognize and reward success early and often
- Find different successes to recognize other than just grades or attendance
- Help students find their own passions, encourage them to think about their future successes
- Help students monitor their progress on their goals
- Offer advisory classes or homerooms that provide time for goal-setting and monitoring of goals or successes
- Develop several criteria for achievement on a project so more than just one student has success
- Create advisory classes that include different grade levels and keep the same students over course of four years to establish rapport, trust, commitment
- Recognize and Motivate students to do better with extrinsic rewards like the class student of the week or student of the month
- Recognize students with high GPAs, as well as those who show improvement, with awards cards that give them discounts at local stores and restaurants
- Schedule students into the appropriate classes where they can succeed and give them the tools to be successful
- Develop a report card that allows the teacher to grade the student in several areas, other than just GPA, in an effort to identify their successes

- Give students days off, or provide some tangible reward, for school improvement or achievement
- Create intrinsic rewards by developing personal relationships with students or connecting students with people who will encourage and motivate them
- Provide more vocational opportunities and/or electives for students to find their own success
- Give students a taste of success at the beginning of the year by giving them lots of opportunities to succeed which will motivate them to build on that success
- Celebrate the small successes as well as the big
- Reward students for making improvement

Implementation Ideas:

The school provides a community of mentors.

- Create a student mentor program – i.e., juniors and seniors work with ninth and tenth graders in small group collaborative learning environments where student mentors serve as positive peers and role models; students work together before and after school, go on field trips and play sports together (benefits: students have ownership, students participate in groups, students identify each other's strengths, students develop work ethic, and it creates an informal peer to peer relationship)
- Develop small learning communities to give teachers opportunities to get to know their students better and mentor their students in the classroom
- Mix academics with mentoring from the teacher in the classroom, i.e., AVID
- Allow students to choose a mentor rather than assigning mentors so that there is more of an authentic connection between the teacher and student
- Serve as a role model for students
- Provide positive feedback to students either one-on-one or by writing positive notes or comments on assignments
- Make it easier for teachers to access all the information on a student to help them mentor the student, i.e., software systems that provide attendance, phone numbers, grades, parent contact info, etc.
- Establish alumni and/or community member mentoring programs and pair students with business leaders, community leaders
- Provide common planning time for teachers to discuss students and encourage a team effort to address individual student issues
- Offer counseling groups that involve seniors and juniors who mentor at-risk freshman and sophomores
- Establish better counselor-student relationships by having students stay with the same counselor for all four years of high school
- Provide programs for general ed students to serve as mentors to special ed students – i.e., Best Buddies
- Focus on 9th graders through a 9th Grade Village or 9th Grade Academy where students have their own set of teachers and administrators who monitor and mentor students throughout year

- Require students to find their own mentors either on campus or off campus as part of their senior project

Implementation Ideas:

Students enjoy challenges and work hard to achieve their goals.

- Instruct and guide students as to what hard work and strong work ethic means
- Connect student work with outcomes to teach them what hard work means and how you learn
- Create activities for students that are so engaging they forget they are working hard
- Create projects, like the senior project, where students must work hard but they are motivated and inspired to work hard
- Create challenges in the classroom
- Post grades regularly so that students are empowered as to where they stand and take action
- Provide immediate feedback on tests, assignments, papers

Implementation Ideas:

Parents reassure their student's future.

- Offer workshops for parents to educate them about college pathways and how easy it is for students to get financial aid for college, so they can reinforce that message at home
- Schedule parent conferences with several teachers where the parents can “reassure their students that they value of education”

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Strengthening the Work Ethic

Guiding Principles

- 5) **Students enjoy being challenged and work hard to reach goals. Therefore, the school community has aligned its learning goals to address student's individual goals.**
- 6) **Competition in the classroom better prepares students for real life. Competition helps students do well in everything – not just school.**
- 7) **The student's work ethic improves by having faith within themselves, challenging their work abilities, evaluating their work strengths, and setting good study habits. By participating in groups, students are able to identify each other's strengths and work ethics.**

Student work ethic was the concept from this section that resonated most strongly with participants in all groups. A strong work ethic, they said, is a “huge part of being successful” for any student. Yet, while participants agreed that teachers can encourage students to work hard and demonstrate to them the benefits of hard work, many argued that “a good work ethic comes from the home and comes from the family.” And, as one participant suggested, our society is experiencing an overall decline in work ethic. Nevertheless, all agreed that finding ways to motivate students to work hard will go a long way toward creating a culture of success.

“One of the things that really struck me was strengthening the work ethic. If we could do that, I think we could solve a lot of problems.”

“Ultimately a good work ethic comes from the home and comes from the family. And we have kids today who obviously come from families with poor work ethics...and getting them to change their work ethic is a real challenge. Success breeds a good work ethic. It is a huge part of being successful, there is no doubt.”

“If we can increase the work ethic, we can achieve more of these changes.”

“I think my work ethic is not as strong as my father's. His work ethic was not as strong as his father's and my kids' work ethic is not as strong as mine. I have noticed that decline...If we can figure out how to motivate these kids to succeed, despite their problems, despite their family life, I think that is key...We as parents work hard so our kids don't have to work as hard and they are getting use to that.”

“We can show kids there is value to working hard, that they shouldn't just do the minimum to pass, that they should do their best.”

Participants also endorsed the Guiding Principle that “by participating in groups, students are able to identify each other’s strengths and work ethics.” Group work, they explained, also fosters teamwork and a positive peer dynamic which encourages students to participate and work harder “because they are contributing to the group.”

“Participating in groups students are able to identify each other’s strength and work ethic...there is a desire to be liked by your peers. You will have the students who are academically gifted but they may not have other attributes...and they are accepted more and they feel accepted...Because of the social dynamic, others are accepted in the group because they are contributing to the group.”

Some participants were initially put off by the Guiding Principle focusing on “competition in the classroom.” “It jolted me at first,” noted one, while another suggested “it took me a second to think about it differently.” For many, promoting competition in the classroom seemed counterintuitive to their training as teachers. Concerns about this issue centered on the negative effect competition can have on some students, particularly those who are struggling or already suffer from low self-esteem. As one participant explained, “it’s a fine line between competition and demeaning the person.”

However, after further discussion on the subject, most participants seemed to agree that competition, “as long as it is done in a positive manner” and is not “competition for competition’s sake,” can be a valuable tool in teaching and learning, as well as “preparing students for real life.” As one participant reinforced, “we are wired for competition.” In order for competition in the classroom to be meaningful, they said, teachers must ensure the environment is a caring one, where teachers “emphasize that winning and losing is part of the game,” and where students are not “put down.”

“I like the idea of stressing competition in the classroom in preparing them for life, and also, at the same time having a caring environment.”

“There will be winners and losers in competition so you need to be able to prepare the losers for dealing with loss in a positive manner. This is getting at the heart of real life. We also need to teach kids that are winners not to be arrogant and to be supporters of others.”

“There are so many different levels of what different kids can be good at, so it is not competition for competition’s sake. Competition helps kids as far as the work ethic of figuring out what they are good at.”

Implementation Ideas:

Strengthening the work ethic.

- Consistently recognize and reward effort and hard work
- Demonstrate hard work by working hard and serve as a role model
- Give students ownership of something so that they become deeply involved, work hard and recognize their own achievement
- Share with students very specific, concrete examples of what work ethic looks like and how it operates
- Model work ethic by having perfect attendance as a teacher

- Provide immediate feedback on assignments so students know their work means something and they know where they stand
- Instill the idea in students that “you can’t get anywhere without trying”
- Be consistent about expectations
- Hold kids accountable for every paper, project, assignment
- Always check student work
- Give rewards and incentives on occasion
- Be consistent about homework, i.e., “there is always homework during the week, but never on the weekend”
- Develop consistency across classes, i.e., in Small Learning Communities every class has homework, every class has a certain way to head assignments, etc.
- Provide a regular structure for the class
- Influence parents about the importance of a strong work ethic since “work ethic comes from family,” so they can be a role model for their own children
- Require community service hours
- Allow students to finish a year-long class in one semester if they want to “hustle” and work hard
- Establish an attendance policy requiring students be in class a certain amount of time
- Instill in students the idea that “being challenged is good for their future goals”
- Make it unacceptable for a student not to be engaged in class (with back up from the administration)
- Find something students are interested in, find the hook that keeps them interested and then connect it to the curriculum so they will work hard
- Keep students moving and have different activities to keep them engaged
- Translate the lesson from sports that “hard work pays off” to the classroom

Implementation Ideas:

Competition in the classroom better prepares students for real life.

- Create games that are engaging and involve competition – i.e., Jeopardy – to review material or prepare for tests
- Give “get-out-of-homework free” cards for high scores on quizzes or tests
- Encourage students to focus on their own personal best and compete with themselves
- Schedule fairs or demonstrations of student projects to foster competition
- Create competition between different classes and reward the one that does best
- Post grades or progress on benchmarks regularly which allows students to compare where they are to others
- Develop a reading competition for number of books or pages read
- Develop a mandatory senior project where kids perform a job in a business and learn about competition
- Divide class into two halves for a project, bring in judges for a demonstration and have them vote on who did the best job

- Require students to make presentations for projects so students can compare their work to others

Implementation Ideas:

Participating in groups.

- Divide the class into groups for projects or test reviews; encourage students to teach the “weakest link” in the group by randomly selecting papers from group
- Create peer evaluations of group work so that students can identify each other’s strengths and weaknesses
- Create a rubric for evaluating group work
- Divide class into teams to review for a test and students motivate each other

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Expanding Family-School Relations

Guiding Principles

- 8) **The family and high school have established a meaningful and personal connection.**
- 9) **A communication system that nurtures collaboration (home visits, weekend activities and action centers) and an open door policy for the schools.**
- 10) **All students and families feel committed and connected to the school site as well as to each member of the staff and vice versa by having an advisory program for parents and students based on positive learning skills.**
- 11) **All students and families feel committed and connected to the school site as well as to each member of the staff and vice versa by having teachers sending to five parents each week a positive message regarding their child's positive qualities.**
- 12) **All students and families feel committed and connected to the school site as well as to each member of the staff and vice versa by having students in advisory classes at school.**
- 13) **Schools do everything in their power to encourage parent involvement and assure that each student receives the caring support a functional family provides.**

Not surprisingly, these teachers wholeheartedly endorsed the concept that parent involvement is one of the key components to creating a culture of success. And it was obvious that many of the schools represented by these groups have already undertaken numerous and varied efforts to promote the connection between the family and the school. However, many of these teachers expressed frustration that their efforts that have not always paid off and spoke often of the challenges schools face in connecting with parents to encourage support of their child's education. Nevertheless, most agreed, that "parent involvement is a long-term investment, and you have to stick with it." One teacher enthusiastically described a concept to improve parent involvement where parents teach other parents how they can become more connected to the schools and advocate for their child's education.

"I felt the parent component is idealistic but I feel like there is so much improvement we could make with this and we could make massive changes if we go in that direction and try to aid parents."

“Studies show that high performing students tend to have parents that value education and tend to be higher educated as well. One of the things missing here is how do we get the parents of the low performing students involved.”

“I went to a workshop where it was a group of Latino mothers who started this group of maybe 8 or 10 of them at this high school in which they got this training and then they take that training and teach it to other parents. They make home visits where people open their houses on that day and other parents show up and they train them how to advocate more for their child’s education, give them education vocabulary and do different workshops.”

Two principles in this section advocated an “advisory” program or class for both parents and students to nurture the family-school connection. However, not all teachers in these groups were familiar with the “advisory” class concept and several asked for clarification. In addition, a few participants whose schools had implemented an advisory class program suggested that advisory classes, in their experience, have not been successful in helping teachers make authentic connections with students.

Moreover, while participants agreed that sending positive messages to parents about their children can be extremely powerful in supporting the student and creating a parent-teacher connection, many were resistant to the quantification of this effort (the GP refers to five positive messages per week) and questioned if this is a “realistic goal.” Further, some explained that messages to parents about students must be meaningful and focus on real successes or they have little value. Also, they said, it is important for teachers to find a “balance between the positive and negative messages” that they communicate with parents.

“I am amazed by the power of positive comments and we need to get that mindset as teachers more. We get weighed down by so much garbage and we forget the importance of handing out those compliments and those positive things.”

“I don’t think teachers can handle that many. I think it makes a big difference but that is too many. Maybe each teacher can set for themselves a more realistic goal. It can be notes, calls, emails or comments on papers or student work.”

“On top of everything else we do...I don’t know if teachers in reality would have time to write about a child five times a week.”

Implementation Ideas:

***A meaningful and personal connection between the family and the high school.
Encouraging parent involvement.***

- Explore different ideas for getting parents on campus, i.e., offering classes they’d be interested in taking
- Provide food as a incentive for families to attend school events – i.e., hot dogs, ice cream, pizza, spaghetti dinners, potluck
- Provide transportation to school events, i.e., through a partnership with a cab service or bus vouchers

- Create a parent involvement program that trains parents to help other parents become more involved in schools and advocate for their children's education
- Offer social services (i.e., receiving food stamps) on the high school campus so parents have to be on campus and might be more likely to stay on campus and interact with teachers
- Schedule events at different times to accommodate parents' work schedules
- Offer a range of time for parent-teacher meetings, rather than a set time, so parents can drop in when it is convenient
- Give students incentives to get their parents to attend Back to School night or Open Houses – i.e., extra credit, “the student teaches their parents Spanish and the student gets the grade the parents get on a five- minute quiz”
- Offer “teacher hours” at a neighborhood coffee shop for parents to drop in
- Offer computer or English classes on campus to encourage parents to come to the high school and feel comfortable there
- Create fun, engaging activities to encourage parents to come to school – i.e., carnivals, street fairs, science fairs, awards presentations
- Create an interactive CD (in different languages) that orients or introduces parents to the high school and its teachers, administrators, programs, etc.
- Provide access to the internet for parents on campus
- Post grades online so parents can check their student's progress
- Educate parents about the consequences of taking their kids out of school for long periods
- Create public service announcements for airing on Spanish-language stations that gives information about the school, events, etc.
- Develop a Spanish radio weekly update from the local high school, put on by students
- Create a “bring your parent to school” day
- Create opportunities to involve parents in homework assignments
- Encourage kids to teach their parents one math problem they learned each day
- Ask parents to sign off on homework
- Involve parents in field trips as chaperones and drivers
- Establish relationships with parents through meaningful contacts, connections
- Be as accessible as possible, set parent meetings for Saturdays, evenings, “whatever it takes to accommodate their schedules”
- Offer parents incentives to attend Back to School Night or Open House – i.e., raffles, door prizes
- Schedule Back to School or Open House as an entire school day, pupil free, when parents can drop in anytime
- Offer campus and classroom tours for families and for extended families
- Establish a calendar for the whole year at the beginning of the year so families can plan ahead
- Give parents online access to class assignments, grades, etc
- Establish a system for the teacher or front office to send thank yous to parents who attend back to school night

- Hold meetings for parents in rec rooms where they live, and create school liaisons between teachers and parents
- Create smaller more intimate opportunities for parents to come on campus—art shows, portfolio exhibits, math night, language arts evening, science night
- Mentor parents so they can learn how to show their children they value education
- Develop “buy-in” from the community and local businesses so that employers provide time off from work for parents to attend parent-teacher meetings and other school functions

Implementation Ideas:

A communication system between the schools and families.

- Fund a home visit program where teachers are paid to personally visit the homes of students
- Ensure that all school communications are presented in the appropriate language
- Call the parents and talk to them about their child’s work
- Send group emails to parents about class information
- Email parents about their own child’s work or progress
- Call parents with the positives before the negatives
- Use an automated calling system to inform parents about upcoming tests, due dates for big assignments
- Use an automated calling system to deliver positive messages about their child
- Make sure student profiles include all parent contact information, including working phone numbers and email addresses
- Provide “Good News” post cards to teachers for quick notes to parents
- Send parents personalized invitations to school events through the mail
- Establish an open door policy that welcomes the parents to visit classroom

Implementation Ideas:

Schools assure that each student receives the caring support a functional family provides.

- Provide support staff, intervention staff and counselors for families who need help
- Offer workshops on parenting, different teenage problems
- Offer workshops for foster parents on parenting a teenager
- Seek help from the community for kids with family troubles
- Create opportunities for teachers to get together and discuss individual students and identify their needs such as intervention or counseling

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Strengthening the Social Ethic

Guiding Principles

14) Students and parents participate in a positive atmosphere that promotes a caring, supportive and respectful environment where their ideas and actions are valued.

15) Schools are giving support to students that come from different cultures and religions so they are more motivated to succeed in life and learn from other cultures.

This section did not garner a great deal of attention from participants, partly due to time constraints but also because, according to participants, many of these schools have already made great strides in “valuing diversity” and “celebrating the different cultures” in their schools. However, one group of teachers indicated that they would like to have more training about the culture of the students they are teaching so they can better understand their students and even “embrace their values.”

A few participants suggested that this section could be expanded “because the social ethic is so huge.” This might include more points about peer pressure as part of the “social ethic” – i.e., students dealing with negative peer pressure, ideas for creating positive peer pressure with student mentors, etc. It might also include ideas about students having a positive attitude about their own school, fostering “school spirit” and “not considering your school a ghetto school.”

Implementation Ideas:

A positive atmosphere that promotes a caring, supportive and respectful environment.

- Have kids develop their own rules and consequences for the class
- Allow students to express themselves when they talk about things that are uncomfortable or teachers are unsure how to deal with
- Model respect and tell students at the beginning of a course, “I am very big on respect and when I give you guys respect, I expect it in return”
- Find out what kids are interested in and try to point out their strengths
- Establish at the beginning of class how the teacher will talk to the students and how the teacher will expect the same in return
- Incorporate a program called Character Counts into the classroom in which kids learn how to be social, how to conduct themselves, how to be respectful, etc.

Implementation Ideas:

Schools are giving support to students that come from different cultures and religions.

- Incorporate different cultures and religions into the curriculum whenever possible
- Bring in guest speakers who are from different backgrounds and cultures
- Offer literature in the school library about different cultures and backgrounds
- Create opportunities to celebrate different cultures – i.e., assemblies, ethnic lunches, diversity days, cultural awareness days, clubs
- Provide more in-service training for teachers on the culture of the kids they are teaching so they have a better understanding of cultural differences
- Greet students at the beginning of class in three or four different languages
- Offer classes on various cultures
- Celebrate the culture through specific days where students and teachers come dressed in the traditional clothes that represent their cultures

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Valuing Child Rearing Practices

Guiding Principles

- 16) Parents ask and respond to their children about their progress and successes, expect honesty and respect, encourage students to overcome obstacles, dream of a better life for their children, pay attention to their children, have high expectations, and give them support.
- 17) Parents and their children have an ongoing relationship that is supportive of education and involves constant interaction.
- 18) Parents care how their students act at school, monitor the behaviors they demonstrate that promote success, and are involved at each step of the educational process in their child's life.
- 19) Families are empowered, believing child rearing is a number one priority including instilling values, developing a work ethic, and showing support.
- 20) All families spend significant amounts of time each day interacting with their children about life's activities: school, work, feelings, and challenges.
- 21) School staff members value parents and child rearing by listening to parent needs and come to families in a spirit of cooperation. Within the school – family setting, dialogue among families, students, teachers, and all staff is meaningful and results oriented.

This section represented to participants the crux, and quite often the missing link, of how to cultivate a culture of success for students – that parents are involved, value education and have high expectations for their children. Yet, participants struggled with how schools and teachers can influence the relationship between the student and the parent. Most assumed that parents support and want their kids to succeed but at the same time participants appreciated the challenges many families face in today's economic world. Participants offered some ideas on how to foster or strengthen the parent-student bond but for the most part had a hard time conceptualizing how teachers can really make a difference in this regard.

"Parents really support their kids. They want their kids to do well. They want to be involved, but I don't know if they know how to be involved or if it is the factor of time or all those things."

"I don't think it is a question of if they want their kids to succeed. It is just that time is so critical, and if food is a bigger priority, that is where they are going to. I understand that."

"I was thinking this is wonderful if every parent really did all this, but it is shooting for a big dream."

"It is just a feeling of helplessness because we, as teachers, don't really have control over what goes on at home."

"You can't tell a parent how to parent...I think the best we can do is try to be the best role model and try to connect with them...and support them."

"It is important to make a distinction between somebody who is a good parent who supports education too. Because some of our parents, who I would say are probably good parents, they don't support education so they don't teach their kids respect for education. They want their kids to have a job after school to support the family, or baby-sit the kids, all kinds of responsibilities, which is important, they need money. But the kids can't get their homework done, though they are working hard. So it is a little short-sighted."

Implementation Ideas:

Valuing child rearing practices.

- During home visits or parent-teacher meetings, ask parents what their hopes and dreams are for their child and what their child's hopes and dreams are
- Offer parenting classes at school to help parents "parent teenagers" and not give up on their teenagers
- Give assignments to students that encourage them to spend time with their parents, i.e., homework where kids must teach their parents, discuss a topic from class with their parents, or interview their parents
- Create opportunities for more contacts or connections between parents and their children around education
- Ask students to talk to their parents about what they are learning in school
- Assign students in history or social studies the task of interviewing their parents about things that happened in a particular time period from their point of view
- Make it easier for parents to know their students' grades
- Offer child development classes on campus to influence the next generation
- Offer flexible times for parents to meet with teachers in the effort to build relationships between teachers and parents
- Offer classes, training or communications for parents in how to encourage their students' education
- Help parents learn how to navigate through the school bureaucracy
- Provide families a home phone number
- Make a connection with each family at the beginning of the year and explain the class expectations and guidelines so the families can follow up with their children
- Create opportunities for honest dialogues with parents who may not value education, or who may be putting too much outside responsibility on their children, about the value of education and what it can mean for their child

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Encouraging System-Wide Thinking

Guiding Principles

- 22) Students and parents participate in a connected, safe learning community where ALL school community stakeholders support a respectful, trusting, and collaborative relationship with one another. When everything is connected things make sense for everyone.
- 23) Family and teachers encourage students to have positive attitudes and look on the bright side by showing that they believe in the student.
- 24) Family and teachers give personal attention by building strong relationships and overlooking mistakes.

Encouraging students to have positive attitudes was the principle that resonated most strongly in this section. At the same time participants endorsed the concept of “community stakeholders” connected to the schools but struggled somewhat with the amount of effort involved on behalf of the schools to encourage active community participation.

On the other hand, many participants objected to the principle suggesting families and teachers “overlook” student mistakes. They explained that teachers should not overlook mistakes as they are a normal and natural part of the learning process. Instead, they clarified, teachers and families should help students “learn from their mistakes.”

“I have a quibble with ‘overlooking mistakes.’ I don’t know if that is the right language. I think we have to establish we are forgiving but sometimes it is to the students’ benefit to make a mistake. That they know they made a mistake, we recognize it and accord it the proper perspective...if we overlook them we are not helping them learn.”

“We don’t overlook mistakes, we adjust for mistakes.”

“The word overlooking mistakes really bothers me. Because you want students to learn to move beyond their mistakes. But they have to learn from their mistakes and I don’t think overlooking mistakes is the way for anybody to learn from their mistakes.”

“I have a problem with the ‘overlooking mistakes’ part. Are we overlooking mistakes or are we helping to define and correct mistakes?”

“Mistakes are how you learn.”

Implementation Ideas:

Family and teachers encourage students to have positive attitudes and look on the bright side.

- Encourage students to never give up and never stop believing that if they try harder, they can “do it”
- Give students as much encouragement as possible
- Help students “look on the bright side” and figure out how to pick themselves up and turn a situation around
- Model optimism by showing up with a positive attitude
- Give students support so they can achieve
- Keep encouraging student effort long enough so they can see the results
- Find and encourage a student’s area of strength
- Share examples with students of sports athletes or inventors and explain how many times one might fail before finding success
- Reflect on positive quotations from people
- Change the overall school policy or culture from one of allowing students to fail to one of not tolerating or accepting failure from students
- Monitor kids and stay on top of their progress

Implementation Ideas:

All school community stakeholders support a respectful, trusting, and collaborative relationship with one another.

- Outreach to the community to help teachers make connections between the subject matter and the real world
- Require seniors to job shadow a business person in the local community
- Involve the community in mentorship programs with high school students
- Solicit internship opportunities for students in the community with local businesses
- Invite community members to be judges of student work or student presentations
- Require students to participate in public service in the community
- Solicit scholarships for students from local community members and businesses
- Involve local businesses and community members in school fairs and other school celebrations
- Invite community members to speak to students about their own personal success stories at after school assemblies and give kids extra credit for attending
- Provide after school enrichment classes that are taught by community members

Ideas for Implementing the Guiding Principles

Moving to a Learning-Centered Environment

Guiding Principles

- 25) Students are treated as respected individuals and are connected to their teachers, cared for, and communicated with about all aspects of their education.
- 26) The community is connected to the school, students, and teachers. Through these connections teachers are nurturing: they listen, they lead, they follow and they create possibilities every day. As a result, students are safe, there is freedom of expression, rules are enforced, and all are supported.
- 27) Schools are a community of caring stakeholders where communication and learning are an ongoing process. All students have a professional relationship with each of their teachers and administrators.
- 28) All students are in classrooms with passionate, caring teachers who help students see relationships between learning and real world experiences.
- 29) Teachers show personal interest and give positive feedback to their students so that students not only succeed in their classes, but also in life. The students are motivated to please their teachers as well as their family members.
- 30) Teachers have a good relationship with students by communicating and creating activities that involve both parties. Through teacher reassurances, students continue to do their best. Students are praised for their success with regular ceremonies so that their efforts are acknowledged. When students are encouraged they will keep trying to succeed.
- 31) The environment is free of negative influences where students reach for their goals and accomplish their dreams.
- 32) Teachers encourage students to do their best causing them to know what they want to be in the future, take pride in their school, and know that somebody supports them.
- 33) Caring teachers show they have high expectations for students by encouraging them to do well and helping them achieve success on assignments.

As stated earlier, creating a bond between the student and the teacher was one of the central themes participants identified in the effort to create a culture of success. And this section reinforced for participants the value and importance of teachers who “know their students

and connect with their students.” Passionate, creative and energetic teachers who are committed to building relationships with students by caring, respecting and motivating them was the ideal described by participants.

“A lot of this has to do with the relationships you build with your students.”

“Imagine if a student went to school and has six classes and in all six classes the teacher was creative, energetic, knew them and connected with them. I feel that is all we have to do. So, why is that so hard to do?”

“It is about warmth, respect. It is about learning, it is about caring. Teachers are passionate and caring about the students and hopefully, the students are passionate and caring about the teachers.”

“There is a saying that really bits home in this regard – ‘students want to know how much you care before they care how much you know.’”

“We have to remember the impact we have on these kids every day.”

Implementation Ideas:

Students are treated as respected individuals and are connected to their teachers, cared for, and communicated with about all aspects of their education.

- Provide immediate feedback on student work
- Let students know you are working hard for them
- Take time for things kids are excited about even if it means not part of the lesson
- Know every student’s name and call them by name
- Assign students journaling work that requires them to write a letter to the teacher and then personally respond
- Respond to student emails over the summer
- Maintain a relaxed environment in the classroom
- Provide intervention programs for students who are falling behind where teachers can develop stronger relationships with students

Implementation Ideas:

Teachers are nurturing: they listen, they lead, they follow and they create possibilities every day.

- Take time to sit down and talk to students individually as much as possible
- Appreciate the students’ culture, talk to them about their culture
- Promote a “cultural day” just for your classroom
- Talk to students about their personal interests
- Attend student sporting events and performances and then talk to students about them
- Let students know you believe in them
- Make a commitment to “being present” for every student

- Make the effort to understand students and “where they are at”
- Display things in the room that are related to the content you are teaching
- Engage the challenging students by giving them responsibilities and “getting them on your side”
- Develop personal relationships with students
- Listen and pay attention to things going on in students’ lives
- Talk to students and let them know you care when you notice changes in their behavior
- Welcome students in your room at lunch period
- Be available for students before and after school
- Be prepared in your subject matter, be passionate about what you are teaching and show you enjoy what you are doing
- Greet students at the door by name
- Administrators allow teachers to experiment
- Teachers and administrators support each other
- Invite community business partners to visit speak to students and show how their business relates to education

Implementation Ideas:

All students have a professional relationship with each of their teachers and administrators.

- Set the tone with students as teachers “by the way you dress and the way you talk to students”
- Shake hands with a kid “like you mean it” and establish eye contact
- Establish a “dress up” day for students to come to school dressed in professional attire, i.e., “shirt and tie”
- Require kids to dress professionally for senior projects, exit finals, major presentations
- Establish your role as the teacher with authority while respecting students and expecting them to have mutual respect
- Discourage kids from talking about other teachers or administrators negatively in the classroom
- Expect kids to come to class prepared with their own materials and completed homework
- Be prepared as the teacher
- Communicate to the student boundaries and hold them to it
- Establish consequences and accountability for student work and student actions
- “Dress professionally, act professionally”
- Model professionalism by “practicing what we preach”
- Show consistency by ensuring that all staff members apply the dress code equally and fairly

Implementation Ideas:

Teachers have a good relationship with students by communicating and creating activities that involve both parties. Students are praised for their success with regular ceremonies so that their efforts are acknowledged.

- Create opportunities for connections with students such as having lunch with students or allowing students to “hang out” in your classroom during lunch
- Give students small gifts or rewards – i.e., cupcakes – to show you care
- Compliment students when they do a good job
- Send parents an email or note letting them know when their children do well
- Talk to students about their future, about college
- Ask kids about something of personal interest to them, i.e., a soccer game or a hobby
- Spend the first five minutes of class on a topic that might be personal or of interest to students and have them share with each other
- Greet students by name every day as they enter the classroom
- Ask kids their “opinions” about topics before requiring more concrete answers
- Be willing to take risks as a teacher and allow students to take risks
- Consider body language, tone and the way “you treat kids” when they ask questions or when they engage in certain behaviors
- Have a sense of humor
- Celebrate academic success whenever possible, make celebrations more visible and more frequent (not just at the end of the year)
- Create own incentives, celebrations or internal rewards system for each class, i.e., student of the month, improved student award, “good citizens” list
- Develop creative, interesting lessons for students and “mix it up”
- Create a comfortable environment for students with games like a “penny toss” where all students add their “two cents” by answering open-ended questions with opinions and speculations (as opposed to right and wrong answers)

Implementation Ideas:

The environment is free of negative influences. Students take pride in their school.

- Schools effectively address and deal with gang problems, guns on campus
- Schools put more emphasis on clean facilities and trash clean-up
- Schools and teachers practice zero tolerance on dress code violations
- Schools provide more control and security of the hallways
- Schools undertake proactive security programs
- Administrators listen and respond to teachers about potential student fights, student threats, etc.
- Schools foster and nurture more student leadership

Implementation Ideas:

Caring teachers show they have high expectations for students.

- Establish procedures and hold students accountable
- Encourage students to do their best, try their hardest and try to improve
- Maintain high expectations and never lower the bar
- Let students know you expect better when they turn in mediocre work
- Establish expectations at the beginning of class and put them in writing
- Develop rubrics for expectations so that students have clear understanding of what is expected of them