



# Alliance for Education Solutions

## **Intangibles That Make a Tangible Difference For Dropout Prevention: The GENESIS High School Example**

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Fall 2007

### **The Dropout Crisis in America**

Among the most lethal educational challenges left unsolved by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is *a high school drop out rate averaging 30% nationally and exceeding 50% in many communities of color*. These figures are both astonishing and ironic! After five years of NCLB guided educational practices, fully one-third of American schoolchildren who enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade are being left so far behind that they will have dropped out of school before completing the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Some of these students will be reclaimed by programs that combine academics with an understanding of how to motivate discouraged students, but millions more will be *doomed to a life of unemployment, underemployment, dependency or prison*.

Over the past two decades, prevention research has consistently identified a core set of individual, family, and community factors that increase the risk of school disengagement and drop out. Many of these factors are beyond the control of schools; some are not. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center (2007), dropping out of school is often the result of a long process of disengagement that accelerates in the middle and high school years. This data raises an important education system question – *what, if anything, can be added to the day-to-day educational environment that will interrupt the cycle of accelerating disengagement and keep young people in school?* .

### **Applying Core developmental Principles Can Help**

In 1992, a landmark publication: *“Voices from the Inside: A Report on Schooling from Inside the Classroom”*, chronicled one of the first in depth explorations of the “human side” of the educational process, and its potential as a vehicle for improving educational outcomes. Since then, a growing body of research, consistently validated by student feedback, has substantiated the critical importance of combining high academic standards with “developmental” student-teacher relationships and educational environments rich in developmental assets. The data also suggests that although all students appear to work harder and achieve more in positive educational environments

where cultures of hope, high expectations and mutual respect prevail, these qualities are especially important for retaining struggling students.

The message is clear – *students stay in school longer, work harder and perform better in positive educational environments that are rich in those developmental assets over which schools do have control.* Throughout the country, individual schools, with risk factors comparable to other low performing schools, are turning their schools around with the systematic introduction of youth development principles, not as separate programs, but into the day to day operation of their schools. These principles include: *a caring school climate, high expectations, physical and psychological safety, timely supports, positive adult role models, and meaningful participation.*

These developmental principles would appear to be rather straightforward to apply. In reality, barriers are formidable for their broad scale implementation across public school districts.

As elsewhere, California schools are under unrelenting pressure to improve test scores, and they operate within *an academic performance testing system that indirectly rewards schools for allowing students on the margins to drop out.* As a result, most schools have paid scant attention to the drop-out problem, often preferring to fudge their numbers to mask the extent of the problem.

Fortunately, California has taken an important first step in recognizing and confronting education's disengagement problem. California has just signed into law SB 219 (Steinberg), which holds schools accountable for their drop out rates and encourages them to find better ways of engaging students in the classroom and the school.

In this regard, a recent *Los Angeles Times* article asserted that reducing the drop out rate in California will require a "profound rethinking" of how we motivate students to stay in school. With SB 219 providing a new incentive for schools to seriously address their drop-out problem, and with large gaps in the knowledge base required for any effective rethinking of how to motivate students to stay in school, there is a great need to learn from schools that have managed to create the kinds of motivating educational environments in which at-risk high school students can thrive. GENESIS is one such school.

### **The GENESIS Example**

GENESIS Charter High School was created in 2003 as part of the high school reform efforts of the Sacramento City Unified School District in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates and Carnegie Foundations. A co-educational high school with a military theme, its philosophy is to provide a rigorous and relevant education in a safe and caring environment that focuses on the acquisition of the academic and personal skills needed to function effectively in a diverse, rapidly changing society.

GENESIS is an inner city school educating students who have struggled in other educational settings. The ethnic composition of its 300 student population is: 53% Latino, 33% African-American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% White, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native.

In its first few years, GENESIS struggled with low attendance and poor test scores. However, with the arrival of a new principal committed to creating a caring, explicitly developmental educational environment where “failure is not an option,” GENESIS students are turning around their educational careers. Attendance has improved significantly, and, according to statewide data released in September, 2007, GENESIS boasted a 99 point gain on the Academic Performance Index, the largest of any school in the Sacramento City Unified School District, and placing it in the minority of schools, statewide, able to meet higher standards the state set this year.

Principal Judy Billingsley, attributes the turnaround to the deliberate creation of a close-knit school community that combines strong academic supports with a caring school culture emphasizing, hope, high expectations, and mutual respect. As the school’s educational leader, she takes it upon herself to model the attitudes and behaviors she expects of her teachers, staff and students, and she makes it a point to be visible in the lives of her students every day.

Principal Billingsley’s description of the cultural characteristics of “her” school appears to reflect the operationalizing of each of the six developmental principles identified above. However, student response is, in essence, the only true measure of whether developmental principles have been effectively applied at a particular school. No matter how well intended, only student experience can confirm whether *a caring school climate, high expectations, physical and psychological safety, timely supports, positive adult role models, and meaningful participation*, have actually occurred.

### **The Need for Student Validation**

Under pressure to produce “hard” evidence of improved educational outcomes, the educational system has paid scant attention to the so-called “intangibles” that have repeatedly been shown to make a tangible difference for academic success, particularly for at-risk students of color. This reluctance may also be compounded by the realization that students are the final arbiter of whether transformation to a developmental school culture has actually taken place. At Genesis, students are confirming that it has.

When asked how they explained the Genesis turnaround, an initial focus group of student leaders gave life to each of the key developmental concepts outlined above, describing what they “look like” when practiced by adults, and sharing personal responses when adults go the extra mile for them.

Students repeatedly described specific elements of a ***caring school climate***. In fact, although they gave examples of each of the five other key developmental principles –

*high expectations, physical and psychological safety, timely supports, positive adult role models, and opportunities to participate* – these seemed to be particular manifestations of the broader caring school climate theme. They spoke of teachers who “back you up,” who challenge you, but also take the time to make sure you understand academic material, who stay after school to provide extra help, who will work with you before class, if necessary, and who are willing to teach Saturday classes. They spoke of teachers and administrators who are willing to listen and give advice, who take a personal interest in you, who will come and find you if you skip school, and who become “*friends for kids who don’t have friends.*”

They spoke of a principal who knows them by name, constantly reminds them that “*failure is not an option,*” is always out on campus, is always available for them, and is receptive to their issues and concerns. They reported feeling safer at Genesis than at previous schools where there was “not enough security,” and described their principal as a fair disciplinarian who works to create a family atmosphere where “*even the yard duty staff shows they care about you.*” They also describe her as “*hecka cool.*”

Students spoke of a leadership class instructor, who is also in charge of discipline and schoolwide safety, as always being there to support their events and work with them on community service projects, and who teaches them how to act, and “*never makes you feel less than.*” They viewed the extra support provided by Saturday and after school programs as another example of how much school personnel cared about their success, but also called for more of such supports – electives, technology, school nurses, counselors and psychological services – to help deal with the realities of students’ lives.

Students reported that this positive educational climate increased their motivation to do well in school. Typical were comments such as: “*When people care about you and believe in you, you begin to care about and believe in yourself.*” Students particularly valued the confidence that school personnel, again led by the principal, showed in them. Here they contrasted their GENESIS experience with that of other schools where teachers seemed to give up on them. The value of this personal connection is also reflected in their reporting greater motivation for doing well in school because they didn’t want to their teachers and principal to be disappointed in them.

## **Reflection**

Given our small sample of student experts, these findings can only be suggestive and require additional input from a broader range of student respondents, school personnel, and parents. However, their consistency with previous research is striking, and their implications are indeed far-reaching. The ultimate test of any educational enterprise is *student effort and performance*. Therefore, a continuing challenge for all educational systems – and one that we are currently failing - is finding better ways to inspire effective effort on the part of students. The research is worth repeating – *students stay in school longer, work harder and perform better in positive educational environments that are rich in those developmental assets over which schools do have control.*

Hopefully, the “*profound rethinking*” called for by the *Los Angeles Times* has begun. However, a cautionary note is in order. Before developmental principles can become a major force for school improvement, three elements of the current educational policy environment must change:

- The power of developmental principles for positive school change must be understood by policymakers, and legitimized by teachers’ unions;
- There must be clarity about what these principles look like in actual practice; and,
- We must develop the political and organizational will to implement them.

Led by the *Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office and Educational Options Office of the California Department of Education, The Senate Select Committee on High School Graduation, the Ventura County Office of Education*, and developmentally focused community based organizations, California appears to be on the threshold of significant movement on two important fronts: (1) recognizing the power of developmental principles in school improvement, and (2) valuing the contributions of youth in helping educators and policymakers acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to apply the principles consistently. Hopefully, GENESIS student leader contributions to this monograph will also help move these processes forward.

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