School Culture, Student Success and Social Justice

Improving Student Outcomes at Low-Performing, High Poverty Schools

"Some men know the value of education by having it. I know its value by not having it."
- Frederick Douglass, statesman and author

Failing Our Students

We are paralyzed by a social injustice caused by the unequal treatment of marginalized students and their denied education.

Social justice provides each person an equal and inclusive right to benefit from, and participate in, society. When children are denied an education the ideals of equality and opportunity are silenced, and social justice is reduced to an empty promise.

California is losing generations of students from poor and underserved communities who have no other option but to enroll in entrenched low-performing schools. Despite millions of dollars in state and federal aid, these schools have shown little progress – if any – in student academic outcomes. Students impacted by these failures are predominantly Latino and African-American:

- *African-American and Latino children are three times more likely to be poor than their white or Asian counterparts.*
- *Latino and African-American youth between the ages of 16-19 are three-and-a-half times more likely than white and Asian youth to <u>not</u> be in school and <u>not</u> graduate from high school.*
- *In 2011, over 58 percent of students enrolled in California's public schools were African-American or Latino.*

Despite evidence confirming that the use of effective practices and underutilized resources can turn "low-performing, high poverty schools" into "high-performing schools," little has been done to apply proven principles to our state's failing schools.

We can, and must, do better to help all of our students realize their potential, especially students from low-income and underserved communities. Without the intervention of state decision-makers, the chronic growth of low-performing schools and student failures in California will only worsen. Fortunately, research and proven applications demonstrate how academic outcomes for disenfranchised students can dramatically improve.

A Proven Solution

"We know what works in education. The research is prolific. Amazingly, then, the question today is not about what works, but about why we do not implement what we know works…"
- James McDermott, English teacher

High poverty, high-performing schools throughout the country confirm that a child's demographics do not determine a child's destiny, and validate that all children can learn at high levels regardless of their socio-economic status, language, race or family situation. Unfortunately, due to entrenched positions that trivialize change, examples of California turnaround schools are few.

What is required for this conversion to occur is a willingness to instill substantive change in a school's and school district's expectations and culture. The following principles and guidelines – when applied – will result in school transformations that will avert the repeated failure and abandonment of generations of our state's students.

Overview

Decades of well-intentioned education reforms – focused primarily on improving school curriculum, standards and test scores – have yielded only marginally successful results, particularly in low-income communities of color. However, a breakthrough supported by 20 years of research has resulted in significant improvements in student outcomes and academic success. This breakthrough focuses on changing a school's "culture" – not symptoms – a change which has been found to be *the single most indispensable ingredient* for effective school reform.

School Culture

A school's culture is developed through the shared commitment and interaction of students, parents, community members, teachers, staff, administrators and school board members. This commitment focuses solely on promoting positive student outcomes. Instead of working in isolation, this culture is established by an interactive, well-functioning, cooperative and non-adversarial school environment.

This interactive culture is the most powerful predictor we now have of student achievement levels, and there is an almost perfect correlation between measures of school culture and student achievement scores. Volumes of research confirm that no instances of successful school turnaround were found that did not address school culture. Higher functioning schools are defined by a sense of belonging and community – an outcome that can be reliably assessed and measured.

A Solution Within Reach

The evidence is prolific. The research is stark. A positive school culture is an indispensable factor for effective school reform. Schools that have changed their cultures and applied these concepts – resulting in improved student outcomes – are numerous. If we do not fully embrace these compelling and proven school reforms, large communities of our state's overwhelmingly poor, diverse and neglected children will continue to be abandoned and their educational opportunities will continue to be denied.

Our children deserve better.

**AES is committed to promoting positive cultural change to achieve social justice at our schools.
To join these efforts, request more information or discuss opportunities to implement school culture reforms, contact the *Alliance for Education Solutions* at AESimpact@gmail.com, (916) 421-2874 or www.AESimpact.org.**

This brief was developed by the *Alliance for Education Solutions* in collaboration with the *Alliance for the Study of School Climate*.

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Proven Reforms, Criteria and Guidelines to Improve Student Outcomes at Low-Performing, High Poverty Schools

Reclaiming the Educational Opportunities of a Lost Generation of Students

"The wide variation in performance among schools serving similar students suggests that these gaps can be closed. Race and poverty are not destiny."
- *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools* (2009)

School Culture Characteristics

Specific practices and cultural shifts have been identified that are common in high-performing schools but almost never found in underperforming schools. Teaching and school administrative practices can be reliably divided between actions that promote an expectation of success or an expectation of failure. The overuse of existing school practices that repeatedly fail must be replaced by approaches that foster student success:

- An expectation of success by teachers and administrators instills high expectations of students and a belief that all students can succeed. As stated in a 2009 report, "Race and poverty are not destiny." Practices promoting expectations of failure are significantly excessive in underperforming schools with large majorities of students of color.
- Punitive, student alienating discipline is replaced with caring disciplinary practices without jeopardizing school safety and order. Student academic success is most closely related to the quality of a school's discipline climate, and outcome measures confirm that a non-punitive disciplinary approach is superior to retaliatory actions.
- Effective classroom management is the single most predictive element to determine a school's culture, and can be improved through teacher training, professional development and assessment instruments – much of which can be accomplished by using or modifying existing resources and programs.
- School leaders foster an environment of inclusiveness and respect that is developed by the collective engagement and input of students, parents, faculty, staff, administrators and the community.
- Adversarial relationships are abandoned in favor of shared cooperation that focuses on student needs. Teachers are encouraged to implement agreed upon innovative teaching techniques but are not penalized if such efforts fail.

School leaders from successful turnaround schools can be found throughout the U.S. – including California – and their success can provide guidance for superintendents, principals and teachers. Furthermore, high quality and proven school culture assessments are available that provide a clear and useful diagnosis of a school learning environment's strengths and weaknesses. Equally important, these assessments allow schools to re-examine presumed "best practices" that may actually be contributing to the poor outcomes and problems they presume to solve.

A positive school culture incorporates the following characteristics and specific actions:

- Collective leadership and changes in the school culture are encouraged by the school's formal leaders; principals, superintendents, and school board members.
- High expectations of students and the school instructional program by parents, faculty, staff, administrators and the surrounding community, with a strong demand for improved student academic performance.
- Common agreement exists that supports a strong academic orientation with (1) clearly stated academic goals, objectives and plans; and (2) well organized and interactive classrooms.
- All instructors, both newly-hired and experienced, are encouraged to mentor one another to learn "best practices" and new teaching techniques while supporting a culture of empowerment, respect, inclusiveness and cooperation.
- Students are encouraged to give meaningful input about "what works" for them in the classroom.
- High staff morale is nurtured by (1) well-defined roles and responsibilities; (2) strong internal support; (2) collaboration and consensus building; (4) personal worth and usefulness; (5) confidence in a school decision-making structure that presumes the participation of students, parents, faculty, staff and administrators; (6) a sense of ownership for student outcomes; and (7) job satisfaction.
- The use of well-functioning and proven methods to monitor and assess school inputs and student outputs.