“THE BEGINNING OF A SOLUTION”: SCHOOL DESIGN, SELF-EFFICACY, COMPLETION RATES, AND CREATION OF COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Prior research indicates that using democratic modeling in a classroom can increase students’ class participation, self-esteem, senses of belonging, and senses of responsibility toward the school, but that the effect can be short-termed if other classrooms are not so organized. However, little research examines the impact of flexible scheduling. The school examined the impact of flexible scheduling, open class labs, and modified democratic modeling on student attitudes about self and community and on student success rates. This qualitative case study used open-ended questionnaires, a review of the school program and student outcomes, and observations to determine the nature of and extent of such an alternative school program related to student motivation, self-efficacy, performance, sense of community, and graduation rates. Results indicated the program positively impacted not only success rates, but also self esteem and self efficacy, student success, reduced student-teacher tensions, and increased teacher and student satisfaction with student outputs and performance. This research raises several important questions concerning student maturation and student success, as well.

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Introduction

Unlike many classrooms utilizing autocratic management methods, democratic classrooms have been shown to both alter students’ perceptions of their classroom experiences and shift the teacher out of the position of class autocrat and into the position of class facilitator. As early as 1993, Schechtman determined that students in democratic classrooms developed greater senses of belonging and of freedom to express their feelings, as well as greater opportunities for sharing. As a result, social attitude-impacting democratic programs are often used in social studies classrooms where democratically constructed classroom interactions and behavioral expectations foster positive interactions and greater understanding of different cultural groups (Davis, 2007). In such programs, students develop more open communications and stronger beliefs that social justice rather than arbitrariness are preferable. They demonstrated more responsible behavior in other classes. They also demonstrated greater respect for themselves and others both inside and outside the classroom. Taken to the school level, researchers and theorists have developed school models like the Just Community Model, the Lab School, or the Children’s Republic (Engel, 2008; Tappan, 1998).

However, although student attitudes and understanding can be enhanced through participation in democratic programs, most schools are unable to fully integrate democratic educational methods throughout the school. In addition, student attitude and student failure are impacted by a number of other factors that can at least in part ameliorate the impact of democratic education. Students lacking the family support needed to succeed in traditional schools, for example, are more prone to negative self-esteem, lack of school completion, and

later delinquency and life failures (Adams & Adams, 1996; Beman, 1995; Bynum & Dunn, 1996; Caspi, Henry, Moffitt & Silva, 1996; McCabe, 1997; Pabon, Rodriguez, & Gurin, 1992; Roizblatt et al., 1997; Sheets, Sandler, & West, 1996; Winters, 1997). Previous school experiences, including bullying, parental relationships, having a parent who did not complete high school, being from a single parent family in early childhood, suspensions, low socioeconomic status, low grade point averages, and having repeated a grade also predispose students to academic challenges and failure (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Pagani et. al, 2008; Suhyun Su, Jingyo Su, & Houston, 2007; Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard, & King, 2008).

The desire to work or personal factors that create the need for employment also can place a strain on already at risk students' schedules, negatively impacting their academic success (Lee & Staff, 2007; Warren & Cataldi, 2006). At the same time, students who drop out of school can experience subsequent success in employment and higher education if able to complete their high school education later, but often as GED graduates still experience less success in the areas of income, life satisfaction, future optimism, symptoms of severe depression, and substance use than high school graduates. (Suh-Ruu O, 2008; Vanttaja & Jarvinen, 2006).

The School Program

The school, begun originally to meet the needs of teenage mothers, has evolved to serve any students wishing to either complete their high school educations on a flexible schedule or early. As such, it included both students with special time constraints and students who experienced academic failure at other high schools. Because it was originally designed to serve potential dropouts, the school offered year-round open enrollment. As a result, its enrollment increased during the school year.

The school combined a number of factors determined in previous research to positively impact students' academic and life success. Its schedule was flexible, with the school being open to students from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Students were required to attend at least three hours of school each day. Although it did not include student governance, it did incorporate at least one characteristic of democratic education—students addressed teachers by their first names, in part breaking down the barriers between teachers as authoritarians and teachers as mentors.

Students were given significant control over their own success within the minimum time requirements established. Like students within the district, students were required to earn 24 course credits to graduate. Unlike students throughout the district, however, their course work for each class was split into semesters, and each semester's work split into a series of eight packets. Students could only work on two packets (module segments of two classes) at a time, could only sign out one class-supporting textbook at a time. To maintain good academic standing, students had to complete a class packet every three days. Completing a packet required finishing assigned reading, a series of applicable problems and questions, a laboratory or classroom project that applied the learning, and writing an essay explaining what was learned, its applications, and its implications. It also included passing a test on the material by gaining a final test score of 70% or higher. The quality standards applied to student work were comparable to that applied in all district schools. Students who did not meet requirements were placed on probation and, eventually, could be told to leave the school and complete their diploma through the district's GED program.

The school continued students' control over their own environments and education by providing subject laboratory areas—large, open rooms with desks, reference books, computers,

and other resources—in which students could both interact with teachers and complete required course work. Students could move between class areas as they wished. In addition, they could visit quietly with each other in designated areas while onsite.

The school also had a strong support structure. It sponsored several clubs, including a theater company, a writing group, and a debate and speech team. It sponsored tutoring assistance, provided onsite by local college students. Each teacher served as student advisor to a number of students and, as such, both tracked students' progress and provided guidance to help them succeed. The school also had an onsite licensed social worker and a young parents' support group and was the site for several college classes that provided students with the chance to earn concurrent high school credits.

The Study

This exploratory single case study gathered data on any correlations between the school's program and students' self-esteem, self efficacy, and success rates. The study was conducted solely on site. It was conducted approximately one month before completion of the school year in order to measure potential student changes at an optimal point.

This study was based on several assumptions. Students would be honest during the completion of the anonymous surveys that were made as blind as possible. Teachers would make effective, honest observations about students' behaviors and attitudes based on their long experience interacting with them. Observations of students' behaviors and evaluations of their participation in the school would provide additional insights into both students' attitudes and their senses of ability to succeed and the school's real impact on student attitudes and behaviors. Further, changes in students' attitudes would evolve noticeably by at least three months of attendance based on research indicating environmental impacts on behavior and behavior

changes take approximately three months to become habit (Covey, 1986), so measurement of students' attitudes before and after three months would provide insight into students' attitude changes as a result of attendance.

Data included single event response open-ended questionnaires incorporating a multiple-question internal consistency strategy. The teacher group completing questionnaires included 8 of the 16 teachers who had taught at the school for at least one year. They were selected because they had mentored, encouraged, and evaluated students for a long enough period of time to effectively judge whether any student behavior changes had occurred. The second group of questionnaire subjects was 183 students out of a population of 261 who returned required permissions to complete the questionnaires, copies of which were placed in each laboratory area within the school. This represented approximately 70% of the 261-member student population.

Data also included 128 15-minute direct, nonparticipant observations of student-teacher interactions conducted in four different class areas at different times over a four-week period. These observations were done with the permission of teachers and students, but in combination with the researcher's volunteer position as a journalist for the local newspaper. So, individuals observed were never sure exactly when they were being observed for the study.

Observed student behaviors were based on previous attitude behavior research, and included direct eye contact versus looking away from teachers; expressions of anger or frustration—smiles, laughter versus frowns, scowls, groans, verbal angry expressions, calm tones versus abrupt or harsh tones; quitting versus working through materials. Observed teacher behaviors included tone of voice, smiles, laughter versus frowns, scowls, groans, verbal angry expressions, calm tones versus abrupt or harsh tones. Direct eye contact was used as a measurement only with the 91% of the demographic in which that action indicates that an individual has a notable

comfort level and sense of equality (Argyle, 1988; Burgoon et al., 1989; O'Hair and Ropo, 1994). This data collection method allowed a comparison of students' actual attitudes and feelings with survey-reported attitudes or feelings.

Finally, the study included a review of aggregate student success and package completion rates while attending the school. This allowed some measure against which to compare students' senses of self efficacy and actual course success.

Results

Student questionnaire responses were examined for overall themes and themes based on how long students had attended school—less than three months, three months to one year, and more than one year—to gain an exploratory insight into the impact of student attendance over time. Since students attending the school for less than three months had minimal exposure to the changed school environment, their responses provided a baseline about entering students' attitudes and expectations. Finally, student responses were examined for grade level trends to see whether any information could be gleaned about student responses based on age or grade level acquisition.

Approximately half of the students responding were seniors. Twenty-one percent of the respondents had attended school for 1 year or longer, while 39% had attended less than three months. Juniors and sophomores were the bulk of the remainder, with only 3% of remaining respondents being freshman. In addition, almost equal numbers of sophomores and juniors had attended school between 3 months and one year and over one year. Only one freshman had attended the school more than 3 months.

School's Effect on Students

Student comments on the school and its components' ability to aid in their success were sorted into one of three categories—performed well, performed adequately, or did not perform well. Based on this sorting, one half to two thirds of students completing the questionnaire rated the teachers and program as performing well at meeting their needs and preparing them for the future, while only 12% or less indicated it did not serve them well. Overall results appear in Table 1.

Table 1 Students' Assessments of the Success of the School's Program

Service	Well	Okay	Not Well
Teachers listen	111	68	3
Teachers care	109	61	13
Teachers encourage	112	52	24
Prepares for work	79	80	22
Prepares for more education	87	78	19
Prepares for goal	93	70	20
Schedule	108	50	13
School feels safe	81	76	18
Explaining rules	82	75	15
Giving help	103	63	10
Plans for future	79	77	26
Grading fairly	102	62	14
Testing fairly	116	46	12

Trends surrounding students' grade levels were not evidenced, but trends surrounding length of attendance were evidenced. The majority of students who had attended for less than 1 year indicated that teachers listened, cared, were encouraging, graded fairly, and tested fairly. However, students who had attended for more than 1 year had varied responses. They expressed concern about whether the program "prepares students for work," "prepares students for more education," and "prepares students for goals." They also expressed concern with the school "schedule," "feeling safe," "grading fairly," and "testing fairly."

Students' beliefs surrounding their success were also probed through the use of a number of questions. They included questions about students' senses of success and self efficacy at the school. Student responses again were sorted into three categories—very successful, "doing okay," and unsuccessful. Patterns surrounding grade level were equal, with approximately 51% indicating they believed they were successful and only approximately 8% indicating they were unsuccessful. However, assessments based on time at the school were more interesting. Of the 59 of students at the school for less than 3 months, 4 believed they were unsuccessful and equal numbers believed they were either very successful or "doing okay." However, among the 85 respondents at the school from 3 months to 1 year, 9 indicated they did not rate themselves as successful. That represented a decrease in the ratio of students believing they were "doing okay" from the less than three month group. Finally, of the 40 students who had attended the school for over one year, 23 (57%) indicated they believed they were very successful and 14 (35%) were "doing okay." Only two students indicated they believed they were unsuccessful.

In addition, students were asked to indicate and discuss the grades they normally received on each packet they completed, which allowed comparison of the self-confidence and self-

images of students completing the surveys to their actual performance. The majority of students in each group indicated they received a grade of A, and less than 5% of students who had attended the school for more than 3 months indicated receiving a grade of C or lower. The majority of students who had attended the school for less than 1 year indicated their scores had increased. Finally, no students who had attended the school for more than 1 year indicated lowered scores, and over half of them were higher.

Students' Reasons for Entering the School and Priorities While Attending

Since students' reasons for entering the school could be related to poor self esteem or negative previous experiences, students were questioned about their reasons for entering the school. Through several questions, students were asked to identify their potential reasons for entering the school. Those goals were then categorized and examined overall and based on length of attendance at the school and grade level.

Overall, of the students responding who attended school for less than three months, 15% indicated they had chosen to attend school for its flexible schedule, 12% to finish classes sooner, 9% for the school's environment, 8% each to finish school and to improve their grades, 7% for greater control over their classes, 6.5% for greater possible educational success, and 6% for extra class help. Of those surveyed after one year of school attendance, 14.9% indicated the flexible schedule, 11.7% to finish classes sooner, 10.6% for the school environment, 10.6% for greater control over their education, 10.1% for family/personal needs, 10.1% to work while finishing school, 7.4% to improve grades, 7.4% greater possible educational success, and 6.9% greater exposure to different options.

Students who had attended the school for less than 3 months indicated priorities of acquiring both a diploma an education and of preparing for college. Seniors in that group, however, added

good friendships and social lives to their priority lists. Numbers of students in all grades attending for more than 3 months also included extracurricular activities, feelings of success, and increased motivation as additional goals.

Additional Student Comments

Several final statements should be made about students' responses. Positive comments about the school indicated that its democratic education methods had a positive effect on both student self-perceptions and successes. Students appreciated the freedom, flexibility, sense of autonomy, and greater sense of equality it created among teachers and among student groups themselves.

Few students shared complaints. Those shared surrounded their perceptions that the grading system was arbitrary and harsh. They also indicated their concern over a shortage of available teachers during peak student attendance periods, a phenomenon noted during observations when the observer witnessed students waiting for teacher attention in the math lab area for one hour or more on five separate observation days. Additional student comments follow:

"It rocks!!! It is very enjoyable!"

"I love [this school]!"

"Good, gives us a chance to get school done and still have a life."

"I like it. It works better for me."

"I think it's good for people for all different reasons. I appreciate the time and effort that all the teachers put in. I think it's a great school."

"[this school] is a miracle worker for people like me who need a different alternative way."

"Need more teachers."

"I love this school. We get to grow up and not be baby-sat. We are allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for our own lives. We are on a first name basis with all "authority" and we

can have fun with our teachers. I think it's better for the teachers, too, because they have more flexibility and freedom—and they can be more one-on-one with students. We don't have cliques or jocks or cheerleaders. I can't imagine a violent outbreak here. There's nothing to rebel against. We're all accepted here."

"The packets can be very hard sometimes. They put too much work in the packets."

"[this school] is the best school! I don't think I'll ever go back to a normal school. [this school] has helped me graduate one year early. [this school] helps you get college credit! [this school] should be the school for everyone."

"The way to do packets is unclear. It took me forever to finish the packet. There are not enough teachers. And 69 is close enough to 70. Sixty-nine is still a D, which isn't a pass."

"They should change the testing procedures so that missing one question doesn't make you lose 3%!!! This results in a loss of more than one and a half points on the final grade!!!"

"I like it very much. Teachers are friendly and provide good help. I like the rules and the flexibility of schedule. It is the best school I have attended."

"Great school!!"

"I think that this school is not the best but it helps me out."

"It has helped me to graduate when it was not possible in regular high school."

"Originally I came to [this school] so that I could graduate early but after I got chronic fatigue I was so glad that I had this option of schooling because I slept so much and got such bad headaches that several days I couldn't go to school."

"[this school] is the beginning of a solution. A solution to how our current "public education" system works. It is a revolution that is inevitable, yet is going to provide a struggle which we as humans must overcome to truly evolve."

"I think that my experience at [this school] has rejuvenated my faith in the public school system. There has not been any other school that has been more tolerant of various foibles, follies, problems, and difficulties that any student may have."

Teacher Questionnaire Responses

Eight of 16 potential teacher respondees completed questionnaires, totaling 50% of eligible teachers. No difference in teacher response was evident based on length of teaching time. Attitude changes appeared to vary instead based on subject area taught. Individuals who taught core academic subjects—English, social sciences, science, and math—identified different student behaviors and attitudes than those in more career-focused teaching areas like personal development, technical arts, job skills, and art.

Teacher questionnaires included some questions about some basic teacher load, student, and student-teacher interaction questions designed to gain both specific numeric data and teacher insights. Results indicated that the mean number of students with whom teachers worked daily was 20.5, with a 17.5 median, a high student number of 75 in the social sciences lab and a low student number of 6 in the personal development lab. All teachers stated students generally succeeded on their end-of-packet tests the first time, although one academic teacher pointed out that students often have to redo some of the packet assignments before successfully completing them.

Other teacher responses were sorted by category of response. Teachers indicated that approximately half of their students told them they attended the school just to complete high school. Another quarter of students, they estimated, indicated they wished to attend training beyond high school, while an additional quarter indicated a desire to earn a bachelor's degree. Finally, only a few students, they estimated, expressed having no future plans.

In related questions, teachers estimated the relative importance to students of various aspects of the school's program. Categories teachers assessed of students' reasons for attendance included gaining an education, career guidance, and senses of acceptance and control over their educational environments. In addition, several teachers indicated that even students who had entered the school either expecting its program to be easy or simply to complete their graduation requirements acquired greater educational expectations after attending the school for at least 3 months. One teacher response summed up the majority of teachers' attitudes. "They finally learn to work for educational goals and find success."

Several teacher questions focused on teachers' assessments of students' self-images and self-confidence. Teachers' responses were sorted into mostly positive self images, somewhat positive self images, and mostly negative self images. Teachers indicated they estimated that approximately ¼ of students had mostly positive self images when entering the school, but that the number jumped to approximately ½ after attending the school for at least 3 months. In addition, the number of students with mostly negative self images dropped from over half of the students around 1/3 of the students after attending for three months.

There were a number of related teacher comments on specific aspects of students' performance. Some teachers indicated students who applied themselves developed more adept test taking abilities. Others expressed concern that some students began packets and failed to complete them, instead returning the packet and moving on to another packet, although they observed that pattern changed as students attended the school for greater periods of time. Teachers stated that whether students attended the school only for the minimum required time was a main indicator in whether students succeeded at the school or demonstrated positive attitude changes.

Teachers also included additional comments that students' attitudes and behaviors changed after 3 months in the program. Some observed that students who continued in the school developed more positive attitudes, telling teachers they enjoyed the greater one-on-one contact and felt teachers had an interest in their success or that they experienced greater feelings of control over their educations and their lives, which motivated them to work harder. Some stated students indicated they felt more able to identify school and teacher expectations at the school than in other educational settings and were, as a result, more motivated to accomplish tasks. One teacher quantified a perception of the extent of student motivational and attitudinal changes occurring. "If they get involved and attend regularly, 70% of students change to the "very positive" category."

Finally, teachers indicated which aspects of the school's program appeared to affect students the most. The majority indicated that one-on-one help, strong counselors, and flexible schedule had the greatest impact on student performance and attitude. Shared one teacher, "The fact that even when they've fallen behind, [the school] gives them a chance to catch up seems to make all the difference. When they develop a relationship with a particular teacher, that really seems to motivate them."

Student and Teacher Observation

In each of the class lab areas where observations were made, individuals spoke quietly together either about school work or personal subjects. In the English lab, students were observed talking in groups as they waited to use the computers, but students in all other lab areas appeared to be working on their class materials. A number of students in the mathematics lab area were observed expressing concern for the extensive waits they experienced trying to discuss

materials with their teachers. Some science lab students also expressed concern about the length of waiting to speak to a teacher, although less concern than students in the mathematics lab.

During the approximate 32 hours of observation composed of 128 observation segments, prolonged cordial direct eye contact (defined as two minutes or longer) with a teacher during one-on-one activities a total of 635 times, while prolonged discomfort with eye contact (defined as two minutes or longer) with a teacher occurred only 36 times. In addition, frown, scowls, clenched fists, and similar actions were identified only 28 times; confused expressions, shrugs, and similar actions only 42 times; negative comments only 26 times; and quitting activities only 21 times. Enthusiasm and excitement over interaction with the teacher or with their performance was demonstrated by students 72 times, and positive comments were overheard 127 times.

Teacher behaviors as they interacted with students were also observed. Over 700 incidents of prolonged (two minutes or more) of positive voice tone usage and only 17 incidents of prolonged negative voice tone usage were observed. No expressions of anger and only 15 of frustration were observed. In contrast, 213 expressions or tones of excitement were observed. Teachers mentioned grades 25 times and emphasized the importance of learning 481 times.

Discussion

Seniors were heavily represented, as well as students who had “other school” experience. These demographics appeared indicative of the student population as a whole, but may also have reflected students’ increased attendance to complete required coursework for graduation, either on time or a year early.

Student Goals and Expectations

Student goals and expectations shifted during their attendance at the school. This shift in goals and expectations proves particularly notable, since research indicates that students’ self

images, self efficacy, and educational expectations are solidified by eighth grade and are particularly difficult to change positively following that (Trusty, 2000). Students who attended less than three months indicated greater emphasis on gaining a diploma, gaining an education, and gaining feelings of success while preparation for college and to gain more education were emphasized students who had attended the school for three months or more. Students newer to the high school experience showed greater concern for extracurricular activities and a social life than those who had attended other schools previously in other locations, although all groups emphasized a desire for good friendships. However, students who attended other high schools identified all nine different educational goal categories identified in their responses, while students who had not attended any other high schools had much more specific, limited goals. These limited expectations could represent already having all but their most basic academic needs met outside the school environment, or having no established goals other than academic goals. They could also indicate that, as found in other research, students who have had negative experiences in other academic environments have limited expectations for future academic experiences, which can include an inability to perform or an inability to establish positive relationships (Liu, Kaplan, & Risser, 1992; Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997). Certainly, further investigation of these possibilities is warranted.

Notable shifts also occurred among three month to 1 year attendee and over 1 year attendee groups. Within the group of students attending the school between three months and 1 year, goals shifted toward gaining a diploma, gaining an education, feelings of success, and preparation for college or more education. One notable exception was seniors in this group. They also mentioned a desire to develop good friendships. Perhaps this shift in goals reflects a greater maturity resulting from students' needs to control their success, or perhaps it reflects the

development of a friendship-based support group or a giving up on that support group. The seniors' addition of good friendships could be a normal senior response to the imminent life changes that will occur following graduation. Finally, students who attended the school more than one year returned to listing a number of academic and nonacademic goals, including a social life and increased motivation. None indicated they were there to survive until they could quit or other negative aspirations or goals.

These shifts appear to indicate students do go through periods of adjustment based on past experience and expectations surrounding the high school environment. Students without previous high school experience had a high range of goals and expectations, while students who had attended other schools had lowered expectations. All students, regardless of background or initial expectations, appeared to go through an intermediate period where they shifted expectations and goals to focusing on academic requirement and success. This could indicate students' recognition that the school's programs were not as easy as its different program might have made them believe. It could also indicate students' increased acceptance of responsibility for their futures, perhaps in part because of the openness of the school day, the requirement that they maintain focus for themselves rather than having it imposed by teachers, or some combination of all these factors. Finally, their ultimate shift to a more balanced expectation could indicate they have adjusted and taken responsibility for their success and creating balance in their lives. Certainly, the goal shifts noted lend credibility to the possibility that, during the various phases of attendance at the school, students go through periods of adjustment. However, determining which of these potential attitudes is most accurate requires further examination.

Interestingly, seniors appeared to have high school expectations, regardless of circumstances. Perhaps this occurred because, as seniors, they wished to maximize their last year

of high school experiences, perhaps because they had a clearer definition of self and greater self esteem and self efficacy, and perhaps because they had a clearer concept of what high school experience should be. This aspect of seniors' behaviors also merits further examination. The major question to consider is whether the independence fostered by the program either decreases student fear of graduation or increases student anticipation of future possibilities.

By far, teachers reported that the greatest number of students entering the school indicated as their main goal to finish high school. However, 40% of students completing questionnaires indicated a desire to prepare for college or more education, compared with the approximately 22% indicated by teachers. This difference may indicate teachers' miscalculation of students' reported reasons for attendance. It also may indicate students were not totally honest with their teachers, perhaps because students who feel inadequate or unable to succeed will appear better in teachers' eyes either by denying the importance of school or underplaying their desire to succeed at school, which aligns with previous research (Liu et al., 1992; Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997). Therefore, the possibility that these students, having felt insecure about their ability to succeed within the school, might demonstrate bravado by underplaying their desire to both succeed and learn in order to protect their self images if they in fact fail should be explored.

Students who entered personal development labs appeared to have more limited goals. This could reflect the reason they entered personal development labs—to find a focus or more defined future goals. This could also be an indication they found more support and nurturance there, perhaps because personal development labs had lower student attendance numbers—an average of six students per day—so those teachers had more time to provide such nurturance. Again, further research could prove useful.

Students' reasons for choosing the school appeared fairly uniform. Their most commonly mentioned reason for attending the school was its flexible schedule, followed by finishing classes sooner, a more comfortable environment, and working while finishing school. Although reasons for attendance differed within different groups of students, in all groups these four reasons were the most cited.

Interestingly, teachers' perceptions of students' reasons for attending the school varied from the reasons students cited. Teachers felt students' greatest reasons for attending the school were, in order of being most often cited, family/personal needs, a more comfortable learning environment, the flexible schedule, and discipline problems at their base schools. These differences could indicate part of the reason teachers proved as effective in mentoring and inspiring students as the data indicate. Perhaps teachers were attempting to assist students they believed required personal support in order to succeed, so they had greater compassion for the students and tried harder to help them.

Student Benefits and Performance Increases

In a related area, improvements in self-esteem and capability to succeed began to be evident during the first year. By the beginning of the second year, all students appeared to have developed self-confidence and self-esteem. They also appeared to be socialized within the school and to feel safe developing greater educational goals, regardless of their previous experiences at other schools. Giving weight to this possibility were teacher's estimates that about 12-15% of students experienced an increase from other success perception categories to the "very successful" category and about ¼ or 25% increased to the "mostly successful" category. This indicated students' feelings of success and related self-esteem greatly increased.

All teachers indicated the school positively impacted student attendance and learning in all areas except career guidance/preparation, greater exposure to people/ ideas, and greater educational options, where personal development teachers noted no impact. Since an interest in these areas would be the reason students entered personal development labs, this may have indicated personal development teachers were unaware of their impacts on students. This possibility is borne out by the fact that students' comments indicated teachers and the school were more effective in these areas than teachers rated it. It could also indicate students have no clear image of what to expect from such an activity, so they have no way to judge the effectiveness of the program. Finally, it may indicate that students' strides are indications of greater self efficacy, but that the self efficacy is unrealistic. These possibilities should be examined in greater detail to determine whether further honing of this program would prove helpful for maximizing students' performance.

Students' reports of the school's program were positive. Students indicated that, overall, they felt teachers encouraged, listened, and cared. This undoubtedly was part of the reason for the school's ever-increasing student numbers. This high level of student comfort with teachers would allow teachers to utilize both democratic teaching techniques and mentoring activities to help their students. Further, high numbers of students indicated they felt testing and grading were fair. This further indicated their feelings of being able to succeed and of growing self-confidence. Without that comfort, student ratings might have been be lower. For results to be more definite, further study would prove useful.

The school's classroom management techniques also potentially benefited students by helping them combat their feelings of inadequacy and unacceptance. Some of these techniques included the use of first names, equal treatment, and active listening employing equal teacher

and student respect which, based on previous research can increase student self efficacy and success (Field, Lang, Yando, & Bendell, 1995; Haensley & Parsons, 1993; Ho, Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1995; Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1997; Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Levendosky, Okun & Parker, 1995; McCabe, 1997; Roizblatt et al., 1997; Sheets et al., 1996; Speicher, 1994).

At the same time, 12% of student respondents indicated they felt the school did not help them plan for the future. In addition, approximately 10% indicated they felt the school did not prepare them for their goals. Perhaps in the process of assisting students who had special self-confidence and self-esteem needs, the school's personnel were not ready for students who had a strong sense of self-definition and goals and actually needed more focused assistance for their futures. Originally begun for locally at-risk students, the school may not be tooled for the higher level classes or challenges students may now need. Again, this aspect bears further research and, if true, dictates a need to examine how to both integrate best instructional methods for both high achieving and lower achieving students.

Breakdowns of student reports on the school's success also indicated students went through a period of adjustment to the school's differences—education self-definition, goal-setting, time frame development, and individual responsibility. The initial displeasure of some students because of their perceptions both that teachers failed to encourage them and that the school failed to prepare them for work and their futures was greater than might be expected. However, later data indicated students raised their ratings in each of these areas—a possible sign that, as they adjusted to the school's independent program and its greater freedoms and responsibilities, they experienced greater success and happiness as a result of those differences.

The one deviation from this attitude shift occurred among seniors. Seniors deviating from this pattern uniformly listed as their reasons for attending the school as improving their grades,

working during school, and for family and personal needs. These students appeared to have unrealistic educational expectations that no program could help them achieve, since 75% of them indicated they were completing courses at the rate of three or more packets per week but experiencing lower grades than desired. This could indicate that seniors feeling pressure to graduate but behind in credits believed they could rush through the program. The fact that their experience was lower grades, combined with previous indications that students who have attended the school for at least three months shift their focus for a time to succeeding in classes, could indicate the school's program does hold students to good academic standards. This should be examined more closely.

Teachers' lengths of service had no impact on their attitudes about students' potentials or success rates, and therefore had little impact on their interactions with students. On the other hand, students' lengths of time at the school did have a demonstrated impact on their feelings of success. One possible explanation for this continued teacher optimism in the face of students' initial discouragement might be that this school model allows teachers to avoid prolonged exposure to specific students' negativism and aids them in maintaining more positive attitudes which, in turn, allow them to more positively help students as a result.

Packet completion increased as students continued to attend the school, as well. From a 15.2% total of less than one packet successfully completed per week initially, students evolved within the first three months to meeting the two packet per week completion rate. However, a three or more packet per week completion rate did not allow students to acquire good grades. In addition, 15% of students stated they had initially focused on completing three or more packets per week but quickly decided, instead, to focus on completing two packets per week, a completion rate that allows students to both succeed and acquire good grades.

At the same time, student grades increased. Initially, 6.6% of students acquired C grades, and eventually no students got scores score lower than B. Initially, 57% of students earned A grades, and eventually 66.7% of students received A grades. By the end of the year, all students felt they were at least holding their own, and 56.4% indicated their grades were higher than before entering the school. This would correspond with the increased self esteem and self efficacy noted by both the teachers and students.

Students and teachers both reported in their personal comments that the school met many of students' needs. It offered flexibility, allowed success, and created hope. One student stated that, although not without faults, the school's program gives hope. Said another, it is not the perfect program, but is the best out there as yet. These comments reflect students' overall conclusions—that the school's program did have a positive effect on participating students' self-esteem. Although the exact nature of the correlation of the program used at the school to these improvements requires further study, this study indicates positive improvements in both students' performances and self-efficacy and self esteem.

Finally, researcher observations indicated that students have experienced a bottleneck in studies in the mathematics and science labs that may require the addition of extra staff. However, existing teachers were both supportive and encouraging. In fact, over 90% of all teacher-observed behaviors involved either excitement or encouragement. In addition, over 70% of students' behaviors and demonstrated attitudes also reflected positivism. There were a significant number of demonstrations of frustration (approximately 30%). However, only approximately 3% resulted in students demonstrating quitting behavior. Frustration is a fact of life. This overwhelmingly positive management of that emotion would appear to indicate a high level of positive student adjustment.

Upon examination of each of the three research methods used in this exploratory, holistic single case study, students' self-esteem improvement became evident after a one-year period. Although freshmen showed limited signs of self-esteem problems, students from other grade levels demonstrated limited expectations and senses of success upon entry into the school. However, students who had participated in the school for over one year demonstrated significantly improved self-esteem and heightened educational and social expectations.

Finally, observations bore out those findings. Teachers, unaware of the observer's observation criteria and, at times, whether the observer was observing them as part of the study, demonstrated supportiveness, and students responded in kind. Teachers' mentioned students' grades minimally, while they maximally emphasized the importance of learning. In fact, teachers' rapports with students proved so strong and students' self-images appeared so great that a minimal number of students demonstrated an inability to handle potentially debilitating frustration. This reaction to teacher and systems is borne out by research. In addition, this increased stability and self esteem can be seen in increased student grades and the number of packets completed successfully, also borne out as side effects of improved self esteem, since research indicates students' attitudes of personal success directly impact their self esteem and self image (Dondero, 1997; Haensley & Parsons, 1993; Liu, Kaplan & Risser, 1992; Schechtman, 1993; Wilson & Wilson, 1992).

The school's program incorporates volunteer tutoring, democratic education, mentoring, an opportunity for students to be involved in positive school community experiences, peer cooperation and mentoring, and other positive self-esteem building activities. Further examination of the extent of the correlations between some of these aspects of the school's programs to determine which of those aspects, if any, would also prove feasible and beneficial in

traditional high school programs. Certainly, these program aspects allow the development of a strong sense of community, which can assist students who might otherwise not experience that type of environment.

Most important, perhaps, is the nature of the flexible, self-driven instruction process used at the school. It would be beneficial to examine in detail the impact of flexible scheduling and independent instruction on students' acceptance of responsibility for and steering of their own educational courses. Currently there appears to be little, if any, research in this area. If this type of scheduling and structure increases student responsibility and self-motivation, it might prove beneficial to determine how to include it in more high school's program designs. It is certainly worth the examination.

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