Identifying and Understanding Effective High Schools: Personalization for Academic and Social Learning & Student Ownership and Responsibility

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What are the policies, programs and practices that make some high schools in the same state and district context more effective than others? Motivated to understand the differences between schools with similar size and demographics yet different attendance, graduation and levels of student academic growth, the National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU)—a federally-funded project aimed at identifying, developing and implementing processes to scale up effective practices in urban high schools—embarked on year-long initiative to identify the major differences between two high and two low performing high schools in two districts—Broward County, Florida and Fort Worth, Texas.

In both districts we found that the more effective high schools successfully mobilized both the academic and social emotional systems at their schools in the service of students. Administrators, guidance counselors and teachers at the effective schools worked together to bridge the academic and social emotional elements of schooling, seeing them as interwoven. They implemented teaching strategies, cultural habits, and organizational routines that promoted interconnections between the classroom and the social emotional lives of students. As such, students in the higher performing schools were much more likely than those in the lower performing schools to say that adults in the school supported them in developing both cognitive and non-cognitive skills necessary for their academic success and social wellbeing. Further, the high performing schools in our districts mobilized these academic and social emotional practices in different ways, particular to their local context and needs.

Perhaps most interestingly, our studies underscore that there are multiple ways to forge pathways between the academic and social emotional systems of schools. Here, we share the major findings from our two districts to illustrate how the academic and social elements of schooling are interconnected. With policymakers and researchers calling for higher student achievement and the need to attend to the social emotional and non-cognitive elements of students' lives, we here we show how schools promote these connections.

Our findings come from a year-long study of eight Florida and Texas schools that were identified using value added methodology.[1] We choose schools that had either higher or lower levels of academic student growth on the state assessments for three consecutive years as well as higher or lower graduation rates with low income and minority/English Language Learners (ELL). The Broward County Public Schools and the Fort Worth Independent School District, Texas were excellent places to explore differences between high and low performing high schools as both face the challenges of high levels of students living in poverty and second language learners. Both are nested in the strong accountability climates of their states.

Once we identified the higher and lower performing schools, we visited each of the eight schools three times, conducting extensive interviews at each school with principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors, department heads for English/Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, and science, teachers, ESE and ELL coordinators, and students.[2] We also observed classes using the CLASS-S classroom observation instrument as a measure of instructional quality[3] and shadowed 6 to 8 students at each school for an entire day, observing their daily routines and interactions,

interviewing each afterwards. By including many stakeholders and using multiple approaches, we were able not only to examine the specific programs, policies and practices within each school and how they worked, but also how these components worked as a larger deliberate system to coordinate into successful outcomes for students at the higher performing schools.

Personalization For Academic And Social Learning

In Broward County, we found that the high performing schools—Laurel Oak and Silver Palm—engaged in an intentional set of systemic practices we call Personalization for Academic and Social Learning or PASL. When compared with the lower performing schools, we found that the higher performing schools had deliberate set of practices and organizational routines aimed at personalizing students' learning experience. While the schools enacted this differently, they both sought to build connections for students between the classroom and other activities in the rest of the school. As one teacher at Silver Palm explained, "The whole personalization is what matters in this job, the key component to having success."

Culture of Personalization

At both higher performing schools, adults told us that personalization was an explicit part of their culture. A guidance counselor at Laurel Oak described personalization as, "We try to take a big school and break it down to a small school." Another said that, "we personalize education" such that "there is a sense of community that is palpable. You can feel it." Promoting a culture of personalization entailed two activities: striving for personal knowledge of students and promoting both formal and informal connections between adults and students.

Personal knowledge of students. Adults at both higher performing schools described practices aimed at increasing personalization that lead to a general culture of caring. While adults had different ways of describing personalization, they generally articulated an expectation that adults know their students' names, cultural and academic backgrounds, and academic aspirations. Beyond this, personalization for some administrators, teachers and guidance counselors involved being attentive to students' needs at school, for others it entailed efforts to understand students' home life. A Laurel Oak counselor explained, "You get to know your kids. Teachers get to know the kids as well… It's close knit family because everybody wants the kids to do well."

Formal and informal adult-student connections. Adults and students at the higher performing schools perceived a high degree of social and interpersonal support. Adults described greeting students in hallways, inquiring about students' weekends and afterschool activities, and, in the case of English teachers, trying to link students' interests with the academic content. Students in focus groups at Laurel Oak described the administrators as caring, because they had a visible presence and "they talk to us." Students at Silver Palm also described an environment where adults strongly encouraged them to participate in the school activities. Administrators at both higher performing schools reported being present during lunch periods in the cafeteria, interacting daily with students. Students in all three of our focus groups at Laurel Oak agreed emphatically that, "the principal is caring" and said that "administrators really go to the extreme to help out each individual club and to help every student get to what they need and what they want, and we always see them walking around and in the classes."

Complementary organizational structures and routines

Three complementary structures and routines enabled personalization, leveraging academic and social-emotional supports at the higher performing schools. There were looping, comprehensive and consistently enforced behavior management systems, and data rich environments.

Targeted Looping. Both schools assigned an assistant principal, guidance counselor to the same group of students over multiple years. At Laurel Oak, this grouping began in ninth grade and went through graduation four years later, with language arts teachers included in the looping with the lowest 25% of students for ninth and tenth grades. At Silver Palm, tenth through twelfth grade students looped with an assistant principal and guidance counselor. Participants universally praised looping, explaining that it supported and sustained personal relationships among faculty, staff, students and parents, contributing to a culture of learning among the adults and students. A guidance counselor at Silver Palm explained through looping they, "get to know [students] as individuals. We develop a relationship... There are some kids I feel like are my own kids." An assistant principal at Laurel Oak explained, "All of us stay with a cohort of kids…; this is to increase the level of personalization not only with the students, but the parents as well… It is invaluable to our success." Adult participants also praised it as a way to address academic and social emotional issues together, inquiring about academics, for example, if a student ended up in their office for a disciplinary infraction. The higher performing schools used looping to institutionalize personalization, by providing students with at least two adults who monitored their progress and gained holistic knowledge about the students' academic and social experiences within and outside of school.

Comprehensive and consistently enforced behavior management structures. The higher performing schools also enacted disciplinary systems designed to engender a sense of caring and implicit trust among students and teachers that many explained facilitated personalization and academic learning. Administrators were key to this feeling of care and trust. One teacher from Laurel Oak explained, "Strengths really start at the top; the administration, from principal, assistant principals, are very, very supportive. They are constantly on guard. It's just incredible the way they run this school. They have eyes all over." In addressing disciplinary issues, administrators also saw them as opportunities to discuss a student's academic standing and home or social life. An assistant principal at Silver Palm explained, "I wear the hat of the guidance counselor many times… you find that the discipline is not the sole reason to meet with a child. I address the academic needs and then go into the disciplinary, which they are always inter-related." Overall, participants at the HVA schools deemed the behavior management systems to be effective in addressing students' academic and social-emotional needs.

Data rich environments. Another organizational system that enabled personalization for academic and social learning was the use of data by administrators, teachers and support staff to monitor student progress and provide feedback to students. Teachers, administrators and guidance counselors used student data in their daily practices as well as in their problem solving meetings. They also used data in their scheduling of students to courses. Both of the HVA schools in the study had coherent systems in place around data analysis and use, drawing on academic data such as grades and test scores, but also data on the social emotional side, such as attendance and discipline. At Silver Palm, administrators used data when they met with students. "I have individual conferences

with every senior that's on a list that I call the danger list, in danger of not graduating," one guidance counselor explained. An assistant principal at Laurel Oak explained that data was also used to drive professional development, "We learn through benchmark testing, and ACT scores, and AP scores, and then we also use that information to develop staff development."

Research confirms our findings on the culture of personalization and these organizational strategies of looping[4], strong behavior management systems[5] and data rich environments.[6] These studies provide further empirical evidence successful schools provide systemic and deliberate opportunities for personalization through a positive school climate achieved by way of administrators and teachers' expressed care and concern for students' well-being, intellectual growth, and educational success. With consistent behavior management systems, clear and fair disciplinary structures also supported school cultures where students feel secure as well as a sense of belonging.

Student Ownership and Responsibility

In Fort Worth, what differentiated the two higher performing schools from the two lower performing schools were practices that helped students take ownership and responsibility for their own academic success. Teachers and other adults in the higher performing schools scaffolded students' learning of both academic and social behaviors to guide them in assuming ownership and responsibility for their own learning. The schools also developed an integrated system of academic press (the encouragement of students to achieve) and support (resources to foster academic success). Together, these practices of integrated academic press and student support helped to build student ownership by promoting self-efficacy and giving students skills to help them engage in

challenging academic work. Thus, self-efficacy and engagement are considered indicators of student ownership and responsibility, while academic support and press are strategies used to develop student ownership and responsibility.

Defining Student Ownership and Responsibility

The higher performing schools in Fort Worth developed systemic practices aimed at building students' confidence and understanding of how they can take responsibility for their own academic success. We emphasize two activities important for increasing student ownership of and responsibility for their academic success: 1) changing beliefs and mindsets of students to increase self-efficacy (that is, an individual's beliefs about his or her ability to perform behaviors that should lead to expected outcomes[7]) and 2) engaging students to do challenging academic work.

Research shows that students who have strong, positive mindsets and a high degree of self-efficacy exhibit more positive academic behaviors, choose more difficult tasks, have higher engagement with academic work, demonstrate more persistence despite setbacks, and have higher achievement across academic areas.[8] Such students also demonstrate both behavioral and academic engagement.[9] Behavioral engagement involves the basic behaviors expected in school, such as coming to class prepared and completing assigned tasks, that are important predictors of student achievement and, thus, predictors of whether students will graduate or drop out.[10]

When students have a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning, they:

- Believe they can achieve challenging academic tasks.
- Are personally invested in academic success—both the immediate learning task in

front of them and in long-term outcomes such as college and career readiness.

- Demonstrate their sense of responsibility through behaviors such as coming to class prepared, completing assignments well and on time, making up missed work in a timely manner, and seeking additional help when they are struggling (i.e., going to tutoring).
- Demonstrate their investment through engagement in class, asking questions when they are confused, monitoring their own learning, and attempting to master material with which they struggle.
- Demonstrate life skills such as initiative, self-direction, productivity, and accountability.

School Strategies to Develop Student Ownership and Responsibility

It is important to note that while student ownership and responsibility are measured by a set of outcomes at the student level, our research indicates that student ownership and responsibility resulted from concerted school efforts. Higher performing schools in Fort Worth succeeded not only because of efforts to improve instructional quality of teachers, but also because the schools created systemic practices that scaffolded student learning of the behaviors that allowed students to assume ownership and responsibility of their academic success.

In short, increasing student ownership and responsibility requires a commitment by teachers and the school as a whole to a scaffolded approach. Educators need to establish an environment of academic press and support to help students take ownership of their learning. Our data suggest that both higher performing schools had stronger and more systemic practices, policies, and resources to establish an academically rigorous

school environment where students were pressed to achieve and supported—academically and socially—in doing so. Indeed, as described below, one higher value-added school focused explicitly on increasing student ownership and responsibility for their learning. The vision shared by adults of student ownership and responsibility entails both changing the cultural/climate and instruction, including a focus on moving away from traditional modes of instruction to more meaningful, student-centered, and cooperative learning activities that require students to be actively engaged in their learning. The efforts to increase student ownership and responsibility focused on building a culture in which students are held accountable for their learning and supported through systematic but personalized interventions.

For example, the Lakeside Code, which outlines expectations for student conduct, focuses on academic and instructional behaviors rather than discipline. While these were academically-oriented behaviors, the standards focused on non-cognitive behaviors that the school believed were key to helping students achieve: coming to class on time with all materials needed, going to tutoring if they needed help, making up missed-work when they were absent, keeping track of their own grades through assignment logs, and being ready to ask questions when they don't understand what is happening in class. Through the expectations in the Code, the school is "teaching" students the non-cognitive skills that lay the foundation for academic success. Lakeside teachers, students, and administrators described these behaviors as the heart of the student and teacher accountability mechanisms, with consequences if they failed to meet these standards. Similarly, rewards were provided for meeting these non-cognitive behavioral standards. Lakeside also provided systemic support structures to help students meet their academic

expectations. While teachers across case study schools described being available to students for tutoring, Lakeside established an extended lunch period to encourage tutoring as the norm for students throughout the school. Another key feature of Lakeside's academic support system was the Intervention Committee, which worked with students who were not meeting standards as outlined in the Code to determine the root causes of their difficulties and develop a plan to address them.

Conclusion

These schools remind us that the academic and social emotional systems in schools work in the service of each other and are not independent as policymakers and reformers often cast them. All kids, not just the highest and lowest performing kids, benefit from attention to the interconnection of these systems. Further, reform efforts that attend to just school instructional systems may miss important elements of what makes schools successful—and the non-cognitive and social emotional needs of students that lay the foundation for ultimate academic success.

Endnotes

[1] We recognize that VAM is controversial particularly when the analysis is conducted at the individual teacher-level and used for high stakes decisions such as teacher evaluation (Amrein-Beardsley, Collins, Polasky, & Sloat, 2013; Bracey, 2006), but believe we avoided many of the critiques of VAM through our school-level analysis (Sass, 2012).
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[7] Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, 1st ed. (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997).

[8] Camille Farrington et al., *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping*

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[10] Farrington et al., *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review*.