From Vision to Action: Solving Problems through Inquiry at Boston Day and Evening Academy

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On a mid-week day in mid-December 2008, Boston Day and Evening Academy's room 209, usually used for board meetings, student assessments, awards dinners, and other occasions requiring an intimate atmosphere, smelled like Chinese food. Thirty-eight students gathered around large conference tables, chatting with teachers and each other and eating lunch. Some drifted between tables, catching up and laughing. These second-trimester students at Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) were having a reunion after just a few weeks apart. That these students—all overage for high school with combinations of attendance, learning, and disciplinary issues—were in school at all is significant. But the remarkable thing about this particular gathering was the number of students. Of the 40 students who enrolled at BDEA in the first trimester of 2008, 38 were still in school, using words like "inspired," "motivational," and "cool" to describe how they felt about their experience—and, in effect, themselves.

This had not always been the case. Typically, the end of the first trimester found Student Support staff shifting into overdrive trying to track down students who hadn't been in school for weeks or months, and recruitment went into a kind of perpetual orbit, trying to recruit and enroll new students to take the place of those who had slipped away. When the syndrome landed on the agenda of the school's leadership team (head of school, assistant heads for day and evening, director of curriculum and instruction, dean of student support, director of advancement), the ensuing process of discovery and remediation brought to bear a cycle of inquiry fueled by the following discoveries born of data analysis:

Among students who enroll at BDEA, most attrition occurs in the first year;

The majority of first-year attrition occurs within the first six months; and

The majority of students who withdraw from BDEA read below a seventh grade level and many below a fifth grade level.

As the team expanded its cycle of inquiry to include faculty, test assumptions, and identify challenges, we began to recognize the need for additional services for new students which would get students to "buy in" to BDEA's culture as soon as they enrolled in order to prevent the disconnect that leads to withdrawal. The outcome was the creation of BDEA Seminar, a program that acquaints students with school culture, allows them time and guidance to transition to a new curriculum and new school culture, provides extra support in literacy, and offers individualized wrap-around services to help the student to feel ownership in the school.

At BDEA, an alternative Horace Mann charter public high school in Boston, the cycle of inquiry is practiced on a daily basis in every part of the school. Our faculty members use the process in weekly professional development and faculty meetings, and daily in their classrooms; our students hone their skills of inquiry while involving "essential questions" in their daily work; and school administration includes the whole school community in the process of examining any potential changes to curriculum, methods of instruction, growth, support, and advancement. But while the general cycle of inquiry influences our daily work as a school, there are instances when the more specific data-based inquiry and decision-making model becomes the fulcrum of whole-school change, and results in a process and a result that not only creates a better learning environment, but also encourages whole-staff buy-in and better chances for success.

Setting the Vision

The impetus to get hold of our slippery enrollment, attrition, and graduation numbers came from several sources simultaneously. BDEA enrolls students year-round, making tracking difficult enough without the added challenge of fluctuation due to attrition. Perhaps the most mundane point of inspiration was the school's Office of Institutional Advancement and Alumni (OIAA), which is regularly asked by potential funders for the schools graduation "success" rate. It seemed to the OIAA staff that the manner in which we were calculating the number did not represent a true or complete story of graduation success, so they deflected by explaining that the school ran three programs (Day, Evening and Distance Learning); that the school enrolls students as they are accepted from July through April; and that due to the multiple challenges faced by our students (homelessness, victims of violence and abuse, non-existent habits of learning, no familiarity with success), their attendance is often spotty. As a result, it was nearly impossible to establish valid baseline attendance and graduation rates.

Instead, OIAA focused on the numbers of students who did graduate—a number that grows each year—and the subset of those graduates who go on to college, vocational training, and jobs. At the same time, the school's leadership team sought to draw BDEA's staff members together during weekly professional development sessions to address specific areas of programming that needed direction, added substance, or improvement. Those areas included post-graduate planning, assessment, advisory, and retention. Finally, the school's acting co-heads charged Alison Hramiec, the new director of curriculum and instruction (DCI) with the task of finding a way to adapt and streamline data collection systems and analysis to better represent student enrollment and retention. (Hramiec became immersed in inquiry training through her work at the Principal Residency Network (PRN) at the Institute for Professional Development and Graduate Studies in Education at Northeastern University in Boston. Prior to enrolling in PRN and conducting her residency at the school in 2007-2008, she had been a science teacher at BDEA for four years).

In a sense, it was the perfect storm of inquiry. As a CES school and a member of the Center for Collaborative Education, the school's leadership was thoroughly familiar with the concept and practices of data-based inquiry and decision-making, and discovered that by identifying these particular needs, they had begun a new cycle.

Collecting and Analyzing the Data

Following the mission and improving the practice of alternative education creates its own challenge with respect to generating data that accurately reflect a unique set of students learning and advancing within individual cohorts. In the case of BDEA, student data collection had been hampered by an imperfect registration system which utilized several collection methods initiated by different departments in the school: the initial application, the registration form, the student support questionnaire, the health form, and the family center form. Several placement tests administered prior to enrollment were also factors.

As the painstaking process of culling sets of numbers from specific cohorts in specific years unfolded, patterns began to emerge which refined the vision even further. Our original quest to identify a graduation rate was marginalized by the data describing our attrition rate. Further examination of those numbers clarified several contributing factors, including attendance patterns and which students were meeting benchmarks, while also identifying common characteristics shared by students who were accepted to BDEA but who ultimately did not enroll.

As the DCI began to look at all of our recruitment and enrollment data with the goal of creating a system by which to measure graduation rate, she continued to include the director of post-graduate planning, the co-heads of school, and the instructional leadership team in the conversation. Pathways for communication were uncluttered, because the goal was clear and its importance unquestioned: to examine the process of application, enrollment, and assessment for the purpose of increasing student retention, enhancing learning, and determining rates of graduation.

The result of our data collection, as well as anecdotal evidence collected from students through a grant funded by an anonymous foundation and administrated through the Project for School Innovation (PSI) shows that students who do not feel "connected" with the school lose interest, or lose the inspiration to persevere through difficult circumstances and continue coming to school. Students who are frustrated as a result of reading at a lower level than the class material also tend to see themselves in yet another school

environment that has set them up to fail. This frustration causes them to lose confidence in themselves as scholars, and in BDEA as a school that can give them another chance at success.

Taking all of the evidence and conditions into account, we developed the BDEA Seminar. The BDEA Seminar is, in effect, the entering students' only class for eleven weeks. It is preceded by a full week of orientation during which students get to know each other, their teachers and the school through experiential activities and assessments. The cohort moves out of orientation week with a better feel for the school, their goals, and their pathway to graduation and meets together from nine a.m. to two p.m. Monday through Thursday, and from nine a.m. to noon on Friday. All classes take place with the same students, the same teachers, and the same support staff. Students are given a chance to assess mid-trimester, and those students who meet significant benchmarks and who show appropriate levels of maturity, have the choice of moving into general curriculum and out of Seminar at that time.

Three of the BDEA teachers most invested in the process of addressing the data findings through the development of Seminar were tapped to create the instructional cohort for a maximum of 50 students. One science, one math, and one English-Language Arts/Humanities teacher are supported by a Student Support community field coordinator and a literacy teacher.

Seminar students also have an opportunity to get a solid understanding of advisory before moving into the general culture of the school. If students come to BDEA from a school where advisory was used ineffectively, it is important to address those impressions and replace them with positive experiences and relevant practice. During Seminar, students have advisory each week with their primary Seminar teacher. The focus for the 11-week period is on identity, technology, and post-graduate planning, Students learn that advisory is an integral part of their education at BDEA, offering them a way to become part of a cohesive group and allowing them to see their teacher as a coach, as together they begin to construct the student's individual learning plan. Finally, advisory introduces the concept and practice of experiential education which begins in advisory and extends to work in the community on Fridays.

Identifying Challenges
At the same time that the DCI was collecting sets of numbers and identifying patterns, the staff post-graduate planning workgroup was taking a hard look at how to better prepare our graduates for the worlds of college and fulltime employment. The work of this group connected to the others, identifying the need for post-graduate planning to be integrated into the advisory curriculum beginning in Seminar. It was clear to all staff that the school needs to impress upon students that while receiving a high school diploma is an important goal, graduating is really only the beginning of their journey, not the end.

When the attrition data emerged, it also became clear that our first challenge was to change the priority of work across all areas of the school in order to address the immediate problem of student retention. The success of any plan developed to meet this need would depend upon meeting the following challenges:

Whole staff buy-in. Any solution to the problem of attrition would be successful only if the entire staff was on-board with what would likely be schedule changes, personnel reassignment and redirection of funding.

Time. There is never enough time in the day to do the work that must be done in order to create and maintain success. Finding time to talk about program development and implications, let alone starting up such a program, could easily sway staff to postponing any new initiative. The impetus had been directed at post-graduate planning, and suddenly leadership was proposing a significant redirection of effort, so it was important that the work already done not be seen as time wasted, and that any new direction would be afforded enough time to succeed.

Personnel. In examining the strengths of staff in positions that would be crucial to creating and overseeing a retention program, it was clear that changes would need to be made. Ultimately, two staff in the recruitment/assessment area left the school (by choice), one person was reassigned, one position was replaced internally, and a new position, that of recruitment manager, was hired.

Language. Before beginning discussions about how to address the data on attrition, the leadership team felt

it important to create a common language which included all staff as part of the solution to a problem that belongs to all of us, and promoted a culture of ownership.

Reinventing systems. The process for collecting the data being analyzed was far from perfect. In fact, it had been inconsistent across programs and over the years. The inaccuracy of some data would eliminate some years from analysis, but the most recent data was recoverable in large part due to staff consistency. It was clear, however, that going forward, collection systems would need to be put in place and monitored for consistency.

The overarching questions for leadership became "How does this become part of our work?" and "How do we create new structures based on shared decision-making?" The topic was moved to the agenda of the instructional leadership team and soon scheduled into the weekly professional development calendar.

Action Planning

Developing an action plan involves following a sub-cycle within the larger topic. When attrition data was presented to faculty, the reactions split along program lines, but each included elements of the following: an acknowledgement that attendance was a serious problem, agreement that a cohesive understanding of the culture of achievement was not being communicated effectively, and agreement that there was an inconsistent cross-program message of high expectations. The process of defining the problem merged into determining the course of the problem, and the faculty embraced the process wholeheartedly. Leadership had been advocating for a shift to shared decision-making and made it clear that they needed to hear different perspectives in order to build true consensus with any solutions. Once the problem had been identified and recognized, and a structure for a solution had been described, the staff was able to respond to the data together and to methodically create a solution that would engage new students more quickly in the life of the school while delivering to them an accelerated vision of their life as students and their path to success.

Each of the four work groups had also outlined specific concerns that needed to be addressed over the academic year, including:

How do we establish new students in the culture of the school from day one?

How do we advance our student assessment so that we are addressing students' needs?

How do we strengthen our advisories so that there is a common vision including rigor, relevance, relationships and results?

How do we make post-graduate planning part of each student's daily work at the school?

How do we address the needs of students who have been at the school for four years and seem reluctant to move on?

Because the questions had been generated by faculty in work groups in response to the needs they perceived in the school, the identified issues were received as authentic and open for collective action planning. Work groups continued to meet during the trimester and staff created action plans, which addressed each of the individual questions. All plans were presented and discussed at an all-school retreat, and action plans further refined in response to comments.

Annual Assessment

At the same time that faculty and the DCI were identifying needs and creating school-wide plans to address them, the leadership team, assisted by a coach from the Center for Collaborative Education, began to address what would become the annual assessment process for the new initiatives through rewriting the school's Accountability Plan. With significant support and guidance from the Charter School Office at the Massachusetts of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), BDEA's leadership team answered the three questions posed by the accountability structure of the DESE—"Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter," "Is the academic program a success," and "Is the school a viable organization?"—

by creating objectives which would answer those questions and annually measure our progress towards meeting those objectives. The leadership team also structured department and program mid-year reports around the accountability measurements so that staff would have its own benchmarks to signal progress towards end-of-year goals.

Setting the Vision

At the end of March 2009, a new group of students will be eating Chinese food in room 209, catching up with each other, talking about their new classes, and giving us their impressions of Seminar and the school in general. The number of students who show up to take part in that process is our first indicator that the program is meeting its goals—or not. Their reflections on their first trimester, what they have learned about themselves and their goals, the ways that they plan to achieve those goals, and their levels of academic and personal accomplishment will also inform the cycle of inquiry for next year and set the vision for 2009-2010.

Boston Day and Evening Academy

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) is a year-round public high school with a unique mission: serving 350 students who are over-age for grade level and who are either at high risk for dropping out or have already dropped out of high school. BDEA began serving students in September 1995 as the Downtown Evening Academy, Boston's first evening, diploma-granting, public high school. In 1998, the school became a Horace Mann Charter School and was renamed the Boston Evening Academy. In 2001, a Distance Learning Program was added and now operates at full capacity with 50 students. In 2003, the Day program was added, strengthening our ability to serve at-risk, over-age, and academically under-prepared 8th grade students who are as old as eighteen but have not yet reached 8th grade benchmarks. During the same year, BDEA became a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES).

All three of BDEA's programs use a competency-based curriculum, and progress is assessed through a variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, including written and oral exams, research projects, meeting over 300 benchmarks, internships, capstone projects, and field work. The 200 students enrolled in the Day program come directly from 8th grade, the majority at the age of 16 or 17. The 100 evening program students have already attended high school, and are either transferring or returning after having dropped out of other high schools. Distance Learning students have family and job responsibilities or health issues that prevent them from attending school on a regular basis, and through project-based holistic learning, demonstrate competency and stay connected with their teachers through appointments, blogs, and emails. BDEA's curriculum and assessment does not include traditional grade levels or Carnegie units for grading, but meets all students "wherever they are" in their education using a combination of individual learning plans and differentiated instruction to meet and surpass graduation requirements.

The goals for the BDEA Seminar

• Providing a sense of ownership for one's education
• Assessing academic ability levels
• Connecting new students with each other and with current students
• Teaching school-wide curricular expectations, including work on basic skills including writing across the curriculum
• Exploring student backgrounds, learning styles and specific academic challenges
• Boosting student confidence and ability to enter their classes "up to speed"
• Informing students of school policies and expectations
• Creating consistency for teachers in student transition to classrooms at the end of BDEA Seminar
• Monitoring and tracking student retention and attendance

Andrea Kunst joined BDEA as Director of Institutional Advancement and Alumni in 2007 after a career that afforded extensive opportunities for learning in the fields of teaching, journalism, live music, nutrition,

dialysis therapy, public relations, development, and finally charter school administration. As part of a remarkable team working to improve education for overage students, she has found her mission.

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