The Impact of a Junior High School Community Intervention Project: Moving Beyond the Testing Juggernaut and Into a Community of Creative Learners

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Abstract

Involvement by the adult community in schools and students' lives is an effective way to increase student attendance, boost morale, and improve students' perceptions about their school experience. This study examined a two-year comprehensive community intervention initiative within a high-risk junior high school, measuring its impact on student attendance, as well as student, staff, and faculty perceptions of school climate. Findings of the study show that community partnerships and programs can increase student attendance rates and significantly improve perceptions of school conditions. Findings also show that when the pressures of raising standardized test scores impede these kinds of community intervention efforts, a significant and dramatic decline in the perceptions of school climate may result. Thus, the authors of this study make an argument for sustainable, collaborative, and organic community-based mentoring programs that focus on the development of students' creativity as a means to improve school practices.

Key Words: junior high, community involvement, school climate, high stakes testing, intervention project, creativity, creative learners, perceptions, attendance, middle schools, students, youth, development, mentoring, afterschool programs, after-school

Introduction

U.S. junior high school students report the most negative views about the climate of their schools and peer culture (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). This stems from a range of problems that overwhelm many adolescents such as: (1) learned helplessness in school (Holt, 1996); (2) not having a healthy family and community support structure (Olender, Elias, & Mastroleo, 2010); (3) a reduction in student interest due to high-stakes testing and test anxiety (Kohn, 2011); and (4) not being attracted, challenged, and/or engaged in real-world educational issues and experiences (Fertman, White, & White, 1996; Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). Crime rates also soar during these middle school years; in one study 74% of junior high schools reported one or more incidents to the police compared to 45% of public elementary schools (Wilcox, Augustine, Bryan, & Roberts, 2005). Furthermore, the same study reported that one in four students do not feel safe walking home alone in their neighborhoods, and 84% of middle school students agree on the need and importance of having a safe place to go after school. According to Strong, Silver, and Robertson (1995), 95% of students affirm having goals they wish to reach and accomplish in school, although 42% are not optimistic about achieving those outcomes. Thus, it is no wonder why middle school dropout rates are among the highest, and more than half of all eighth graders fail to achieve expected levels of proficiency in reading, math, and science.

Many of the challenges associated with learning and development in junior high schools have been linked to poor school climate, which can broadly be defined as an environment not conducive to meeting the psychological and developmental needs of children (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). In order for students to steer clear of risky behaviors and better thrive in junior high school environments, the climate needs to be prone to: (1) the building of positive adult relationships, (2) the development of individual creativity, and (3) the offering and support of wide-ranging opportunities and activities that engage students in constructive and personally meaningful ways (Robinson, 2011). For many schools, these elements of climate construction are oftentimes difficult to achieve due to factors such as harmful environments surrounding the school, poor leadership, an overemphasis on high-stakes testing, and/or a lack of sustainable resources (Grills & Ollendick, 2002).

Several research studies have also focused on the importance of family and community involvement during the adolescent years of development as a means of increasing academic achievement, improving attendance rates, and promoting better attitudes and behaviors in school (Epstein, 2001; Gonzales, 2002; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Researchers have found when parents and

other adults are actively involved in their child's education there is a significant increase in students' attendance, homework, and positive sense of self (Berger, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001). Simon (2002) suggested that teenagers with active parents and adults in their lives will attend school more steadily than those with parents who do not participate in school activities. For years, the literature has articulated a need for establishing community partnerships with the schools, although "few schools have successfully implemented comprehensive school partnership programs" (Manning & Buchner, 2009, p. 18). Effective schools have also engaged local businesses and community partners to help direct and support school activities and projects (Fan & Chen, 2001).

The phenomenon of engaging community partners, the business community, and parents in junior high school education is not a new concept. Since the 1970s there have been many attempts by educational reformers to devise innovative ways to connect community organizations with young adults. Research has suggested that family and community involvement in adolescent education is strongly linked to improvements in academic achievement, better school attendance, and improved school programs (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Shields (1994) argued that schools have no chance of fundamentally changing school environments without the direct support and engagement of the larger community. Epstein (1995) suggested that "with frequent interactions between school, families, and communities, more students are likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, working hard, thinking creatively, helping one another, and staying in school" (p. 702). Dryfoos (1998) argued the need for quality case studies of successful and effective school and community partnerships in order to assist other struggling schools who are at the beginning stages of developing these kinds of relationships. Therefore, the results of this study will demonstrate: (1) how attendance, dropout rates, and attitudes of students involved in a junior high school community intervention project changed as a result of collaboration efforts, (2) which of the project programs were most successful at creating a positive change in perceptions of school climate; and (3) what factors should be considered when initiating and sustaining new community–school partnerships and projects.

Methods

Participants of the Study

Participants of this study ($N = 758$) were 7th and 8th grade students from an urban, economically disadvantaged (87.5%) and high minority (90.5%) junior high school located in the southwest region of the United States. Overall,

there were slightly more males (52.5%) than females (47.5%). Hispanics made up the majority of the population (51%), followed by African Americans (32.2%), Caucasians (11.4%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (4.8%), and American Indian/Alaska Natives (.3%). Daily attendance rates for the baseline 2006–2007 measurement were 94.6% with a dropout rate of 2.9%.

Students used in the control group ($N = 428$) were taken from a demographically similar junior high school—urban, economically disadvantaged (74%), high minority students (87.7%), and a 95% attendance rate. This school reported a 1.1% dropout rate in 2006–2007. This school was also chosen as a control group because of its record of having few administrative changes in the recent past as well as a low likelihood of experiencing major changes during the projected intervention timeline. An internal review board for research as well as the participating school districts' administration approved protocols for both populations in the study.

Community Characteristics

The community which surrounds the junior high school chosen for this project included characteristics such as: (1) a high population density; (2) low-performing schools; and (3) high gang-related activity and recruitment around the school grounds. The majority of community residents were Hispanic/Latino, and 66% of foreign-born residents were from Mexico. Forty-four percent of households spoke another language (other than English) at home, and 36% of adults did not hold a high school diploma. The estimated median household income in the surrounding community was $32,000, and roughly 60% of families earned less than $30,000 annually. Thirty-four percent of residents were situated below the poverty level threshold, and 12% were situated below 50% of the poverty level threshold. Even though the community at large is considered middle class and affluent in terms of city revenue, it is important to note that the specific area targeted in this study did not resemble the larger levels of city prosperity.

The Intervention Program

Research on high-risk urban environments indicates that a positive, supportive, and culturally conscious school climate can significantly shape the degree of academic success experienced by students (Macneil & Maclin, 2005). Furthermore, researchers have found that positive perceptions of school environment are key protective factors that lead to the prevention of antisocial and maladaptive behavior (Stover, 2005). According to Delisio (2005), the climate factors of a school that are most inhibiting for student achievement and healthy development are: (1) a widespread lack of hope about school; (2) a

diminished sense of self-worth while at school; and (3) having few supportive adults around who care about the future of students.

The purpose of this intervention project was to generate an immediate and profound change in student perceptions of how the adults in students' lives care about them on a day-to-day basis. This was done by bringing in a fresh, motivated, and cohesive team of adults from the community who were likely to generate individual relationships with students and take an interest in their lives and learning. This group of adults (i.e., steering committee) were charged with developing and implementing a range of strategic activities (e.g., mentoring programs, afterschool clubs, community events, etc.) that would improve the learning environment and increase morale for students, faculty, and staff. The goal of the two-year project was to pilot new projects and programs that would enhance perceptions about the school, as well as to find new ways to support the most successful programs into the future.

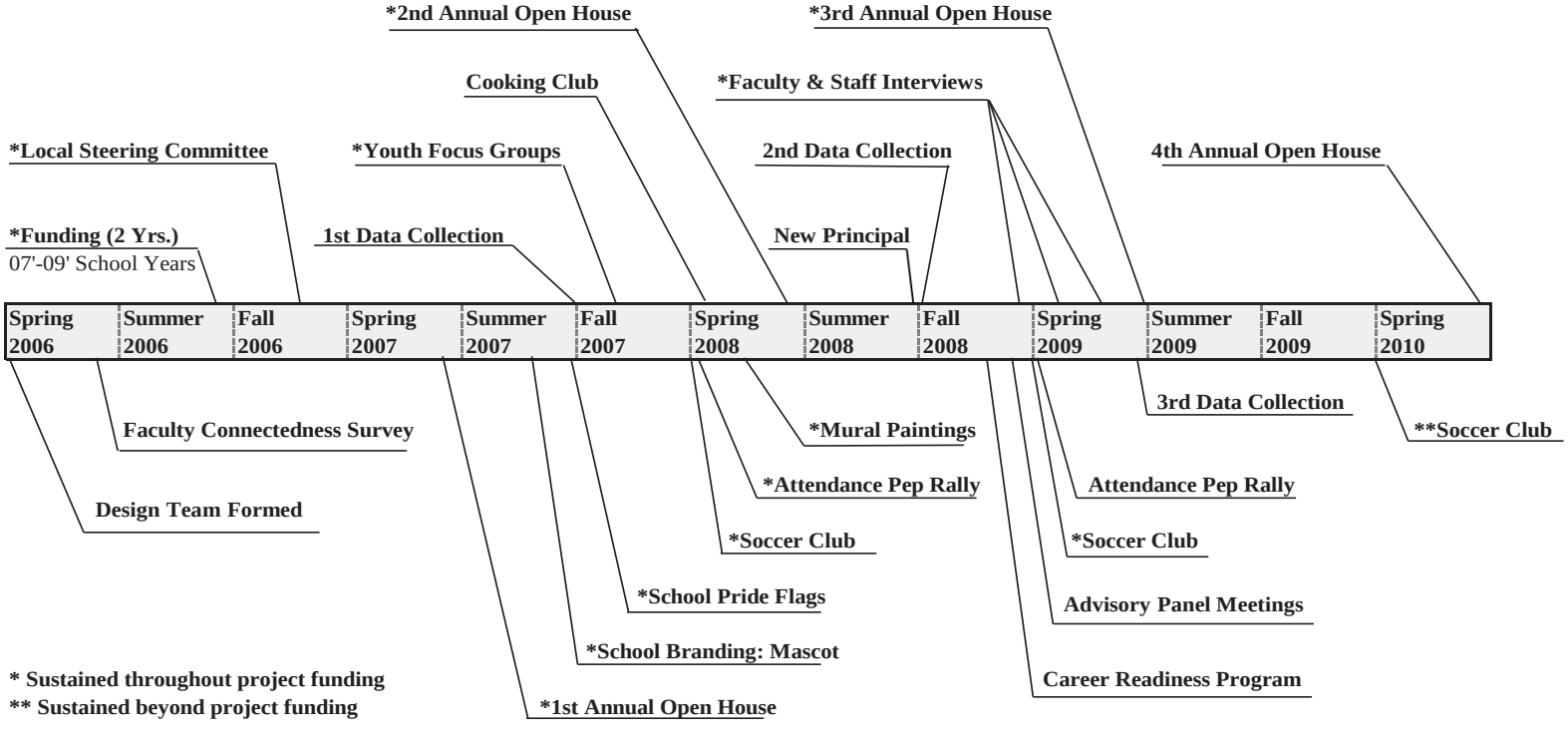
The steering committee was composed of 20 community partners (including representatives from school faculty, parents, students, nonprofit agencies, university students and faculty, city council members, local churches, city officials, law enforcement, and the business community), all focused on working with school administrators to build purposeful activities that would benefit the learning community. Specific goals of the program were to: (1) decrease school absenteeism; (2) increase academic performance; and (3) generate positive relationships that increase students' engagement and excitement about their school and community.

Specific activities and programs that resulted from the project included a school branding initiative (e.g., school pride flags/banners, t-shirts, and mascot development), pep rallies, mural painting projects on school grounds, attendance contests, open house/field days for incoming 7th graders, afterschool cooking club, afterschool soccer club, and a career readiness program (e.g., an aerospace engineer came to the math and science classes to discuss the relevance of what students are learning in school and how it applies to his particular profession). Many programs were initiated during year one of the project and sustained throughout year two. Other programs were initiated during year two. A timeline of project activities and progressions are outlined in Figure 1.

Sources of Data: Quantitative

The first of two sources of data used for analysis in this study was a school climate survey developed by the program's steering committee. These questions were based on the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets (1996), which were grounded in elements of the human experience that have long-lasting and positive consequences for adolescents, such as youth development, resiliency,

Figure 1. Community Intervention Project Timeline



and risk prevention. Research on these 40 developmental assets has shown that the more assets young people acquire, the less likely they are to engage in risky behaviors and ultimately become more successful in school, regardless of their gender, economic status, or ethnicity. Questions selected for the survey were largely related to factors such as adult support, school effectiveness, peer influence, values clarification and development, and social skills. The self-report instrument allowed five response choices ranging from "Never" to "Almost Always." Factor analysis of the 53 initial survey questions yielded five overall scale constructs, explaining 89.2% of the common variance. Forty-four of the questions loaded at .40 or higher and were retained for further analysis. The first scale construct, Optimism (Opt), had an average factor loading of .485 and included question items such as "I am hopeful about my future" and "People have a lot of confidence in me." The second scale, School Climate (SC), had an average factor loading of .548 and included questions like "School makes me feel good about myself" and "My community encourages me to stay in school." Personal Responsibility (PR) was the third scale construct (with an average factor loading of .552) which included questions such as "I am responsible for my own learning" and "People expect me to do the right thing." The fourth construct was Social Support (SS), which had an average factor loading of .552 and included questions like "I feel like I belong to something good" and "There are adults who are trying to help me become successful." The last construct, Self-Efficacy (SE), included questions like "I am good at doing many things" and "At school I try as hard as I can to do my best work" and retained an average factor loading of .622. Reliability computations for each scale were considered good and computed as follows: Optimism (α = .736); School Climate (α = .887); Personal Responsibility (α = .856); Social Support (α = .856); and Self Efficacy (α = .796).

Three separate times the data from this questionnaire were collected and recorded for analysis. This included an initial baseline measure (at the beginning of 2007–2008 school year), a second measure (at the beginning of 2008–2009 school year), and a final measure (at the end of 2008–2009 school year). Table 1 (p. 133) shows how many useable sets of data were valid for each scale construct. Due to absenteeism on days of data collection, students no longer attending the school(s), or incomplete reporting, the attrition rates from scale asset measures ranged from 80% to 84% for the intervention school and 73% to 75% for the control school. Although incentives for completing the survey accurately were put into place (i.e., raffle tickets for prizes such as an "iPod"), it was noticed that the length of the survey was sometimes too long for some students to complete consistently. Other reasons for the high attrition rate could have been related to inconsistent settings for data collection (i.e., 15

minutes at the beginning of 1st period did not always work for some students, and therefore, they were tracked down at other events such as pep rallies, after-school programs, etc.). It is also likely that the majority of useable data sets for analysis came largely from those students who were most engaged and serious about school.

Quantitative Data Analyses

A quasi-experimental design using a mixed model repeated measures analysis was used to analyze data for this study. In order to account for some of the initial variance between experimental and control group scores, a three factor ANCOVA (gender x ethnicity x time) was applied to the design in order to increase the ratio of variance explained by the other independent factors used in the model (i.e., Opt, SC, PR, SS, and SE). The between-subjects factors included gender and ethnicity, and the within-subject factors were the three independent time measures. Covariates used in the model were initial baseline scores. This made it possible to more accurately consider changes within each scale over time, regardless of differing levels of "scale value" each student had upon taking the survey. Tukey (HSD) post-hoc tests further explored where specific differences existed in terms of gender and ethnicity groupings.

Sources of Data: Qualitative

The second source of data used in the study was collected in the form of individual interviews, student focus groups, and individual student reflections that were compiled over the course of the two-year intervention cycle. Third year follow-up interviews were also conducted with key students ($N = 2$), staff ($N = 4$), and faculty ($N = 3$) after the project was completed. Using a qualitative approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the data was analyzed and coded noting all salient and recurring units of meaning that were reported. In other words, the analysis entailed a recursive process of reading, interpreting, and re-reading interview transcripts in an effort to recognize patterns and themes that emerged from the data. These themes not only helped explain and clarify the quantitative findings, they also served to address some of the quantitative limitations and provide a more complete and in-depth description of phenomenon happening during the course of the intervention project.

Results and Findings

Survey results showed significantly strong ($p < .001$) positive changes in student climate reporting across all five scale assets after receiving the intervention for one year. Conversely, results showed significantly strong ($p < .001$) negative

changes in student reporting across all five scale assets after year two of the intervention, dropping slightly below initial baseline measurements (Table 1 & Figure 2). Intervention school post-hoc tests showed no significant gender or ethnicity differences in reporting. Dropout rates did improve from 2.9% to .2% after year one, and slipped back to .6% after the intervention project ended. Similarly, attendance rates increased slightly after year one from 94.6% to 96.6% and decreased to 93.9% by the end of the project.

In comparison, variability in student reporting at the control school was found to be much more flat across all scales. The only measure (out of 10 total) to exhibit the same level of significant change in student reporting ($p < .001$) was within the social support construct, where measure 2 significantly differed from measures 1 and 3 (Table 2 & Figure 3). There were no other significant differences in control school asset reporting. Dropout rates associated with control school data also remained much more consistent across measures (1.1%, 1.1%, and 1.2% respectively). Likewise, attendance rates showed little variance over the three year period (95%, 94%, and 94%, respectively).

Table 1. Measures for Junior High School Scale Asset Reporting (Intervention School)

Scale	*N*	Mean	Std. Dev.	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	*F*
Optimism '07	151	20.28	5.10			
Optimism '08	151	26.57	4.36	3570.48	1	157.32*
Optimism '09	151	17.47	5.08	7716.64	1	338.14*
School Climate '07	135	22.92	7.47			
School Climate '08	135	31.36	6.47	7423.71	1	140.48*
School Climate '09	135	19.96	6.96	10779.30	1	257.26*
Responsibility '07	153	25.16	6.65			
Responsibility '08	153	32.76	6.08	6051.27	1	139.69*
Responsibility '09	153	22.49	6.50	9189.80	1	255.30*
Social Support '07	122	27.20	7.71			
Social Support '08	122	35.89	6.73	5962.53	1	107.92*
Social Support '09	122	23.43	7.43	11679.01	1	221.91*
Self Efficacy '07	142	22.39	5.46			
Self Efficacy '08	142	28.90	5.48	4743.70	1	156.54*
Self Efficacy '09	142	19.99	5.45	5908.45	1	191.68*

* Significant at the $p < .001$ level

Figure 2. Measures of Scale Assets Over Time (Intervention School)

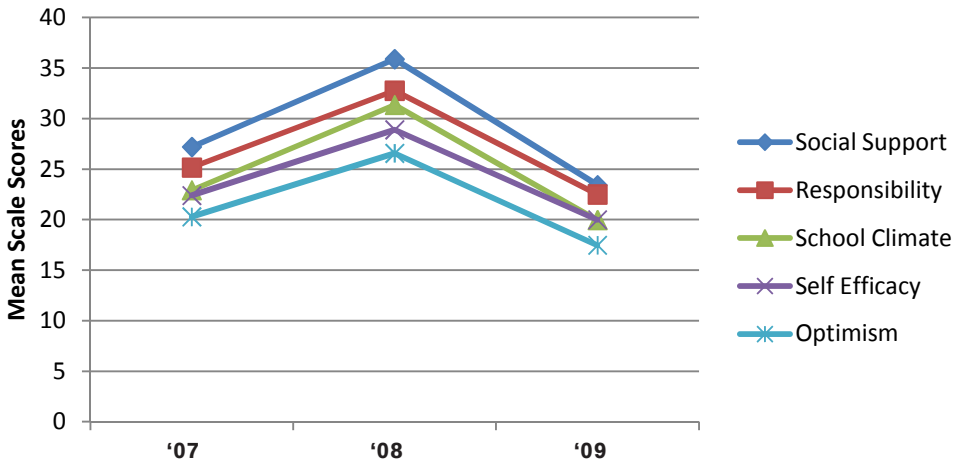
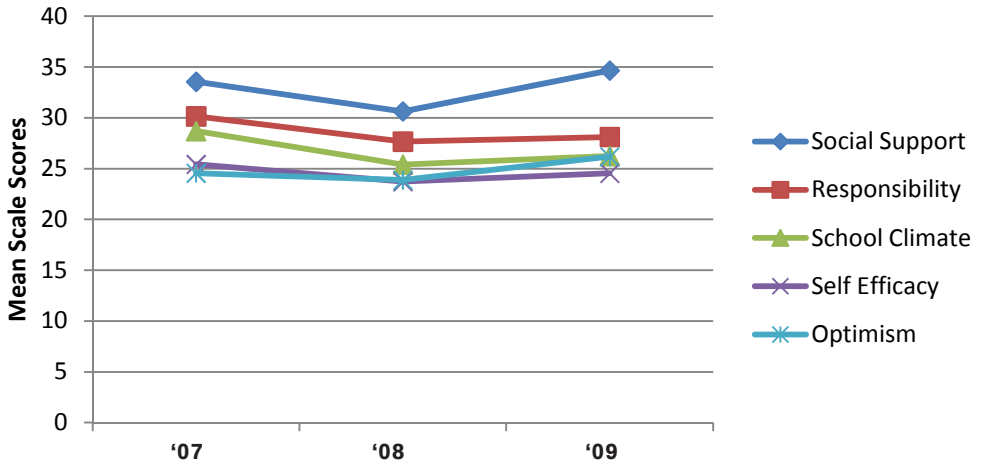


Table 2. Measures for Junior High School Scale Asset Reporting (Control School)

Scale	*N*	Mean	Std. Dev.	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	*F*
Optimism '07	106	25.20	5.56			
Optimism '08	106	24.73	5.84	10.56	1	.643
Optimism '09	106	25.92	7.89	67.69	1	1.90
School Climate '07	109	27.48	7.79			
School Climate '08	109	26.64	6.90	39.31	1	1.52
School Climate '09	109	27.46	7.59	37.64	1	1.99
Responsibility '07	110	28.61	7.31			
Responsibility '08	110	27.74	5.12	41.89	1	1.33
Responsibility '09	110	26.34	7.32	102.27	1	3.02
Social Support '07	105	33.20	7.35			
Social Support '08	105	30.99	7.47	236.56	1	12.07*
Social Support '09	105	32.95	7.08	188.01	1	11.42*
Self Efficacy '07	114	24.54	6.00			
Self Efficacy '08	114	23.73	5.00	37.93	1	1.43
Self Efficacy '09	114	24.61	5.66	43.86	1	1.72

* Significant at the $p < .001$ level
** Significant at the $p < .05$ level

Figure 3. Measures of Scale Assets Over Time (Control School)



Findings after year one of the project support related research findings that have demonstrated a significant improvement in school climate when community intervention and external programming have been present (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Simon, 2002). Unfortunately, this upward trend in perceptions of school climate was not sustained throughout year two. The most compelling reason for this was a dramatic change in leadership at the start of year two. A new principal stepped in with a focused goal of improving test scores in order to get the campus at a level that would aid the district in obtaining funds based on standardized test performance. It is important to note here that it was not the goal nor focus of the new leadership to work with and/or support the community intervention projects that were already established after year one or gearing up for year two.

Four basic themes emerged from the data which help explain the results and describe the changing climate within the school over the course of the intervention project. These themes included: (1) general findings of the study; (2) individual programs having the most impact on improving school climate; (3) critical influence of high-stakes testing; and (4) the value of intervention sustainability and long-term support.

General Findings of the Study

The majority of reasons (58%) given by students for not attending school (and/or valuing their school experiences) were related to disapproval factors of existing school rules and routines (i.e., strict dress code, no leniency for tardiness, constant surveillance, etc.), followed by a dislike of teachers (12%), and dislike of peers (8%). Conversely, the top reasons staff and faculty believed

students did not attend school were more related to perceptions of students' personal and social issues (e.g., fighting/bullying, responsibilities with the family at home, gang-related pressures and activity, etc.). During focus group interviews, the students believed that these factors (e.g., fighting/bullying, home issues, etc.) were only a smaller part of a larger picture involving the day-to-day operations of the school itself, where students had no input in shaping their education or directing their learning environment. For example, one student stated it this way,

> Very few students don't come to school because there is a fight once in a while, or there is gang activity going on around the school…that might affect one or two students, but the majority of students who skip class do it because they find more personal meaning and freedom outside of school.

Another student put it this way,

> When you are nickel and dimed to death with being a minute late to class in a 5-minute passing period, which by the way the punishment is harsh and the tardy system keeps getting more and more strict every year, or you see the dress code getting narrowed down with less and less flexibility, or you have to conform to a new system of having to wear school I.D.'s around your neck, you tend to then focus on these little day-to-day changes that stand in the way of your individual freedoms, discovering who you are, and enjoying your overall school experience.

Individual Programs Having the Most Impact on Improving School Climate

Three programs in particular were talked about most by students, faculty, staff, and community partners as having the most impact on increasing student attendance and improving perceptions of school climate. These programs were (1) the incoming 7th graders open house/field day, (2) the afterschool soccer program, and (3) the school grounds mural painting project. The incoming 7th graders open house/field day, which was generated to create excitement about entering into junior high school, received much praise for improving school climate. One school faculty member put it this way,

> With the first open house/field day, we had more parents attend school that night than probably the whole year combined. Yeah, they came for the free food, but who cares…they came and saw what was going on, and they liked it. It was a positive step in the right direction.

Another faculty member stated, "It was a fun event for everyone, and the parents got to come in and see some of the positive things going on at the school."

One particular student spoke of the attendance and involvement at the open house evening: "My mom and grandma came that night. It was cool because I got to show my mom some of my teachers." Administrative staff also echoed this by saying, "The program encouraged parents and students to be involved in school…feel ownership, showcase pride, and even come to school during the evening hours."

The afterschool soccer club was another program that generated a great amount of student interest and most likely impacted daily attendance (especially with those particular students who were considered most at-risk for attending school). This was largely due to the program's requirement that in order to play on the soccer teams, attendance in all classes was mandatory, as well as grades maintained at an acceptable level. The school's security officer had this to say about the program:

> Soccer mostly changed the mentality of those particular students who were most resistant to come to school in the first place. Many of us saw a real transformation with the soccer kids, as they were definitely more motivated to come to school and at least try a little more than they ever did before.

A student on one of the soccer teams put it this way, "If we get into trouble or miss class, the consequence would be we wouldn't be able to play on the soccer team…so its motivation for us to go to class and get good grades." An additional aspect of the soccer program that seemed to play a meaningful role in its success was the community partnership established with local university physical education teacher education candidates. These college seniors volunteered to come in after school for practices twice per week and to coach Saturday games. One seventh grader had this to say about the university student teachers, "It's a good thing coach comes out and supports us…coach is a good role model and keeps us away from drugs and all the bad stuff." School officials also commented numerous times on the importance of the soccer program. For example, one staff member stated, "These students have been waiting for school soccer to become a reality for some time. This is their game, and they can easily relate and transfer what they are learning in the soccer program to their home life and the world around them." Finally, it is worth noting here that the soccer initiative was the only program to endure long after the two-year intervention project ended. Ultimately, it was funded for an additional five years and expanded into seven other junior high schools via a district-wide grant.

Another project that received mention during the interviews was the school pride mural painting project. This project was selected to cover an area outside of the school that was continuously "tagged" with inappropriate graffiti. The

full artwork and materials were donated by a local artist who outlined the mural while over 30 students assisted in the painting. The idea was to have each 8th grade class add/expand a section to represent their years at the school. As one key staff put it, "Since the artwork has been marked as 'student work' it has not received any tagging since…indicating the community has shown much respect for the student work. The overall graffiti in the area has now decreased tremendously." The school had also indicated that it was the largest turnout for a Saturday morning student volunteer project in the history of the school.

Critical Influence of High-Stakes Testing

The drop in school climate scores by the third year measure can largely be attributed to a change in leadership that began during the 2008–2009 school year (year 2 of the project). The change was primarily focused on initiatives that improved test scores; everything else was viewed as a distraction from that single administrative goal. Follow-up interviews with key faculty and staff one year after the intervention project brought these factors to light with statements such as, "The new leadership at the school has been more focused on improving test scores than working on the critical social and moral issues that are at the root of the whole problem." Another faculty member put it this way,

> Now that the open house/field day is gone, the administration doesn't seem interested in outside people helping our school anymore…morale has dropped. When the programs were in full swing, we had more and more parents participating and even coming to school. Now we never see parents come to school anymore…they felt unwelcome.

The issues of high-stakes testing becoming the sole focus of school was also echoed amongst other auxiliary school personnel:

> The leadership does not care about student involvement and interests like the soccer club. Leadership is now pushing students to have to go to tutoring and focus on academics instead of other activities that they enjoyed participating in, which were activities that got them to express an interest in school and take pride in the first place….While the push for academics is important, it is also very important for our students to like coming to school, feeling connected and balanced in school, and motivated to achieve success in more ways than just a test.

Finally, consider this quote by a very involved and caring faculty member:

> If we cannot get students to school and excited about what they are learning, then life in schools has become nothing more than test score numbers. The previous leadership team cared about everyone and individuals…the programs, the students, the faculty, the staff, and just plain

> ol' pride in the school…the new leadership does not really care about making this place engaging and involving with the people in place. It goes back to the old idea that the environment is shaped by the people who are in place.

Pressures related to high-stakes testing were also commented on by students at the end of the project. For example, one student said,

> There is so much emphasis on testing, and it gets really old. There is constant nagging about passing the test. The teachers say that if you do well then we will have this or that reward for you…but it is only a carrot on a stick, and the students see right through it.

Another student commented, "You may think that if you do a good job on the test then teachers will eventually get off your back…but they never really do…it never ends, and it is so boring." Compulsory testing was clearly playing a role in how students perceived their schooling experience. Consider this quote by another student, "Most of us realize that if we don't pass the test the first time, the pressure to pass will just keep building and building." There appeared to be plenty of affirmation about an overemphasis on testing after year two of the project. This was highlighted by a previous school administrator:

> Good test scores are important to us, but they are not everything that is needed to sustain an engaging and responsive learning environment. Students at this age are already experiencing so many psychological, social, and physical changes in their lives, that compulsory testing may be backfiring on educating students for the real world and the future, possibly missing a developmental mark that many students need to receive and practice during their schooling experience. Students are smart and oftentimes see a genuine disconnect between what they know to be true and what we have them doing and learning in school. There is a tremendous strain on students to pass the test at all costs, and many of them get turned off to school and learning because of it.

Finally, another faculty vocalized their concern with this to say:

> …too much focus on testing—all that drilling and killing…when it becomes all they do every day, all day, it is not effective, and the kids don't care about the testing subject and content—they care even less about the activities going on inside school when it is all about passing the test.

The Value of Intervention Sustainability and Long-Term Support

The intention of the community intervention project from the onset was to continue successful programs long after the initial organization. It would

have been interesting to see what the results of this study would have showed if there were no changes in school leadership midway through the project, allowing for a more longitudinal examination of the programs that were most likely to continue on into year three and beyond. This would have also allowed for a better assessment and understanding of how to support these key programs. Unfortunately, there was a general observation amongst those at the school that the community partnerships were steadily withdrawing from the school environment. Interviews from school personnel supported this with statements such as,

> Attendance and morale have gone downhill since the intervention project is no longer strong. The students are constantly asking where Mr. or Mrs. so and so is, and/or what happened to this or that program. I think, in part, they feel like the adults—along with the excitement of the new programs—have abandoned the school.

This idea was also echoed by two students at the school: "Last year, there was so much excitement at our school, and I don't know what happened to it," and, "Last year, there were many opportunities to learn about different things that we found to be interesting. I have been asking my teachers what happened to the afterschool cooking program, but they don't have any good answers."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to measure the effects of a comprehensive two-year community intervention partnership inside an urban high-risk junior high school. The goal of the intervention was to mobilize and build a sustainable civic partnership and infrastructure that better ensured that junior high school students would "grow up" better connected to the community and become more resilient when facing the undesirable influences that pervaded the school's atmosphere. Efforts of implementing new and innovative community-based programs were exceedingly promising in a very short period of time, as those from the community were feeling very satisfied with the school's progress after year one of the intervention. However, with the change of administrative leadership to refocus all school efforts towards improving test scores exclusively (i.e., year two of the project), the data serendipitously showed a clear and sharp decline in the perceptions of school conditions within the school's bionetwork. In other words, this unexpected shift of school focus to raise test scores ultimately reversed all positive effects and progress made by the community's intervention efforts.

"There is little incentive to replace standardized tests with more meaningful forms of assessment that require human beings to evaluate the quality of students' accomplishments."

-Alfie Kohn (2000; p. 3)

Many lessons were learned as a result of this project. Foremost, the authors recognized that a narrow focus on raising standardized test scores alone, at the sacrifice of paying attention to other enrichment activities and creative programs, can be devastating to the school's climate and the morale of students, faculty, and staff. We agree that accountability has an important role in education, although high-stakes testing should not be the sole benchmark for measuring learning, development, and/or success in school. School climate is a vast and multifaceted human affair, and normative-based tests fail to take any of this organic complexity into account. The authors of this study would then argue that standardized tests are an insular measure of what is actually happening within a diverse and dynamic learning community. The teachers, staff, and administrators we spoke with agreed that standardized tests offered a quick and easy way to show some measure of accountability, although the message was clear that it was by no means an accurate way to chart student development. To expand this point further, we distinctly got the impression that some demoralized faculty were no longer looking at low-performing students as "challenging opportunities for making improvements." Rather, for the first time, they were seeing these kinds of students as "liabilities" which precluded any chance of building a trusting and nurturing relationship.

Ways of employing a more comprehensive assessment model at a local level may include: (1) identifying and defining local issues and establishing strategic priorities; (2) piloting new intervention(s) and/or program(s) that could help address local issues; (3) taking systematic measurements of successes and failures; (4) analyzing data and committing to evidence-based improvement and action; and (5) selecting an indicator that signals whether the intervention or strategy has been effective or not. Bringing more forms of authentic assessment to school programs may make it easier for administrators, teachers, community members, and parents to fight for what is essentially important for students.

The other part of the equation comes in the form of adequate funding so that new community partnerships that are working stay focused and on task. This study has shown that a few targeted programs aimed at connecting students with adults can have an extraordinary effect. Strategies and efforts to increase parental and community involvement is a realistic goal; what is critical is a committed group of community leaders (e.g., businesses, nonprofits, education partners, faith-based organizations, parents, and other civic organizations) who seek to change the prevailing mindset about the nature of schools,

as well as the role adults need to play within it. Furthermore, effective school administrators realize that their students are more than just test results, rather people with unique developmental needs who desire a circle of committed adults and role models.

Conclusion

The junior high school age is oftentimes viewed as a transition time from childhood to adulthood, yet many junior high school students are increasingly finding themselves disconnected from the world around them. This study has shown that it is very possible for a committed community of adult leaders to come together and positively change a school's climate for the better in a very short period of time. Some of the projects represented in this study immediately made an impact on student attendance, increased family involvement with the school, and resulted in significant gains in student perceptions about their school. This was possible due to all parties (i.e., community members, principal, teachers, and students) working together to support the implementation of new (and somewhat externally driven) school programs that connected positive adult role models from the community with students.

This study has also shown that efforts to sustain these kinds of positive school climate changes without the cooperation of school leadership are entirely ineffective. This study demonstrated that once central administration focused solely on improving state-mandated test scores, at the expense of adequately supporting other comprehensive school programs already in place, it took very little time to adversely change the community of learners' perceptions of school, ultimately harming morale and other learning-related assets known to improve students' learning, motivation, and experiences. The authors of this study argue that policymakers and educational leaders need to pay close attention to more than just test scores and merely teaching to the test by finding innovative and creative ways of supporting collaborative criterion-based programs that demonstrate a value-added impact on student motivation, school climate, and meaningful learning.

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