



Engaging the Public in Public Education

Back to School Resources



Introduction

While public confidence in our public schools is at an all time low, there are signs of hope that positive change is on the horizon. Energetic dialogue about how we might embark on the journey toward this change is prevalent in the media, twitter exchanges, and in private conversations. The public is hungry for change, looking for meaningful ways to engage in the process, ready to lend a hand in improving teaching and learning for our students.

Cascade Educational Consultants has developed a series of articles to provide a set of resources to assist schools in discovering innovative strategies for engaging the full spectrum of stakeholders in the education process. We propose public confidence in our schools will increase proportionally with the level of meaningful engagement everyone has in the process. When youth and adults are committed to working together to co-create solutions to our most pressing challenges, the collective effort will lead to change that results in positive outcomes, leading to increased belief and understanding that the system indeed works. What follows is a series of articles on some of the most critical topics to initiate and sustain these efforts: An Inclusive Positive School Climate is a Good Thing; Power, Relationships, and Language; Is Student Engagement Easier Said Than Done; Public Engagement Through Teaching and Learning; and School and Community Engagement.

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An Inclusive Positive School Climate is a Good Thing

by William H. Hughes, PH.D.
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A positive inclusive school climate improves student achievement and a sense of belonging. This year, more than ever, school leaders need efficient, low cost and effective ways to boost school achievement. Paying attention and leading on a positive inclusive school climate is a strategy that pays off long term for youth, faculty and school districts – with stronger student learning achievement – a good return on investment of human and financial resources.

Starting the new school year means new opportunity to improve student learning. Education is changing right before our eyes across our nation. Successful schools build on their tradition of excellence in serving children; keeping on eye on engaging youth and children in their education so they achieve and become well-rounded adults.

Dr. James Comer of Yale University writes that “A positive school climate exists when all students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust.” An inclusive school climate affects everyone associated with the school: students, staff, parents, and the community. It is the belief system or culture that underlies the day-to-day operation of a school. Collectively and individually, a inclusive school climate has a major impact on the success of all students in the school. Research and experience show a link between inclusive school climate and other important measurements of school success, including:

- Academic achievement
- High morale
- Faculty productivity
- Effective leadership

Inclusive schools are places where all children can learn and be successful within a shared academic environment. Inclusive opportunities for youth and children that help them become self determined, productive and socially involved citizens. Inclusive schools focus on:

- Continuous improvement.
- School-community collaboration
- Youth leadership

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- Communication
- Collaborative professional development

Here are key factors towards creating a positive inclusive school climate:

- Improved academic achievement linked to standard based teaching
- Respect – Stronger self esteem and consideration of others
- Trust – Faculty and youth can be counted on
- Morale – Students and staff feel good about being in the school
- Belonging – Everyone, especially youth want cohesiveness; to fit in – grow
- Collaboration – able and accepted to talk about; improve teaching and learning
- Renewal – openness to change, improvement and spiritually renewed
- Caring – Kindness and concern for others – a norm

Schools are experiencing budget shortfalls unseen in our career, and are likely to continue. Over the next few years, schools will be forced to reduce spending due to a drop in revenue and in some cases, public support. Savvy school and teacher leaders are proactively working with their staff and community; finding simple, low cost high return strategies to plan their schools and districts and concentrating on improving student achievement with an eye on the relationships teachers have with youth so they learn more. Focusing on a inclusive school climate costs little; yields high return as youth connected and respecting their teachers – who give them voice and respect while setting high expectations learn more.

School and teacher leaders work in a humble yet confident manner, adapting to the needs of students and their families while respecting what excellence in education is all about. Creating a inclusive school climate takes reflective relationship-oriented school leaders who put greater effort into building and improving relationships than buying a canned program that really won't work out well. Putting into place a set of low cost/high return strategies over the next year or two will create a inclusive school climate, resulting in higher student achievement and a school where as Paul Houston says, "A place students run to in the morning faster than they leave at the end of the day."

We can all agree that starting the school year with a inclusive school climate is a great way to begin for school and teacher leaders, not to mention the youth and children they educate.



Power, Relationships and Language

by Anderson Williams

Partner, Cascade Educational Consultants

A few months back, I had the opportunity to work with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education and the IDEA Partnership. Our focus was on “self-determination and youth investment” for young people with all sorts of abilities. The group included the deaf and hard of hearing, the physical disabilities community, the autism community, the mental health community, and the intellectual disability community.

Beyond any strategic facilitation purpose, I like to start with conversations about power because it is already in the room with us, and we rarely talk about it. Everyone has it. Everyone has lost it. Everyone has used it. Everyone has been used by it. Everyone intuitively knows what it is, but few know how to talk about it.

We opened the session by having participants (adults and a couple of youth) picture themselves as a youth and then recall a time when they felt that they had power during their youth. Going around the room, you can just imagine the stories, the inspiration, and relationships that were shared among these complex lives. Responses varied from having the chance to drive a car to being told as a young woman that she is “just as good as the boys”; from the first experiences of saying “no” to a parent and making her own decision to holding his first position of formal leadership; from being genuinely listened to and supported by an adult as he overcame his physical challenges to experiencing accountability and ownership of her own mistakes and of her own education; from holding that first job to staging a walk-out to protect and save a school for the deaf and hard of hearing.

These were powerful people. We all are powerful people. Power is not something we do but underlies what we do. It has no innate value, good or bad. It is not a choice we make but is reflected in the choices we make. It is not the substance of our relationships but defines the nature of our relationships. And while we don’t talk about power very often, we talk around power in most of the work we do. As I listened to the stories of these leaders, I began to write down some of the language we were using and its relationship to power. The following is the short (incomplete) list of words I captured in my margin:

Inclusion: sharing and/or balancing power

Actualization: living into one’s power

Self-determination: choosing how to use one’s own power (requires the power of true choice)

Voice: expressing power

Leadership: acting on power

This is just a start from my notes that day and I invite you to look for the other assumed, unspoken and/or unacknowledged power underlying our language, our actions, and relationships. At the end of the day, we cannot individually enforce inclusion; we cannot singularly define actualization; we cannot provide self-determination; we cannot create voice; and we cannot prescribe leadership. We don’t have the power.

The power to achieve any of these is within each of us and is manifest through powerful relationships.

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Is Student Engagement Easier Said Than Done?

by Brandon Hill

Partner, Cascade Educational Consultants

Recently, I was talking with educators about how they prepare for the start of the school year. Everyone buzzed about the new academic year. I heard about every educational issue under the sun. Topics included new teacher evaluation rules, principal and teacher reassignments, student discipline, testing and more.

I wondered aloud where student engagement and leadership fits into the picture. How strategies to engage students need to be implemented throughout the learning experience. I reeled off a long list of positive outcomes connected to student engagement (development of leadership, communication skills, peer/adult

collaborations); and how these approaches are not a panacea, but still effective in addressing a myriad of problems.

Before I could get fully settled on my soapbox, I was interrupted with a simple, but valid question, “how?”

How do we get students more engaged in the classroom? How do we cultivate student leadership and use it to support our collective goals? How do we utilize students’ leadership skills and integrate engagement into the overall learning experience? Where do we even begin?

Those are key questions.

Student engagement can happen anywhere. It is not an isolated activity or segment of a lesson plan. Clear, practical methods of student engagement can be implemented on an ongoing basis at various levels. Whether at the classroom level (immediate students and teacher within a class); the community level (broader communities of students within grades, racial/culture/gender/ability subgroups, student interest groups, or team sports); or at a systemic level (across schools, districts and cities).

Here are some examples:

Students engaged with peers: On the first day of class allow students to give an in-depth introduction of themselves to classmates. Have students talk about their backgrounds, interests, future goals, as well as the learning environment they need in order to be successful. Acknowledge diversity and similarities in stories, backgrounds and collective needs.

Students engaged in community: Based on students collective needs, allow the students to create a list of classroom rules (I sometimes use the word “norms” instead as “rules” can sound rigid and restrictive). Have them adapt these rules/norms as official guidelines that govern the classroom community. Revisit the rules/norms often to ensure their effectiveness and encourage dialogue

Students engaged with administrators: Invite principal and/or administrators in to discuss classroom norms and how they relate to overall school policy and guidelines. Discuss diversity of students and needs. Students suggest ideas/strategies to create better learning environments.

Students engaged in school processes: Students work with administrators to establish school-wide policies for healthy learning and classroom climate. Segments of students may highlight and advocate on behalf of specific groups of students. School-wide student voice is solicited and used to inform decisions.

These are just some examples of how engaging students in the creation of rules and norms can go from impacting a single classroom to impacting an entire school.

Think of all the other areas of the educational system where we can engage students to make a positive impact. Student engagement and leadership isn’t just another activity picked from a lesson plan. It’s a way of doing things. Once we learn how to do it effectively we can all reap the benefits.

Public Engagement Through Teaching and Learning

by Teri Dary

Partner, Cascade Educational Consultants



We all stand to gain tremendous resources, expertise, and support from having a broader base of constituents working toward a shared vision of public schools as vibrant centers of learning which radiate a positive, safe, and caring environment within which all students thrive. Rather than relegating "outsiders" to the sidelines, schools need to nurture mutually beneficial relationships with parents, business, and the full spectrum of community members. The collective expertise that will be brought to bear on improving our schools will help us all be more effective in meeting the needs of those at the core of our mission: the students.

Too often, collaborative efforts are hampered by the perception that only teachers know what students need to learn and how to provide the necessary instruction to develop those skills. We will be far more effective in impacting the learning process if we bring all of the available resources to bear on increasing student learning: parents, young people, community members, business leaders, and school staff. The rich perspectives and expertise offered by this diverse group can substantially expand our ability to meet the varied abilities and interests of the students in our classrooms. With teachers as the central guide in the process, each student's educational experience can take great strides by developing collaborative partnerships that enhance learning in a broader context.

As you begin the new school year, renew your commitment to ignite your teaching and learning by engaging the public. The reward? Increased understanding of what it takes to be a successful school, greater support for what you need to be successful, and additional resources to inspire success in your students. Start from where you are, and start small. Begin with a pledge to take one small step toward engaging the wider community in your efforts today, then use the following strategies to get you started.

- Ask members of the city council in helping your class write a classroom constitution to establish a democratic classroom.
- Send home a Time and Talent survey with your students, asking families to identify ways they would like to be involved in your classroom community. Request that each family identify one other community member to take the survey as well.
- Open the school for a broad range of educational opportunities outside the school day, such as a knitting, yoga, or computer classes for learners of all ages.
- Structure homework around things that are happening in the community. Assign a research paper on a relevant community topic and then make the copies available at the local library. Give students credit for participating in a community event that relates to your curriculum. Invite community members to speak to your class about relevant topics.
- Write an op-ed for the local paper that talks about learning that is going on in your classroom that connects with a current issue or need in the community.
- Work with the city council and other community groups to engage youth in addressing community issues. Find out what they're working on and connect it with your curriculum. Become a partner in promoting awareness through a public awareness campaign. Attend city council meetings with your students and get involved.
- Invite members of the community to join your class for a community forum to discuss needs in the community. Connect these needs to your curriculum through service-learning and engage your students in designing and implementing a solution.

School and Community Engagement

by Terry Pickeral

President, Cascade Educational Consultants

At a nearby elementary school, third-graders eagerly await a bus full of senior citizens to continue their lessons on how to surf the web and send e-mails to their peers and family. Twice a week, these “tech tutors” engage with their older partners from the local senior center to increase their technology knowledge and skills.

The collaboration between the local school and senior center and played out not only in the Technology Lab, but also on the school campus and at the senior center itself. The elementary school students and seniors often join together singing songs, writing poetry and sharing stories for mutual benefit.

You can imagine the joy seniors express sharing their stories with their young friends and the lessons the students learn from the seniors.

Far too often, when schools desire to engage their community, it is for specific short-term opportunities to contribute to a school’s program or classroom project. This limited orientation to engagement might address a current need, but does not mobilize communities to provide long-term sustained collaboration. Most importantly, it does not bring each student to his or her fullest potential.

Sustainable community engagement is the inclusion of community members in school decisions, planning, activities, visioning, communication, and other school-related activities. It is based on the notion that children whose communities are involved in their schooling have a more successful educational experience. The community benefits by better understanding how (1) schools operate, (2) students can contribute to community development and (3) communities can contribute to a high-quality school system that serves all students effectively.

To create opportunities for the community to be deeply engaged in sustainable school-community engagement the school must understand the difference between identifying potential collaborators and mobilizing community members, institutions and organizations.

Identification of potential collaborators simply creates a pool of candidates that might be included in schools; whereas mobilizing not only identifies candidates, but demonstrates the mutual benefit to the school and community and fully taps the community resources.

My experience shows that community members, institutions and organizations are willing to contribute to school improvement, but rarely understand the entry point to do so. Often, they need help to identify the way the school system is organized to take advantage of the resources they can bring. Here’s what schools can do:

- Effectively communicate their desire to engage the community
- Establish strategies and easily accessed ways for the community to engage with the school
- Identify specific benefits to the school and the community to establish school-community collaborations
- Engage the community in real elements of school decisions, planning, activities, visioning, communication, and other school-related activities
- Conduct research that measures and demonstrates the benefits of engagement to students, schools and the community
- Publically share the results of school-community engagement



At the same time community members, institutions and organizations need to:

- Identify the resources they can bring to school improvement and student development and achievement
- Co-create and co-design school-community engagement so that there is not a request for the school to “buy-in” but rather to “co-own” from the beginning
- Determine the short and long-term benefits of engaging with the local school
- Provide the school access to community facilities
- Encourage internships, school-to-work programs, shadowing and other opportunities that engage students in the community to acquire/enhance workplace knowledge and skills
- Volunteer together with students to address community issues/problems

Sustainable school-community engagement benefits schools and the community by mobilizing their rich resources toward mutual benefits.

The seniors I mentioned certainly learned about technology, but also about the lives of nine year-olds. On the flip side, the students were adept with technology, but less experienced in the world outside their local community. These potentially life-changing experiences do not come from occasional cooperation between schools and communities rather from thoughtful, long-term and sustainable collaborations.

Helpful Resources for Engaging Youth in Inclusive Schools With a Positive School Climate

ASCD – Whole Child <http://www.ascd.org/whole-child.aspx>

ASCD – Whole Child Blog – Inclusive Schools <http://whatworks.wholechildeducation.org/blog>

Cascade Education Consultants <http://cascadeeducationalconsultants.com>

Comer School Development Program <http://childstudycenter.yale.edu/comer/index.aspx>

Guides to Transforming Power, from the “Alternatives to Violence Project” www.avpusa.org

High Quality Instruction That Transforms Service-Learning Implementation Guide

http://www.dpi.wi.gov/sl/pdf/high_quality_learning_web.pdf

Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Schools <http://mcieinclusiveschools.org>

National School Climate Center <http://schoolclimate.org>

Special Olympics - Project Unify <http://www.specialolympics.org/projectunify.aspx>

Western Australia Department of Education - Inclusive Schools

<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/inclusiveeducation/detcms/portal>

Cascade Matters Blog <http://www.cascadeeducationalconsultants.com/blog.php>

Blogs featured on the Cascade Educational Consultants website include:

- A New Vision for School Reform: Where Are the Students?
- Achieving Civic Outcomes
- Adult Development is Youth Development (includes the resource, "Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement")
- Building Teacher, Youth and Parent/Citizen Leadership Focused on Student Learning and Engagement in their School – So Students Learn More!
- Climate Is Not Just About the Weather (includes PowerPoint presentation on school climate)
- Do You Know of an Inclusive School?
- Embracing the Conversation
- High Quality Instruction That Transforms (includes PowerPoint presentation on service-learning)
- Power to Give
- Power to the Pupil
- Solutions For Student Engagement in Every School in the Long Run
- Special Olympics Project UNIFY: Using Collective Power for Good