

Beneath the surface of *high performance*

Higher API scores and graduation rates may obscure the fact that many students at a school are just not learning.

Anyone who has been to London and used its underground subway system is familiar with the warning, “mind the gap.” It is a warning about the “gap” between the train and the platform. Here in the United States, as educators, “mind the gap” takes on a different connotation – the difference in academic achievement among our students.

In some schools, recognizing the gap is easier than others. For high-performing schools, such as Calabasas High School, the gap is obscured by high API scores, high graduation rates, high parental involvement and the higher socioeconomic status of the area. Often when things look fine on the surface level, one doesn’t feel compelled to dig deeper. As Jim Collins expresses, “Good is the enemy of great” (Collins, 2002).

Lesson 1: Realize your imperfections

Realizing that we had a gap was the result of working with Gayle Karhanek, educational consultant and co-author of the books “Whatever it Takes” and “Raising the

Bar and Closing the Gap.” One of the first questions Karhanek asked us was how many students were on our D/F list. This was the moment of enlightenment because none of us knew the answer. We were blinded by our own success. After running a data analysis report, we were surprised at the number of pages listing students who had two or more Ds and/or Fs.

The next question we had to answer was, “What happens in our school when, despite our best efforts in the classroom, a student does not learn?” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek, 2004). One outcome of that conversation was creating the Effective Student Support program based on Stephen Covey’s “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens.”

Lesson 2: Find like minds

Blanchard states, “People without information cannot act, while people with information cannot help but act” (Blanchard, 2004). With the number of D/F students quantified, we were compelled to act. Most

people would ponder the question of how to proceed, but our next question was who should lead the change?

Asking the question “how” more often impedes progress than promotes progress. Therefore, at a staff meeting, as the assistant principal charged with interventions, I asked for volunteers who would be interested in creating a program to help students on our D/F list. Several hands went up, and we were off and running.

Gayle Karhanek often says, “Never wait for money or consensus.” We were able to obtain books, lesson plans and training through Premier, the company that provides our student planners.

Lesson three: If the horse is dead, don’t ride it

Dakota tribal wisdom says that when you discover you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount. Often, educators

By Linda Pierce

overlook this sage advice and resort to other strategies, such as changing riders, using stronger whips or visiting other sites to learn how they ride dead horses.

For our identified students, the lack of academic success entailed more than simple subject-level remediation could provide. Failure was deeply engrained in them; it was a habit – something they repeatedly did.

Stephen Covey bases his book on the ideas that originated with his father, but specifically targets teenagers, as evidenced in his chart (Covey, 1998) of effective and ineffective habits (at right).

Habits can make us or break us. The goal of the Effective Student Support program is to help students identify their bad habits and replace them with habits that will help them realize their goals. Effective Student Support provides an intervention for students experiencing academic difficulty by focusing on the social/emotional/behavioral domain.

In creating the program, we also had to create a paradigm shift. If we were going to change the habits of students, we also needed to change the way we “do school,” because the current system was not working for some of our students.

In the Effective Student Support program students are issued an invitation to join based on a recommendation from a staff member. No one wants to be told that they are “defective.” Each student was told that someone on this campus feels that they are worthwhile and that they had potential; however, something was holding them back.

I told the students that the “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” was a proven method to realize their goals and as a school community we wanted to make an investment in them. Students internalized this message, as evidenced by this exchange overheard between a participant and her friend:

“Where are you going during support?”

“I’m going to Seven Habits.”

“Isn’t that a program for losers?”

“No, it is for people who have goals.”

Instead of the typical large class size, Effective Student Support is limited to no more than 20 participants. Teachers are called mentors, and they facilitate group interaction. Participants come to sessions not to measure content standards, but to learn

Seven habits of highly (in)effective teens

Be proactive

Take responsibility for your life.

Begin with the end in mind

Define your mission and goals in life.

Put first things first

Prioritize, and do the most important.

Think win-win

Have an everyone can win attitude.

Seek to understand, then be understood

Listen to people sincerely.

Synergize

Work together to achieve more.

Sharpen the saw

Renew yourself regularly.

React

Blame all your problems on others.

Begin with no end in mind

Have no plan and avoid goals at all cost.

Put first things last

Make sure that things don’t matter.

Think win-lose

See life as a vicious competition.

Seek to talk, then pretend to listen

Talk a lot. Pretend to listen by nodding.

Don’t cooperate

Be your own island.

Wear yourself out

Don’t take time to learn anything new.

Source: Stephen Covey

about themselves. For a teenager, there is nothing more relevant.

While there is a set topic, mentors weave the concerns of students into the topic of discussion. Participants are warned that anything that is said in a session stays in a session. Once students trust that what they are going to say remains confidential, they open up, friendships form, and problems don’t seem insurmountable anymore. After learning what some of these students go through, it is amazing that they come to school at all. We can’t fix the academic challenges until we find out the underlying cause.

Coming to school, studying hard and getting good grades does not provide instant gratification. The results are intangible. Students in the ESS program earn \$5 for every session they attend. The funds may be used to purchase anything that is sold through the student store. Popular items include tickets to school dances, yearbooks and parking passes. ESS sessions are held every Wednesday. Students in the program report that Wednesday is their favorite day of the week!

Lesson four: Think BIG.

The impetus for this program was the realization that we had a hidden population of students on our D/F list. One obvious measure of success is to see how many

students are removed from the list at the end of the program. Our first cohort generated a 55 percent removal rate from the D/F list. Furthermore, in analyzing grades from program entry to the end of the semester, there was a 37 percent gain in GPA.

While academic progress is noteworthy, what really surprised us were student reports about how their lives had changed. In surveys, students told us things such as, “I finally know how to change.” In hindsight, we should not have been surprised because habits are life-changing.

Lesson five: Success begets more success

We originally sold this program to staff as a one-year trial program. At the end of the year, I reported our findings and asked for the program to be extended. To accomplish the task, I used my best sales tool – graduates of the program.

DuFour speaks of the power of stories, (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Karhanek, 2009), so I had five graduates of the program come early to school and tell their stories at a faculty meeting. Students who generally did not feel comfortable in school stood before all the teachers in the school and shared their bad habits and steps they took to correct them.

One student talked about how she had

been in my office all the time for fighting on campus, but now has friends. One bad habit, she said, was trying to skip over age-appropriate goals. She said she came to the realization that she was missing out on her teenage years.

Another student said, “My grades have changed a lot.” She added that her relationship with her parents and friends had also improved. “I can argue without fighting,” she

said. The staff was wowed by the students’ poise, maturity and humility. In the end, the vote for continuance passed unanimously.

Signature practices

In 2009, Calabasas High School was recognized as a California Distinguished School. A new criterion for the award was to “demonstrate use of signature practices that reflect recommendations found in the

California Closing the Achievement Gap report.” This practice as well as a database of all California Distinguished Schools’ signature practices can be found at www.closingtheachievementgap.org/sigpractices.

Stephen R. Covey has now written a sequel titled “The 8th Habit.” The eighth habit is to know the seven habits and to teach them to others. Graduates of Cohort One were so changed by the program that they wanted to give back. As a result, we created student mentor positions. Graduates would work along with teacher mentors to facilitate the program. Some of the original graduates have now been mentors for two years!

As we reach across the divide to struggling students, the gap recedes as students experience academic success and begin to feel positive about themselves in the same way that their higher performing peers do. ■

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