

# Suspended Futures

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Have we forgotten that schools are all about kids? Are we too concerned with standardized testing and attaching teacher pay and bonuses to results? Is battling union involvement in school governance taking over our thoughts? Is a national common core curriculum going to be the answer to what ails American education? I bring up these questions in light of a report recently released entitled "Breaking Schools' Rules" which was a six-year study conducted by the Council of State Governments Justice Center. This report has been called the most comprehensive analysis ever conducted on school suspensions and expulsions. It traced one million secondary students in the state of Texas. Bottom line: too many students being suspended or expelled, often numerous times, for infractions which might have been handled in ways leading to positive outcomes. The report's underlying message suggests that these routine

punishments often create a pipeline leading from school to prison.

As a long-time educator in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, I am very familiar with the challenges presented by students who do not fit the norm and who disrupt the school environment. I have dealt with disruptive students as a teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and finally as a Title 1 middle school principal. It was in my role as principal for 14 years, that I had the opportunity to implement policies and procedures that actually turned around the escalating suspension and retention practices resulting in school being a place where most students could find success and respect.

The school I inherited as principal, after serving many years as an assistant principal, was a large (1800 student) middle school with grades 6-9, mostly Hispanic and from high poverty neighborhoods. Students ranged in age from

11 to 17. Most of the older students had been retained once or twice and many of these were driving to school.

The culture among faculty members was one of the good vs. the bad. Students who followed rules and were motivated would receive passing grades and the others would fail. The failures would continue to fail and would be excluded from participation in general school life. Dozens of students would be suspended at any given time and the attendance rate was one of the worst in the district.

What we did, as a school family, led to Palm Springs Middle School being featured as a success story in a Harvard study entitled "Opportunities Suspended" and my being voted the Principal of the Year out of a field of over 300 principals in the 4<sup>th</sup> largest school system in the country. I can still remember, when the selection committee was touring the school, and they asked a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student in our at risk program why I was a special principal, and he responded "because he cares about us."

There is a phrase often used in education that says, "I don't care what you know until I know that you care." And so we began the turnaround process at Palm Springs Middle School by adopting a philosophy of caring for all students and believing that all students can achieve.

My very first faculty meeting as a new principal included the showing of a short video entitled "Cypher in the Snow" which was about a student who collapses and dies while exiting the school bus and no one seemed to know who he was or anything about him. Not only did the showing of "Cypher" evoke a few tears from the teacher audience, but it set the tone for what we would be about as we set out to create a school of success for all.

As a school converting from junior high to middle school, we had a wonderful opportunity to establish school teams, whereby a group of teachers would have responsibility for a team of students. Each grade level would have two teams comprised of the four core academic teachers, plus

an elective teacher, and a counselor. These teacher teams would meet three mornings a week for thirty minutes to discuss student issues, often inviting parents to join them. Teams became families with names and identities and teacher team leaders believed that they were responsible for developing a student team where all could be successful.

Students deemed to need interventions best offered in smaller settings were given the opportunity to be placed in our SARP (Student at Risk Program). Funded with mostly Title1 funds, this team was comprised of the four core academic teachers, a head teacher, and a counselor, and served the needs of those 6<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> graders who would profit from smaller classes, and from increased counseling and supervision. Again, the name of the game was caring and respect, and these special students would not be forgotten or lost within a school of some 1800 students.

Not being lost or overlooked in a large school means that the adults in the building, especially the administrative staff, must be vigilant. We all made a point of being out and about when students were entering and exiting school as well as when students were passing in the halls and eating in the cafeteria. Teachers were always at their classroom door when students were entering and leaving. What a great feeling for a student to be greeted by a teacher upon entering for a new class day. Administrators and support personnel would always have their fingers on the pulse of the school.

Visibility by school personnel is probably one of the most crucial elements in running a successful school, yet it is the most overlooked. My habit of morning visibility outside of the school, while students were congregating, waiting for the time to enter the building, proved to be one of the most crucial practices leading to our success in creating a school for all. It was during this time, perhaps thirty minutes each morning, that I was able to see the social

interactions among the student body. I could see who the loners were as well as who the group leaders were. One morning, as I was observing a particularly challenging group of boys, who always congregated on the same corner of the school campus, I decided to do something with them that truly turned things around for them and for the school in general. I asked each one of them, about 20 in total, to meet me in the cafeteria after homeroom. They had no idea what this invitation might be about. When they arrived I invited them on a field trip with me to see a play at a local theater. The play was called "The Matador" and it was about a young Latino boy who dreamed of becoming a world famous matador. I knew that this play, along with its great music, would be something these students could relate to and perhaps be motivated by.

The field trip to a theater, a first for most of them, would prove to be one of several activities for a portion of the student body frequently overlooked in the past. The big payoff, once these students knew that the adults on

campus cared for them and respected them, was that they now became our friends and not our enemies. They now wanted to please us and indeed to please themselves and their families by following school rules, by passing their classes, and by developing pride in themselves and in their school. These particular students, and others on the fringes, were the same students who had previously been the ones who were often suspended, absent, and retained in grade. Helping these outliers to feel a part of the school family by recognizing them and meeting their personal and academic needs produced a true turnaround.

Most students who are frequently suspended, are often the ones who are habitual absentees leading to poor academic outcomes with a great possibility of future retentions and eventual dropping out of school. Again, as indicated in "Breaking Schools' Rules," is school to be a pipeline to low-wage employment and even to prison, because educators cannot find a cure for suspensions, expulsions, and drop-outs?

Realizing that all students can come to school every day, we decided to implement an attendance improvement competition which would include all students in the school and would be reachable by all regardless of their academic achievements. What this basically entailed was a competition among homerooms whereby their percentage of attendance would be computed weekly; standings would be announced at the beginning of each week. Prizes, such as donut and pizza parties, as well as field trips to local attractions and movies, would be awarded at the end of each grading period to the top homerooms at each grade level.

The competition became quite fierce while creating a community atmosphere of all working towards a common goal. Not only did the school's overall attendance percentage sky rocket, but the pride felt by all students helped to create an enhanced school culture. When district rankings were produced each quarter, and our students could see that they were at the top of over 50 other middle

schools, the pride factor became most evident. I can recall meeting a former student, many years after he had graduated, asking me if we were still #1 in the county.

As successful as our team structure was, and as successful as our caring and respecting culture proved to be, and as successful as we were in bringing all students into school, there still was a need for a last resort to suspension. Our SCSI (School Center for Special Instruction) was a classroom devoted to meeting the needs of those students who were deemed unable to continue in their normal classroom setting. The SCSI placement might be for rule violations which previously would have resulted in suspension from school: fighting, defiance of authority, general disrespect, and other infractions the school would not tolerate. These placements would be for a few days up to perhaps a week or ten days. The SCSI teacher was a person with a counseling and guidance background as well as a person knowledgeable in most academic areas. Again,

a caring individual whose purpose was to help the student meet with future success.

With the emphasis on standardized testing, brought about by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and the pressure of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), many schools have resorted to the doubling up of academic classes for students at the expense of elective classes and physical education programs. Unfortunately, the students who most need art and music and other active hands-on classes are the very ones who are left out of these programs due to academic deficiencies. The need is to involve students in those positive aspects of school life that prevent them from engaging in activities which could lead to suspension and dropping-out. Under the current administration, waivers are slowly being granted to the states that request them, but the paper and pencil tests still remain.

Just look at an at-risk population in any school and you will probably see lovers of music or art or athletics or

mechanics. Many of our most at-risk students “turned around” through their participation in our jazz band program and even came to school an hour early to participate in practice hosted by a supportive band director. I can recall a group of students who were graffiti artists who went from being potential drop-outs to passing students when they were permitted to paint their very own graffiti mural on a large wall at the school for all to see. As a matter of fact, I even took them to the local Home Depot to purchase the spray cans. Indeed, all students need to be guided to their place in the school family structure, and caring adults can bring this about.

Parental involvement are two words always included in a school’s improvement plans and are part of their overall goals as well. Not enough can be said about making parents an integral part of their child’s schooling, yet this is often an area where schools are struggling. It is difficult for many parents to make adequate time in their busy lives to come to their child’s school. Children, especially those in

school suspension, drop out to low wage work or prison, and they are the very ones most in need of a school to home connection.

One successful parental involvement strategy was the inclusion of parents in the morning teacher- team meetings. As previously indicated, teacher teams met three mornings a week, before the start of the student day. The team of teachers would select those parents to be invited to a team conference and it was usually the grade-level counselor who would set up the meetings. Often two parent conferences could be conducted on any given morning. Parents profited from the opportunity to meet with all of their child's teachers at once and the door to future communication was opened.

Another important parent connection was our quarterly report card pick-up. Rather than sending report cards home with a student or mailing them, parents came to the school at report card time, either from 4-7 P.M or the

following morning from 7-9 A.M. Tables were set up in the library for each team and in a manner of five minutes; parents would have their child's report card, as well as have an opportunity to converse briefly with a teacher. Counselors and administrators were always present during this time as well. Refreshments were available, and at times the band or chorus might perform. The atmosphere was positive and supportive for all.

There is much talk currently about effective teachers and what makes an effective teacher and how can we get more of them in our schools. We can all probably recall a favorite teacher in our life who motivated us to do our best. That special teacher was the one you did not want to disappoint because you knew he/she cared about you and believed that you could succeed. Remember Jaime Escalante in the movie, "Stand and Deliver" where he motivated a group of students to achieve at levels no one expected them to achieve. These were students who were

headed down the suspension, expulsion, absentee route before Jaime got to them.

Teachers today need to be supported more than ever if we want them to be the ones to halt the failure track discussed in “Breaking Schools’ Rules”. We were successful at Palm Springs Middle because we put in place our theme of caring and respecting, with teachers as well as students. We recognized and celebrated teacher accomplishments by visiting their classrooms regularly and applauding their initiatives. We cared about teachers’ personal lives as a true family would.

Teachers were respected in a collaborative way and were asked more than told. As good leadership coaching teaches us, asking brings about one’s best traits, and telling stifles creative thinking. Teachers need and want to be an integral part of a plan to eliminate suspended futures. They are intelligent and educated and are the key to all students’ futures.

**We are facing difficult times; for lack of funds, teachers are losing their jobs across the country, making success in school more difficult. We are asked to do the same with less. Some teachers and administrators will try. Sadly, some school staff will find that too difficult to do.**

## **REFERENCES**

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