

HUHS: *ACTION RESEARCH* REPORT FOCUSED ON SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS

PRELIMINARY REPORT - JUNE, 2009

Action Research:

Since focusing my time during my first official year as superintendent at HUHS on “Struggling Learners,” in essence those failing two (2) or more courses. I chose to allocate approximately the same amount of time during the 2008-2009 school year to gather information surrounding HUHS’s “Most Successful Learners.” As you might suspect, in year three, I will do the same for those that fall into the large and often ignored “Middle Group” of learners.

Therefore, in order to move beyond parent(s) support, grades, WKCE scores, enrollment/success in AP courses, ACT test scores, attendance/tardies, and participation in extracurricular activities, I felt it was important to meet with parents/students identified as “the most **successful** learners” at HUHS. The associate principals/counselors provided me with names of students to interview (approximately forty). The meetings lasted from between 60 – 150 minutes, providing the parent(s)/student an opportunity to tell me their story, specifically focused on their journey leading to success at HUHS. The same set of questions were used to frame each conversation. In all cases, the parent(s)/student chose to participate in the conference. In fact, the parent(s)/student appeared both surprised and honored that time was spent by the District Administrator to assess, celebrate their son’s/daughter’s success, and seek input on what HUHS could do differently/better not only to address and honor the unique qualities and characteristics each individual learner possesses, but also to address the same issues for that specific group of students in the future.

Learnings:

Below is a summary of the insights I’ve gained. There weren’t any real surprises, but the responses often reinforced what I have learned from successful student interviews over time.

- The students have a record of success in grades PK-8 prior to entering high school.
- The parent(s) were actively engaged in the “learning life” of their son’s/daughter’s educational plan, almost daily.
- Success, oftentimes organized by parent(s), was celebrated routinely.
- Especially in grades K-8, the communications between home and school focused on the learner’s gifts and talents, and it was, through the parents’ eyes, exceptional.
- The range of homework outside the regular student day was between two – three hours per night to a few with no homework at all.
- Most of the families had the fiscal resources to provide learners with exceptional experiences/opportunities outside of the walls of the school.
- The students were involved in multiple extra/co-curricular activities, from one – seven. In addition, most were also involved in some kind of volunteer/community service activity outside of the school day.
- The students generally loved school, and their relationships with teachers grades PK- 11(12) were tagged as excellent.
- The students felt they were challenged, for the most part, in only AP courses, with most of them either having taken or planning to take between two (2) and seven (7) courses.

- The students were not afraid to provide me with specific information surrounding both departments and courses that each believed were “a waste of time.” Many used the term “slacker” departments/courses. Interestingly, there was a fairly consistent overlap in their responses to the question. I will share the information with departments, privately.
- It was very easy for all students interviewed to provide me with a long list of favorite teachers from grades PK- 11(12). In addition, they were able to provide me with a very consistent list of the qualities and characteristics of that collective group of teachers: relationship builders; interested in the student’s life outside of the four walls of the school; good communicator; consistent classroom management practices; demonstrated love of learning/working with kids; established high expectations; positive attitude; and provided each student with the time and support necessary to succeed in the course.
- Students responded consistently when asked why other students fail at HUHS. According to the high achieving students, the pattern of failure began long before arriving in the high school. The low achieving students hate school; do not care; do not do homework; skip school; do not participate in class; stop teachers from teaching and learners from learning; lack a good relationship with the teacher(s); sleep in class, and hang around others who do not care about school either.
- When asked about the high rate of tardies at HUHS, I was provided the following responses: Successful students are treated differently than those that do not care; teachers are very inconsistent in administering the policy; the block of time before school and between classes is used for friends to catch up with friends. Collectively, the high-achieving students displayed frustration with the number of times teachers started and stopped teaching to accommodate tardy students.
- When asked what percentage of students at HUHS are involved in the use of alcohol and/or drugs, at least once a week outside of the school day, the range was anywhere between 50 – 80%, cutting across successful students, unsuccessful students, extra co-curricular participants, students with financial resources, and those without financial resources. Alcohol and marijuana appear to be the drugs of choice.
- The students, not surprisingly, are goal driven. Most were already capable of describing how they were going to use the remaining time at HUHS, as well as identifying a college/university to pursue a future career. Their search for a college/university began, for the most part, in the student’s junior year.
- When asked if carrying around a magic wand with the ability to make changes at HUHS, they provided a variety of responses: eliminate the “slough courses,” especially at the freshman – sophomore years in high school; identify scheduling strategies to eliminate course conflicts; eliminate the inconsistency between and among honors courses; create consistent grading practices, at least across departments; identify a strategy to eliminate when some nights a student is forced to prepare for multiple quizzes/exams and/or three-five hours of homework with zero work to do on other nights; and reduce the length of the lunch hour, claiming they do too much sitting around.
- Provide the opportunity to participate in a debate team, science fair, and/or other forms of academic competitions.

- Encourage administrators to spend time on the “big, rather than little stuff,” and review the censorship policy.
- Parents believed “course rigor” served their son/daughter extremely well, choosing to attend HUHS at some point during grades 6 - 8.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen our Gifted and Talented Program (G-T) from grades 3 – 12 at a minimum (Operational)
- We need to continue pursuing a game plan by behaving as a PK-12 district in order to provide our students with the most “dynamic, challenging, and relevant learning experiences possible.” (Operational)
- We need to remain on our journey to implement a consistent grading practices plan with common assessments. (Strategic)
- Although explored in the past, and an uncomfortable topic at HUHS, we need to revisit our conversation surrounding an advisor/advisee model to strengthen teacher – student relationships. (Operational)
- We need to continue focusing on providing learners with the tools to make good decisions, especially in the area of the use of alcohol and/or drugs. (Operational)
- We need to create an alternative plan to successfully reduce tardies, to insure teachers have the ability to maximize allocated learning time. (Operational)
- We need to continue seeking options/opportunities to celebrate (at school) student academic success on a regular routine cycle. (Operational)
- We need to utilize the stories of our most successful parent(s)/students within the framework of the district’s marketing plan. (Strategic)
- We need to provide AP/College Credit course options/opportunities across all departments, if possible, and when deemed appropriate. (Operational)
- We need to begin developing relationships with parent(s) and students in grades 6 – 7, telling the positive HUHS story before a high school choice is made in grade 8. (Operational)
- We need to continue exploring a strategy to encourage all learners to become involved in a co-curricular activity. (Operational)
- We need to create a review strategy to assess and justify Honors (H) courses. (Operational)
- We must not forget to address, through all education-related decisions made at HUHS, the growing gap between the “haves and have not’s.” (Operational)
- We must continue to create and implement online courses, creating alternative learning opportunities outside the concrete walls of HUHS. (Strategic)
- We must continue to strengthen our summer school program for all students, especially those in grades 9 – 10. (Operational)

Closing:

The stories told by our most successful students should make us feel good about “what’s happening” at HUHS. The students recognize that HUHS has been on a journey to ratchet up rigor within the framework of our educational plan. But, we still have work to do. The game plan to continue

strengthening our “multiple pathways” high school is clearly outlined within the framework of our Strategic Plan. To do the job well, we must continue to work within the plan, involving far more staff members on Action Teams than over the past two years. Ownership focused on the Mission of the organization must grow much stronger roots if we are, indeed, committed to “inspire world-class learners through dynamic education to conquer the challenges of tomorrow.”

Although they did not always use the same words, the parent(s)/student conversations indicated that our successful students exhibit the following qualities and characteristics:

- 1) The students are able to keep track of daily assignments, test dates, project dates, and extracurricular activities. (Organizational Skills)
- 2) Students ask questions both inside and outside the classroom, often times forming study teams. (Committed to Success)
- 3) Students have identified a person(s) they can go to for help or just someone to talk to about life’s challenges. (Support System)
- 4) A successful student feels good if understanding the material, leading to a good grade. (Goal Oriented)
- 5) A successful student has great people skills, is polite, and knows how to get what he or she needs to be successful in school. (Human Relationship Skills)
- 6) Successful students are actively engaged in extracurricular activities, including clubs, sports, community service, and student government. (Well Rounded High School Experience)
- 7) The students stay true to themselves. If something is going on around them that they don’t like or don’t feel comfortable with, they are not afraid to speak their mind. They are capable of avoiding others who may serve as a bad influence around them. (Effective Decision Making Skills)

Reflection:

As I reflect on my “action research,” I can’t help but recall many of the parent(s) faces as they both entered and left my office. For sure, teachers have made a difference in the lives of the learners interviewed, and they will remain a part of each family’s “quality world” forever. The closing comment, many, many times was something like this: “I hope our conversation leads to HUHS better serving all students, and thanks for recognizing that even the most successful students may not be served well in all area(s) of their grades 9 – 12 experience. Often times, they are taken for granted because they - - will learn in spite of the educational plan/teachers.” Later while I was alone, I wondered out loud, “What would happen if all of us took the time, once a week, to ask a student, ‘What more can I do to help him/her succeed?’” My answer was this: “If doing so, the time spent just might have a positive impact on the high school’s climate, culture, relationships, and/or student achievement, as well as a differentiate ourselves from other high schools across the State/USA.”

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