Spotlight on Success: What's Working in Oregon High Schools

A scholarly paper to describe a research study with selected Oregon high schools

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Abstract

This paper will share the results of a research study conducted during the 2007-2008 school year. It was designed to tell the stories of selected Oregon high schools that were having some success in implementing innovations and practices, and were making a difference in student's learning, meeting content standards, and feeling connections to their schools. Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and administrators to gain their perspectives of what was "working" at their high school. Additional data was collected from surveys, focus groups, artifacts, and researcher reflections. An analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes—what's best for kids, community, and servant/instructional leadership. The resultant stories describe what student success and engagement looks like and feels like from the perspectives of the participants. It will also identify models of effective practice that may inform and inspire readers to implement similar changes in their schools.

Introduction

In the nation's schools today, the demands for reform are abundant. Educators, politicians, businesses, and parents call for change and challenges to do better. Efforts at the district, state, and national levels are evidence of perhaps the most comprehensive reform agenda ever undertaken (McLaughlin & Oberlin, 1996). For some, it is serious.

> As educators grapple with various strategies for raising student achievement, it is becoming increasingly clear that we face our biggest challenge in improving high schools. Steeped in tradition and dependent on practices that have long outlived their usefulness, high schools are in dire need of reform. We can find many examples of elementary schools that have been turned around, but relatively few examples of high schools that have undergone a similar transformation. (Noguera, 2004)

In a 2008 *Education Week* article, Kolderie indicated that the despair about high schools seems universal.

As a result of the attention on reform, initiatives for creating change in high schools are plentiful: Breaking Ranks, Blue Ribbon Schools, Breakthrough Schools, High Schools that Work, Essential Schools, Schools Moving Up, and New Designs for Learning…to name a few.   Numerous schools are having conversations and implementing change in order to increase student achievement and engagement. Each state and district makes decisions that greatly affect the lives of everyone involved.

There are lessons to be learned from students, teachers, and principals who find themselves in high schools implementing change. Since their stories help us understand the perspectives of each of the groups involved, the question should be asked: If reform is needed, *what is being done and what is working? What does successful school reform look like and feel like? What are the models that most effectively make a difference in student learning and help students meet content standards? What are the stories students, teachers, and principals tell as they consider what is happening at their schools?* The answers to these questions will generate answers to the following questions as well: *Which innovations motivate students to be in school and participate fully? Which ones create a culture of success and community? How do the answers to these questions influence the way teachers teach and administrators lead? And how can the information learned be applied to other schools?*

This paper provides important and useful data for teachers, school administrators, and school improvement personnel who want to find ways to effectively bring about high school reform and who share the work leading to improvement in student achievement and engagement.

Background and Related Literature

The call for educational reform in the nation's schools is continuous and is a result of the perception of many that high school graduates are not college-ready (Conley, 2007), are not prepared for the workplace (State Board of Education, 2007), and cannot compete in a global market (Stewart, 2007). For example, respondents to a 1997 survey conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers in 2001, as cited by the University of Minnesota NCCTE report (2006), said the biggest deficiency of public schools is not teaching basic academic and employability skills. In addition to *No Child Left Behind* legislation, the emphasis on educational

improvement at all grade levels provides further incentive for teachers to be involved in school reform efforts. Because the overall goal of educational reform is to increase student achievement, teachers and administrators are seen as instrumental in making that happen.

So if reform is needed, what is being done and what is working? The list of strategies high schools use to innovate or engage in school reform is numerous. Margaret Scherer indicated in her February 2005 editorial in *Educational Leadership* that while we may not know how to measure school improvement, "at least we know some of the variables that constitute improvement in the eyes of policymakers, journalists, and the public" (p. 7).

In the past, large comprehensive one-size-fits-all high schools were the norm. Today there is an emphasis on small, focused schools of choice that offer multiple pathways to postsecondary opportunity. Standards, assessment, accountability, chartering, and other system-level approaches abound. In addition, many high schools are responding to the need by adding programs, interventions, academic support, personal support, relevancy to the future, and numerous other strategies for helping students find meaning and success during their high school experience. These practices are often a result of reading about previous research studies that identify successful practices at other high schools. Some of the research is cited in the paragraphs that follow.

Characteristics of successful practice. Of the research that has been done on high school reform, the findings reveal characteristics of student success in different types of schools. The research related to school improvement is giving school districts valuable information on what innovations work best and what practices help students be most successful. For example, a research study in selected California schools compared 83 high-performing schools with 273 other schools that were unable to sustain improvement. Results of the study showed the following influences to be positive: quality of administrative leadership, effective instructional programs and practices, high expectations for students, student mobility, and strong teacher leadership (teacher leaders made policy and professional development decisions). In addition, teachers were given regular collaboration time, structural support, and assessment data with training on how to use it. They were also engaged in action research in their own classroom. And finally, the strongest teachers worked with at-risk students (Chrisman, 2005).

Being in a rural or suburban area with resources does not guarantee success. In another California study, case studies were written on five urban high schools that served predominantly low-income students of color (School Design Network at Stanford University, 2007). The researchers identified practices that support student success and the design features of the schools that enabled these practices. They found three important characteristics: personalization, rigorous and relevant instruction, and professional learning and collaboration.

Schmoker (2001) reported from his work with results-oriented schools across the country that collaboration, data collection, and goal-setting were the keys to school improvement and implementation. He believes that these strategies are simple and can be replicated anywhere for successful short and long term improvements. And Scherer (2005) reminds us that change happens best when "educators find like-minded colleagues with whom to plan and implement a vision" (p. 7).

Breaking Ranks II (NASSP, 2005) advocates that schools create conditions for improved student performance, personalize the learning environment, strengthen relationships, and provide a rigorous

and personalized curriculum. ASCD's High School Reform Proposal (2007) includes the following categories of redesign: multiple measure of assessment, personalized learning strategies, new professional development, school leadership, flexible use of time and structure, and business and community engagement.

Other successful practices include partnerships, advisories, small learning communities, high expectations, alignment, teacher collaboration, actively engaged students, systems of support, cultures of continuous improvement, integration between academic areas and career and technical education, work-based learning, guidance and advisement systems focused on the future, blending career and college-prep education, and dual-credit or accelerated learning.

In the research cited in the above paragraphs, there are repetitions and patterns of what it means to be a successful school. Most innovations are about paying attention to the individual student. The big umbrella may be personalization, with numerous strategies falling under this overall approach to meeting the needs of each student. When combined with differentiation and support, rigor is possible for all students. One state has increased graduation requirements "to increase the rigor, relevance, and personalization of the school diploma, while allowing school districts the flexibility and autonomy to enact policies that are innovative or that better meet the unique needs of the district's students" (State Board of Education, 2007, p. 2).

But while there are similarities, Chrisman (2005) states that in her study, "neither specific characteristics of schools nor qualities of students seemed to account for the striking differences between successful and unsuccessful schools... Rather, improved student achievement seems to be the product of how well a school operates and depends on the quality of leadership and the effectiveness of instructional programs and practices" (p. 1).

Educators themselves do not always agree on the best solutions for change, but the innovations don't have to look alike--there is no perfect solution that applies to all schools and communities. Cuban, as cited by Ferrero (2005), reminds us there are many ways for a school to be "good" (p. 11). Kolderie (2008) agrees when he says that we need to set aside the old assumption that there is one right way to achieve student success. Not only do we need to promote different approaches to educational reform, but according to Education/Evolving (2006), we need to aggressively pursue research that will discover "the myriad ways [schools] differ" (Foundation section). Ferrero (2005) points out that the philosophies and values of different "good schools" can be very diverse, yet all can lead to excellence. Research related to school improvement can give school districts valuable information about what innovations might work best in their schools and what practices could help their students be most successful. It is up to them to take this information and create changes that are unique to the context and community in order to increase student achievement in their schools.

According to a report entitled *Success in Sight* on the McREL website (2006), there are two approaches to school reform: (1) the "scientific" approach, which is more prescribed and is to be implemented with few variations, and (2) the "artistic" approach, which takes into account the local context and uniqueness of the school and community. While changes have been encouraged and sometimes funded, Kolderie (2008) has criticized the one-size-fits-all approach of systematic reform. He believes these practices are necessary but not sufficient, and that the other half of the strategy is to stimulate innovation that is specific to the school and community. Within each of the successful characteristics and practices mentioned in the research, one can find both scientific and artistic approaches as described in *Success in Sight* (McREL).

Much of the research that exists is from a theoretical perspective with school leaders in mind; there is little found from the perspective of students, teachers, and principals. This study gives voice to these three groups of participants and results in stories of success based on their words.

Data Collection and Analysis

The purpose of this research study was to collect, compile, and analyze data from high schools in the midst of reform. It explored what was working from the perspective of students, teachers, and the principal in eight selected Oregon high schools. In a 2008 conference address, R. Biffle said, "We need to move from a deficit model in education to an asset model" as we make decisions about schools; this research explores schools from an asset model. By examining what <u>was</u> working instead of what was <u>not</u> working has the potential to inspire others to implement similar changes in their schools.

In order to identify public comprehensive high schools to visit, approximately 40 education leaders from all over Oregon were asked to identify one or two high schools that were *in the midst of change and innovation, and having some measure of success in student achievement and personal engagement.* The education leaders represented numerous educational organizations, agencies, and institutions around Oregon -- Oregon Department of Education, ESD personnel, North West Regional Laboratory, Oregon Small Schools Initiative, university teacher educators, and others. The educators were asked to identify high schools where definitions of success went beyond the classroom and involved school-wide efforts, initiatives, or programs that affected the culture of the school.

Respondents to the request to identify successful high schools replied with a brief description of why they nominated the school(s) they mentioned. Schools to visit were then chosen on the basis of a variety of representative factors: geographical location around the state, school size, school setting (isolated, rural, suburban, urban), and available resources (state funding, grants, community, etc.). At that point, principals were contacted with the request to spend a full day in their school to gather the desired data and discover answers to the overall question: *What is working here?* When principals consented for the school to be involved in the study, arrangements were made for the full-day visit. Teachers and students who best could tell the story of their experiences were identified and a schedule was created for the day.

Based on the initial recommendations of the educational representatives from around the state, and on the consent of the principals when contacted, the following high schools were included in this research study:

School	Date of Visit	Participants
Tillamook High School	January 18, 2008	11: principal, 5 teachers, 4 students, district office grant writer and foundation director
Powers High School	January 24-25, 2008	12: principal, 3 teachers, 3 students, special education assistant, administrative assistant
Scappoose High School	February 4, 2008	13: principal, assistant principal, 6 teachers, 4 students, 1 counselor
South Wasco County High School	February 1, 2008	12: superintendent, principal, 5 teachers, 5 students
Pendleton High School	February 11, 2008	11: principal, assistant principal, administrative assistant, 4 teachers, 4 students

Sisters High School	February 7, 2008	17: principal, assistant principal, admin. assistant, 6 teachers, 6 students, 1 counselor, 1 volunteer
North Eugene High School	March 4, 2008	8: principal, teacher and small schools coordinator, 3 teachers, 3 students
Sprague High School	May 9, 2008	11: assistant principal, 5 teachers, 5 students

Four methods of data collection were utilized at each school to answer the research question: survey of the principal, survey of each participant, in-depth interview with each participant, examination of artifacts and documents that described the school's efforts and context, and researcher reflections after each school visit. The visits took place from January through May 2008. Participants from each of the eight schools included three to six students, three to six teachers, and the principal. In addition, some other members of the staff were also interviewed. These included a superintendent, an assistant principal, a small schools coordinator, several administrative assistants, an educational assistant, two counselors, a program facilitator, and a grant writer and foundation director from the district office.

Interviews were conducted in the form of a conversation. The concept of "interview as conversation" was described by Rubin and Rubin (1995). They advocated that the qualitative researcher can learn a great deal about a person's experience through a guided conversation. In their book on qualitative interviewing, they stated that "the interview, like an ordinary conversation, is invented anew each time it occurs" (p. 7). The open-ended questions in this study focused on the descriptive details of the participants' current experiences in the midst of school reform. In particular, questions were asked related to what their school looks like, feels like, and sounds like on a typical day. Emphasis was placed on story-telling and going into depth more than breadth.

Because of the conversational nature of the interview, several questions were incorporated into the interview, chosen uniquely for each participant and conversation: What are the good things going on for kids at this school? What is making a difference for kids? What are you doing best? What is the most important reason your school is successful and has been recognized for excellence and its accomplishments? What innovations, changes, practices, or structures taking place at this school are most successful and help kids learn and even want to be here? Which ones results in more academic student success? Which ones create a sense of community? And when a program or initiative was identified, the questions were: Who is involved? What did they/do they do? When did it begin? How does it work? Why did you/they choose this innovation or change? What are the strengths? What are the results? Can it be sustained?

All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, resulting in a total of over 60 hours of audio tapes; the data was then transcribed. Comments made by participants were coded, and then examined for prominent and emergent themes. Several products were created from the results of the analysis. This summary report describes the overall findings from an analysis of all schools. In addition, a case study was written for each high school, using the main themes emerging from the data that were specific to that school.

Results

The analysis of the data from this research revealed valuable insight into the culture of successful Oregon schools. When the participants were asked what was working well at their school to

motivate students and result in student achievement, three main themes, each with a number of sub-themes, emerged from the data. In the text that follows, each theme and sub-theme is identified and then followed by a summary of the data to further support and explain the theme. The sub-themes often overlap and are interrelated to each of the main themes.

Theme 1. Best for Kids: *"If it's good for kids, we'll make it happen."*

Schools in this study had one main goal, and that was to do whatever it took to help students be successful. In fact, in one school, all but two of the 13 participants said something to this effect. Their principal modeled this attitude. She said, "If you make your decisions based on what's… best for kids, then you're always going to make the right decisions." In these schools, teachers and administrators were constantly aware of what students needed in order to succeed. If it was best for kids, new programs were started, funding was found (even if it was in the Coke machine), classes were offered, and incentives were given. One principal found that because the school focused on students, his conversations with teachers were "about creating and building and what kids are getting out of it, not about setting up an observation for evaluation. That's much more life-giving than signing off a bunch of purchase orders in a day."

A parallel theme for this section could be "whatever it takes." Teachers and administrators seemed to be willing to implement and *do whatever it takes* to support students' academically and personally. If it was best for kids, they did whatever it takes to make it happen.

Programs / Projects. The list of programs being implemented in these eight schools are too numerous to mention. Many were designed for any student in the school; others were interventions targeted students to at-risk students or those who needed additional academic support. Some included programs that were generic and found in many schools, such as advisory groups, service learning, and senior projects. Some were unique to the region or state, such as Community 101 or the Chalkboard project. Others were nation-wide programs or initiatives, such as ASPIRE or "Breaking Down the Walls." And others were unique to their school, such as "Outlaw Net" (a local internet provider) or days where the whole school participated in activities with a specific focus (such as diversity).

An example of a program that was effective was called *Native Species*. Among other things, students in this program grew native plants, initiated community projects, planted trees in the forest, and took a noxious weed class at the local community college. It was aimed at students who disliked school and who didn't play sports; with the program they had a reason to be at school. Students in the *Native Species* program worked for $8/hour after school at the same time sports teams were practicing. The same behavior and academic expectations applied to these students as those on sports teams. One student said "I want to come to school every day because if I don't, I can't work, and then I don't get paid." Another said, "It's made a difference for me. I probably would have dropped out."

Academic support. As a teacher said, "There's no reason for any kid to fail here." One school in particular had no tracking or remedial courses, but instead there was rigor with support. Every student took *AP English for All*; some students could meet the expectations in one period while other students had an additional period of the material so they too were ready for the next lesson. Students in these schools had numerous opportunities to get the help they needed in order to be successful. For example, one school had a *Math Acceleration Program*. It was a room with

numerous ways to learn math material—computer program, online tutoring, and licensed and classified teachers as well as volunteers available to help. One school showed how nimble they were when they saw a need for academic help for reading. A principal said, "We added our reading program smack in the middle of the year because we saw that 40% of our incoming 9th graders were not at grade level." In addition to these kinds of support, most of the schools had homework help at various times of the day or learning centers staffed with licensed teachers before and after school, as well as all day long.

Multiple pathways to course credit. Schools in this study had a variety of ways for students to get the credits they needed to graduate or to enhance their choices and personalize their learning. Distance education, credit recovery, and proficiency-based credits were ways students could either make up credits or receive credits for something their school didn't offer. Besides AP classes, some schools welcomed visiting community college instructors one or more days a week. Four of the eight schools had an in-house alternative program for students who were at risk for dropping out of school. Identified and invited students participated with a cohort of students for 1-3 periods out of the day, and then integrated into the life of the school for the rest of the day. These students would not have gone to an alternative school across town, but they spoke highly of the value of their participation in their school building. One student said about his program, "*ECMC* (Education Credit Management System) makes a difference for me. I'm the only one in my family to make it to my senior year. This class actually helped me. Next year I plan to go to BMCC [local community college] and take a diesel tech class." Other such programs went by the name of *Students for Success, Flex*, or *Bridges*.

Integration. Each school in this study had examples of integration or team teaching. These included English and Social Studies, Math and Agriculture, Science and Agriculture, and Science and Art.

One completely integrated program that has been in place for seven years is Interdisciplinary Environmental Expedition (IEE). This example of expeditionary learning is designed for juniors, with the opportunity for those who have been through the program to be selected as seniors to serve as interns for the juniors. Students meet content standards by their participation in mountain climbing, rafting, stream bed restoration, and many other activities. IEE meets in half-day blocks and fully integrates science, language arts, and outdoor recreation through numerous outdoor experiences. One of them said IEE is really "a school within a school." The three teachers have a common planning period, and are full of stories of how transformative it has been for students in the program. A sense of place, service, and stewardship are themes taught and integrated into the content areas.

On target with Oregon graduation requirements. The schools in this study were already meeting new graduation requirements, or they were satisfied with their progress toward meeting them. They made comments such as: "We're on top of what is required of us and then some." or "It's not a big deal. We're already working toward this, and have much of it in place."

Each school incorporated the personalized Education Plan and Profile, Career Related Learning Standards, Career Related Learning Experiences, and Extended Application in different ways. However, the structures were deliberate and intentional rather than "hit and miss." Ways to fulfill the requirements and document them were embedded into a variety of programs and/or courses,

including advisories, career-related classes (sometimes one at every level), core classes, ASPIRE, and others.

Next steps—Preparation for college and/or career. Students in this study had both school requirements and opportunities to determine what their next steps might be after high school. Much of this could have been a result of the new diploma requirements in Oregon, but some of them were in place before the requirements changed. Career exploration, job shadows, and internships were activities with value for determining the future. Some schools required students to complete financial aide forms whether they planned to go to college or not. The resulting comments were often "Wow, I didn't know someone would pay for my college work! I guess I might as well try it." Some schools had large scholarship programs, giving to every student who wanted to take courses to prepare for any career, whether it is flagging school, beauty school, community college, or university.

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Theme 2. Community: *"We just care about everyone here."*

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The schools in this study had a real sense of community, both within the school and outside the school into the surrounding community. Students and teachers demonstrated in different ways how they "cared" for and about each other, both physically and emotionally. Value was placed on giving and receiving—giving to others and receiving from others. The "give and take" applied to the community within the four walls of the high school; it also applied to the community at large (neighborhood, town, state, and world).

Culture of care. Teachers and principals modeled the sense of care in numerous ways. One school had several adults who mentioned how they had taken a student or new teacher into their home for a short time period. One teacher said, "We had a senior move in with us mid-year because he had no other options, and he stayed with us until he graduated. That's just how this community is." Another talked about going to school early and staying late four days a week to informally tutor students who wanted his help. An educational assistant said, "We feed 'em, we love 'em, we educate 'em. There's not much they don't get here that they should get at home."

A student felt cared for and supported when she said about the principal, "She is always there to help; her door is always open." One student described how his teacher had delivered homework to his house after an absence. Another student described "care" as an adult concerned about academic achievement. He said, "Administrators take action when people get D's and F's." Another described his principal as one who wouldn't let him drop out when he wanted to. "They said I wouldn't graduate with my class. I almost said, 'Forget it—I'll just go log.' But then Mr. C. helped me realize that … several years down the road I wouldn't have anything. If I don't finish high school, I'd have the same position as the cart guy at Wall Mart for 20 years!"

Small. When participants were asked what works at their school, answers often referred to the benefits of being small. Numbers alone do not create this phenomenon. The school does not have to *be* small, but it has to *feel* small. Apparently, these schools felt small enough to students and faculty for so many of them to mention "small" as being a positive factor. Certainly, teachers in large schools or who are responsible for 180 students a day care just as much as those in small schools, but it may not be as evident. As one teacher in a small school put it, "I think teachers in bigger schools care just as much, but they don't have the opportunity to show that they care. Here we do."

When teachers have fewer students for whom they are responsible, they have greater potential to be aware of how they're doing, know their learning styles, and know their interests. When a group of teachers teach the same students, the faculty can talk about individual students at staff meetings and share insights regarding what each one needs. One teacher said, "Kids are not able to fall through the cracks here." Another said, "When you're small, you know your kids so well, and you just refuse to let them fail."

Students also highlighted "small" as one of the positive characteristics of their school. They said they could talk to their teachers, and their teachers talked to them. As one student said, "A teacher is just a teacher at other schools, but here a teacher talks to you." Another said, "It's awesome because everyone knows everyone else…. It's like one big group of friends instead of cliques. In my old school, you'd get lost."

Student involvement. Many of the successful schools in this study provided numerous opportunities for students to be involved in something beside their high school classes. Students chose to get involved, not only in sports, but also in clubs, speech team, debate team, fund-raising, leadership class, drama, theatre, and dances. Some schools had long lists of active clubs that met after school; these clubs were valued and an integral part of high school life.

Clubs were supported by the administration as long as they had an adult sponsor and a written mission statement. As one principal put it, "The kids have to attach themselves to something besides school to get them through…where they can gain some self-worth. If we shut up the building at the end of the school day, I'm not sure that school alone would work for anybody. It's the extra things that help them [connect to school]."

Culture of sharing and giving beyond themselves. An important element of each of the schools in this study was their focus on others. As one teacher said, "When one hurts, the other hurts. That's how our kids are. If they see a need they try to help out." One school welcomed a rival high school whose building had been flooded in early December to share their building for a full two months. Schedules were changed to accommodate the additional students and teachers. Another school had a fundraiser for a basketball player from their rival school. $2700 was raised from this low-income community to give to a player who had cancer. One another school had both a club and an elective class called "Natural Helpers" where the focus was to determine where needs existed in the community and then service projects or fundraisers were created for them. More students in that school were involved with this effort on a regular basis than in any other kind of activity on campus. Faculty from yet another school organized themselves to deliver meals to the family of one of their students whose mother had just had brain surgery. This same school had a small group of teachers who "quietly" provided money to students who didn't have funds to go to the prom.

In addition to the acts of giving mentioned above, students in these high schools were involved with other kinds of fundraisers, benefits, and service projects through existing efforts such as Key Club, Sparrow Club, Big Brother/Big Sister, Pennies for Leukemia, and Relay for Life. This involvement seemed to permeate the culture of the school, rather than be an add-on for a limited number of students. One of the benefits was the attitude that resulted. A principal said, "We take care of each other and take care of the kids. It's a pretty happy place."

Culture of cooperation and collaboration. Teachers, administrators, and students highlighted ways their school demonstrated a spirit of working together effectively. Participants expressed how they liked each other, appreciated others, shared the load, learned from each other, and felt empowered in their roles. An educational assistant said, "It all goes back to the teachers, custodians, aides, everybody in this whole school working together. If that wasn't the case, it wouldn't work." And a principal said, "We don't spend a lot of time in posturing, [or competing] for my program or territory vs. someone else's. If someone has a chance to add to a program, people get behind it."

Connections with adults. Most schools in this study had opportunities for students to get to know and be supported by adults other than their teachers or staff in the building. Advocacy groups, mentorships, and volunteers all provided safe adults beyond school personnel who might have been perceived as someone who *had* to have a relationship with them. In two cases, a school district superintendent took on the role of a special adult in the life of an at-risk student.

One of the most poignant stories that illustrate the power of a non-staff adult relationship was told by a student named Daymon[1]. He took a Woods class where a retired person volunteered for one period each day to help out in the shop classroom. After Daymon was interviewed about what was working at his school, he was asked if he could have his picture taken. Daymon replied, "Yes, but only with Bill[1] because I am nothing without him."

Connections to the community. Students and staff in the schools being studied cited numerous connections to the community outside their building. They felt supported by the community in ways demonstrated by attendance at events and financial support for benefits and scholarships. One student said, "People in town support us. We're important here. They see us as future leaders rather than that punk kid." Participants saw that the benefits worked both ways. They verbalized that the community was important to the school, and that the school was an important part of the community. In fact, one teacher said she told her students, "While you're having fun on this project, we're also going to learn how to make a difference in our community."

Schools had also built relationships with the community through partnerships and service learning opportunities and events. For some, the connection was deliberate. One principal said, "We do a lot to try and keep the community and the school tied together."

One school in particular saw associations with the community as being one of the most important things they do. When asked what was working at his school, the principal said, "I think it's the exact thing we're trying to do—make as many connections with different groups, organizations, businesses, agencies, community colleges, and universities. That's a real push of ours to try and build as many bridges and partnerships and networks [as we can]. We've done a really good job of getting outside our little box of [this high school] and making this a bigger broader place."

Community partnerships. Some of the schools in this study had extensive partnerships with businesses, agencies, and institutions in the community. However, these partnerships were guided by the vision and school goals rather than convenience. Schools are more often on the receiving end of a partnership than a true give and take. But one school in particular resisted the typical relationship: "The typical partnership is when a school shows up, a business writes a check, and everyone is happy. But we've progressed beyond that model. Our conversations are unique. We

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[1] Pseudonym

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are brainstorming possibilities of where we can align ourselves for the benefit of both parties because we are both interested in how to recruit and retain skilled workers. For example, Bradford Lumber Mill[i] sits right next to us. Both in philosophy and geographically we're together. So let's brainstorm together. What about a joint Human Resources Department? What about combining some worker training classes? What about …?"

Students in these schools were frequently involved with community partners, often as part of a class. One school collected data in their science classes at locations such as a local creamery, a state park, an estuary, or dairy farm. The students were providing an important service for these businesses, yet were learning valuable academic lessons, career information, and social skills or life skills at the same time. Students at another school were making Breedlove guitars, in partnership with a business from out of state. Yet another school created kiosks of information on invasive species for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. Schools in this study had examples of many more meaningful projects working with adults and businesses in the community. Students verbalized how these experiences created relevance in their classes.

<center>Theme 3. Servant Leadership: *"We're in this as a team."*</center>

A common theme in the schools studied was the style and attitude of the principal, that of servant leadership. In speaking of her teachers, one principal said, "I'm a service administrator. If I take care of you, you'll take care of my kids. My thing is, 'What can I do for you today?' It's really important to me … to make sure [teachers] have what they need."

Instructional Leadership. Teachers and students expressed appreciation for their principal's energy, accessibility, relationships with students, and willingness to risk and make changes. They also appreciated the emphasis on students rather than on management. As one teacher said, "It's important for me to work in a school where the administration's focus is on student success rather than primarily meeting state standards." Teachers appreciated a spirit of collaboration. One expressed how this demonstrated itself at staff meetings, "Nancy[2] plans the agenda, but she puts teachers up front rather than doing it all by herself. And any decision made in the last 3-5 years has been supported by the entire staff….It doesn't feel 'top down.' It's collective information and collective work."

Principals' comments on their effectiveness as a leader were spoken out of humility. In response to a comment that teachers in the building identified her as one of the reasons this school was successful, she said, "But it's not about me. THEY inspire ME!" Another said, "I didn't start all this. I walked into a good situation. My job is just to keep it going."

Persons of Influence. In each successful school, there was at least one person who seemed to have great influence over other personnel, as well as what happened at the school and in the community. These persons represented a variety of roles. Sometimes it was the principal. One time it was someone from the district office whose goal it was to align the district's vision with the community. He did this by successfully creating numerous opportunities for students and teachers to partner with the community through grants he wrote. In another school, it was a new teacher who came most recently from the business world with creative ideas; she energized the whole staff.

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[2] Pseudonym

In one school, the "person of influence" was an administrative assistant who had a long history with the school. This secretary told how last year in the middle of the winter, students were in the "doldrums." She said she came up with the idea of rewards (i.e., no homework pass, hour out of school, milkshake coupon) for students who didn't get any F's in the next grading period. This secretary introduced her project at an assembly, and even though it was a small incentive, most students took it seriously; she was confident it had made a difference.

Persons of influence were identified as such ("There are two individuals who make this possible") by those interviewed. They were seen as creative, out-of-the-box thinkers ("I can't believe the neat things they are talking about that will probably happen"). They were seen as risk-takers ("Let's try it"). According to others in the building, the folks who were influential had an energy that was infectious. And if the person of influence was a proponent of a program or initiative, they believed in it and made it happen.

Vision. Successful schools knew their mission and vision, and they let it guide their work. When asked what was working at the high school, one district office administrator, whose job it is to provide grant funding, put it this way, "It's not a one-prong attack. It's not about money, improving teaching, or improving programs. I hope you're hearing that we're doing good things in these areas, but more than that, I hope you hear that we have a school board, a superintendent, and administrators with a collective vision and a trust between each other. That's the power. So the vision is far more important than the money. The money will come."

Teachers were aware of the importance of a collaborative vision. As one stated, "Without leadership and a vision…you're really running against an uphill battle." One district was very deliberately aligning course work at the high school with the vision statement. That included Oregon graduation requirements, resources ("Our vision guides our resource attainment."), school structures, professional development, and community partnerships.

Professional development. A common theme in the successful high schools was that teachers spoke of their professional development as important, helpful, and satisfying. Before reform took place, several of the schools had deliberately chosen to make changes in their school. In order to create an atmosphere where each person had a voice in the change process, schools sent teams of teachers on visitations, sometimes all over the United States. Another faculty studied *Breaking Ranks II* together, resulting in a desire to collaborate and determine what would make their school work better for students.

Numerous teachers mentioned workshops they had attended in other areas of the state, as well as out of state. Sometimes teachers initiated their involvement, and other times the principal offered for several teachers to attend. Examples of workshops attended related to professional learning communities, reading across the curriculum, leadership conferences, astronomy/science curriculum, forestry research, and Shakespearean plays for English teachers.

Several teachers talked about how their own professional development was being enhanced by teaching other teachers -- in their own schools, in other schools, and at conferences. It was one principal's regular practice to ask a teacher to share their expertise, knowledge, or experience at staff meetings. Teachers in another large school that was divided into small schools had the advantage of visiting and learning from successful practices in other small schools in their building. When teachers teach teachers, it benefits the facilitator as much as the workshop participants. One

district office administrator said, "Teachers have chances to be leaders, gain professional experience, earn recognition, and earn stipends."

Conclusions

Oregon high schools in this research study demonstrated commonalities in three main areas: (1) what's best for kids, (2) sense of community, and (3) servant / instructional leadership. The descriptions and explanations outlined in this paper illustrate many of the characteristics of successful schools across the country and described in the literature review of this paper: personalization, relationships, relevance, rigor, voice, integration, differentiation, and alignment. Many of the research results fall into the category of artistic (versus scientific) school improvement (McREL, 2006). In addition, they imply an asset model (instead of a deficit model), as encouraged by Biffle (2008).

The results of this study are simple, yet profound. The following statements can be made, based on the research findings:

1. There <u>are</u> some common practices that are working in high schools from which we can learn. These actions positively affect the culture of the school and student success.
2. If it works for the students, we need to find a way to make it happen.
3. Schools should utilize multiple methods, strategies, programs, and projects so each student:
   - Feels and is cared for
   - Is happily involved in activities at school
   - Has the academic support needed to be successful.
4. Students will be prepared for "next steps" in life if schools give them guidance, tools, and experiences.
5. A sense of community and a culture of care benefits those both inside and outside the school, as well as teaches life skills.
6. The people (principals, teachers, adults) in a student's life can positively influence their school experience.

Implications

The analysis of the data for this research incorporated anecdotal narratives from the perspectives of Oregon students, teachers, and principals about what was working at their high school. In their own words, they told a story that can inform and influence the practice of other educators: current teachers, current principals, district office administrators, future high school teachers, and teacher educators. The resultant stories describe what student success and engagement looks like and feels like for students and staff.

The stories told by the participants will be of interest to current teachers and principals as they design reform and innovative practices in their own schools. The stories identify models and practices that can initiate conversations on what works for students and teachers in other schools. They can create dialogue about how to make it work in their own setting. The characteristics of success can also be affirming, assuring teachers and principals that the efforts being made are in the best interest of students.

In addition, the stories from this research can be examples of ways that Oregon high schools are meeting the new graduation requirements, adopted by the State Board of Education in January 2007. The schools in this study were each implementing the requirements in different ways, but they were all making progress on implementing structures and systems that would support the work students need to do to graduate and be prepared for life after high school.

As teachers and administrators consider how to do their job best, insights from the schools in this study can inform their practice. These schools are creating "pockets of greatness," a phrase used by Jim Collins in his book <u>Good to Great</u> (2001). When the stories from these schools are told, teachers and administrators will be inspired to embrace, promote, and initiate effective change in their high schools for the purpose of making high school better for adolescents.

Questions to ponder

No two schools are ever alike, nor will the same strategies, practices, models, and programs work in every school. So it is important to reflect on what we know and apply it to our own situation. The questions that follow are an attempt to help the reader consider how this study might be most applicable to her or his own school:

- What of the results of this research resonates with your experience? What are the similarities? What are the differences? What other successful practices can be added to the list?
- What can we learn from the students, teachers, and administrators whose voices we heard?
- How can we use this information, or what does it mean to each person in your own teaching or administrative position? What does it tell us about how we do our jobs as educators? How can we apply what we know is working?
- What other kinds of research should be done in high schools to best understand how to make the changes and innovations that will be most beneficial to student learning and engagement in school?

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