

Chapter II

Student/Community Profile – Overall Summary from Analysis of Profile Data

Downtown High School's student performance data demonstrates that DHS is moving in a positive direction, as evidenced by increased attendance, improved CAHSEE passage rates, a consistently low suspension and expulsion rate, and an increasing number of response-to-literature essays completed. In addition, analysis of the graduating classes of 2007, 2008, and 2009 indicate that, on average, approximately 75% of students who have completed their high school graduation course of study have passed the CAHSEE. Data provided through Student Clearing House indicate that from 2002 to 2008, almost 50% of graduates enrolled in post-secondary education. Even though less than one third of graduates from 2008 went on to college, at least 75% of those students were still enrolled one year later.

DHS has identified three critical academic needs, supported by data analysis as follows:

1. Develop school-wide structures to assess student progress toward mastery of Downtown High School's Critical Academic Skills.

Due to our unanimous belief in the weakness of the STAR/CST data and our own witnessing of our students' intentional underperforming on those examinations, we have embarked on a long-term effort at generating our own assessments and data, rooted in a deep understanding of the importance of meaningful curriculum and the belief that project-based learning and project-based assessments are the vehicles that best allow our students to be successful.

Many traditional schools use STAR and CST scores to inform their decision-making processes. However, the decision-making bodies at DHS have come to regard the data provided by these assessments as inauthentic and largely inapplicable to our students. All of the students who attend DHS do so for credit recovery purposes, and it is credit recovery, not test scores, that motivates them. This simple fact is evidenced by the inconsistency between the test scores and academic performance of students who consistently do well in their day-to-day schooling. It is not uncommon for students who are on the honor-roll at DHS to score far below basic on the STAR/CST examinations.

This does not mean that the curriculum delivered to students is sub-standard or lacking in rigor, quite the opposite. The majority of the faculty of DHS has worked very hard, for more than a decade, at consistently raising the academic bar and at dispelling the preconceptions and myths about what exactly a continuation school education means. Today, projects deliver an immersive, balanced and expansive curricular experiences for their students that reflect cross curricular performance-based learning goals more than they do the standardized requirements for particular subjects. The faculty has also made a conscious decision to focus on depth rather than breadth. Students are expected to understand project content in significant depth, rather than memorizing and recalling a broad range of information simply because those things may be on the yearly state-mandated examinations.

Additionally, many of the skills taught to students at DHS are not easily assessed by the existing standardized testing regimen. Art, being a central component to every project at DHS, is but one subject area that is conspicuously absent from any STAR/CST examinations. Social justice, ethnic studies, and/or people's histories are central the central organizing principles within each project's humanities curricula. A large portion of the science taught at DHS is place-based science, reflecting the environmental and scientific issues that impact local communities. Mathematics instruction is highly integrated, rather than compartmentalized into narrow subject areas. All of these particular curricular emphases, which are based upon decisions that have served our students well (as evidenced by our graduation rates and CAHSEE pass rates), are not readily reflected or even assessed by the STAR/CST testing structure. Our students are clearly motivated to pass the CAHSEE, and most do. They are not motivated to do well on tests that do not reflect what they are learning in their classes or that have no particular consequence for their future. Lastly, DHS is not assigned an AYP or API that has any consequences for its students or staff. This reality does not serve to motivate staff to teach traditional curriculum that is assessed by the statewide examinations; rather, it motivates staff to create curriculum that is tailor-made to their own passions and the interests and needs of their students.

Within that context, we do understand the need to examine meaningful data with which we can better understand students' academic achievement and challenges, as well as better assess the efficacy of curriculum and instruction at our school. Currently, much of our data is anecdotal. Though there is a belief that qualitative or anecdotal data is less reliable than supposedly "objective" data, we have been able to utilize anecdotal data to effectively move our academic program forward. There did not exist specific quantitative data that told us our students had significant deficits in their writing abilities. What we did have was a common experience, as teachers, which showed us that our students struggled mightily when it came to writing structured analytical pieces, including the essay portion of the CAHSEE. Out of this realization came our first, and most successful school-wide academic initiative: the Literacy Initiative. This initiative has seen a dramatic increase in the number of students who, at the very minimum, engage in a structured writing process that results in some specific, if not overall, areas of writing growth. The data our writing rubric has provided is not yet comprehensive enough to demonstrate that students are making significant jumps across it, but it does show consistent growth. Though this data may seem insignificant to the outsider, the teachers themselves can attest to the growth many of their students have shown in their writing and analytical abilities. If a student has never, at any level of schooling, written any kind of substantial piece of work, nor revised or edited it, the mere fact of completing the writing process is an area of significant growth and achievement, one that is not easily quantifiable or comparable.

When we examine our CAHSEE data, we are confident that there has been a significant impact on the ELA test scores because of the formalization of the writing process. We have also met or exceeded all district averages for the ELA CAHSEE, particularly pass rates by our EDY African American and EDY Latino graduating students. These are the students who have gone through the writing process and have been evaluated using our rubrics; clearly, they are having success at rates far greater than their peers in the comprehensive schools across the district.

Because we recognize that generating meaningful data based on authentic assessments is important way to identify necessary instructional initiatives and demonstrate student

achievement, we are currently applying the lessons that the Literacy Initiative has taught us to other Downtown High School Critical Academic Skills. Critical Academic Skills were developed to ensure that students grow academically as a result of their engagement in our project-based program. The skills are correlated with the expected school-wide learning results. A wide variety of authentic assessments exist, individual to each project at DHS. It is time for us to develop a school-wide structure to assess student progress in all Critical Academic Skills so that students can demonstrate they have mastered DHS's academic standards upon graduation.

For example, the semester end school-wide exhibition can provide a forum for students to demonstrate their mastery of academic content that is fully integrated, makes real world connections, and reflects critical thinking, analytical skills and synthesis of ideas. While we currently employ a school-wide rubric to assess the quality of each project's exhibition, there is no assessment tool as yet to gauge individual student achievement. The exhibition rubric facilitates peer faculty feedback that is valuable in improving curriculum integration and instruction to better support students in academic achievement and in presentation skills. Our next step is to development an assessment tool that will help us identify the extent to which exhibition performance represents each student's mastery of project content and skills.

Similarly, each of our Critical Academic Skills can be supported by a school-wide assessment. Our goal in identifying this Critical Academic Need is to develop the tools that will allow students to demonstrate mastery of the performance standards we embed in every project, as well as allow us to analyze student progress toward those goals and use that data to inform our practice.

2. Build upon family and community partnerships to support students' personal well being and academic success at Downtown High School and beyond.

Attendance data is driving all support services at DHS. Understanding our population and harnessing all available resources, we feel that it is realistic and attainable to have 50% of the students attend school 80% or more of the time. Last school year, DHS made such significant gains in attendance that it was given special recognition by the district. Attendance data has been central to our efforts, allowing us to target specific students and student groups for direct intervention.

The systematizing of these efforts is represented through the Prevention and Intervention program (PI). PI was conceptualized by the school administration during the 2008-2009 school year, and is currently undergoing its first year of implementation. PI coordinates a variety of service providers and connects them with students who are in most need of support, including the services provided through the Wellness Center, the ExCEL after school program, and case management provided by community based organizations. PI classifies students into one of three attendance-based tiers:

Risk Level I—0-39%: Approximately 28% (on average) of the students at DHS are in this range. These students are all habitual truants, in serious drop-out danger, and do not typically access support services at school to the degree necessary to develop an individual support plan.

Risk Level II—40%-79%: Approximately 38% (on average) of the students at DHS are in this range. These students tend to have fluctuating attendance, they more willingly access Wellness services, and they have a commitment to graduation. However, many lack the self-discipline to meet minimum requirements. Some fall into this range due to family issues, health problems, or the stress and distraction resulting from living in a chaotic environment.

Risk Level III—80%-100%: Approximately 34% (on average) of the students at DHS are in this range. In general, these students have made the commitment to graduate, access Wellness, ExCEL programs, attend night school, and have the self-discipline to exceed DHS minimum requirements.

Though PI is still being developed and refined, the coordination of services it facilitates has led to steady improvement in moving many of the students from the first and second tiers into higher tiers, closer to the 80% mark. Wellness data indicates that the majority of our students do, in fact, access available resources. Our goal in creating PI to coordinate these resources—mentoring and connections with caring adults—is, of course, to increase student success in school and beyond, whether in the community, in the workplace, or in college. In addition, every year, we transition more students out of DHS than we graduate. These students still require support. Fulfilling this Critical Academic Need means building capacity with our community partners so that every student has a personal connection with an adult who can be a resource to students both at DHS and afterward.

3. Leverage existing collaborative support structures to further improve project-based curriculum.

DHS is challenging itself in every area of the organization to improve collaboration and reduce working in isolation. In the areas of teaching, learning, and staff retention, a crucial element is the development of project-based curriculum. Teachers create thematic, self-contained, and integrated curriculum that incorporates hands-on experiences with real world connections. This is a time-consuming process that takes several years of honing and practice.

DHS is the personification of the achievement gap; we are a school for “unsuccessful” students that serves primarily African American and Latino students in a district where the those percentages have been decreasing. This reality necessitates that the faculty of DHS design curriculum that engages students who have been turned off from school. In order for this to happen, the teachers of the school agreed to embark on a process that will best address both the need to re-engage our students in school and the need to address the academic deficits that may be present due to prolonged prior disengagement with education. Developing innovative, project-based curriculum is a constant

challenge. We must therefore offer substantive support for new teachers who are developing and implementing brand new curriculum, as well as established teachers who are willing to develop new projects or improve their teaching practice by revising established projects.

There are several specific structures that the faculty of DHS regularly engages in, with the specific goal of improving project-based curriculum. The first and most expansive of these structures is our weekly professional development. Each week, the faculty and relevant support staff plan, develop and participate in targeted professional development. The topics of these sessions have ranged from Literacy implementation and support, strategies for supporting children with learning differences, mathematics integration, scientific inquiry, data management, effective communication, personal and student mental health and, most importantly, reflection on teacher and support staff practice. Other forms of professional development that have been implemented include the school wide retreat, which allowed teachers to have intensive collaborative time to plan projects and also added a component of peer feedback from all staff on each project's curriculum plan. Additionally, peer observations and sharing of video recorded instruction allow teachers to observe teaching practice and give feedback to both new and experienced teachers.

The second system that has proven to be invaluable in supporting the development of project-based learning is the allowance of common planning time among projects. Project teachers are encouraged to meet daily with their partners to make sure that curriculum is integrated and to refine project curriculum from day to day.

This year, with four new teachers, three new projects, and one new project partnership, leveraging existing support structures to develop and improve project-based curriculum is a high priority. The New Teacher Cohort was also established this year to give teachers new to DHS the support they need to produce curricula in line with the Core Tenets and Critical Academic Skills. The group met once a week in Fall 2009, to discuss topics such as grading and credit policies, backwards planning, and exhibition expectations.

This Critical Academic Need will facilitate the institutionalization of those support structures that best help teachers refine their practice so that they continually improve their curriculum. We expect our projects to continue to improve.

The following is a list of questions that have arisen as a result of our data analysis:

- Given the transient nature of our population, what quantitative data is meaningful for analysis at our school?
- Given the project-based model at our school, how do we measure academic growth within and across projects?
- How do we make sure that the services that we provide to our students actually support their personal well-being and academic success at Downtown High School and beyond?

These questions will guide us as we develop our Action Plan and work to raise the bar yet again for our school.