

Culture Matters: The Importance of School Culture in Creating Postsecondary Success

Raymond John 18 October 2016

Summary

The moment you step foot inside a school you can get a sense of whether or not you want to be there. But too often schools face challenges that inadvertently produce cultures where students expect less than what their potential demands of them. 12+ partners with high schools in underserved communities to help redefine what is possible for their students. Evidence-based and field tested, our mission is to foster learning environments that empower students towards a successful post-secondary pathway.

Culture Matters

The moment you step foot inside a school you can get a sense of whether or not you want to be there. Culture is pervasive. It lays a foundation that uniquely shapes the identities and mindsets of the students exposed to it. But too often schools face challenges that inadvertently produce cultures where students expect less than what

their potential demands of them. We're here to change that.

12+ partners with high schools in underserved communities to help redefine what is possible for their students. Evidence-based and field tested, our mission is to foster learning environments that empower students towards a successful post-secondary pathway. Our innovative, school-based PLUS Centers supply the tools and resources, while our teams of dedicated Fellows provide the individualized support to help every student succeed—not just a select few. Most importantly, everything we do, from celebrating student achievement to our research-driven programming, is geared to build a culture that incites sustainable, school-wide change.

The Issue

Every year more students across the city of Philadelphia express their desire to attend college, yet according to a joint study by the National Student Clearinghouse and the Philadelphia School District, only 10 percent of public school students who entered 9th grade went on to earn two- or four-year college degrees within a 10-year span.¹ The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce announced in 2012 that 65 percent of U.S. jobs—nearly two-thirds—will require some form of postsecondary education by 2020.² As a result, the lack of college attainment in Philadelphia severely limits students' long-term economic and social prospects, in

addition to the overall economy and growth of the city.

The problem goes beyond a lack of content knowledge and academic proficiency. Unlike their more affluent peers, students from underserved communities often attend high schools that suffer from an implementation gap—an inability to address the individual needs of the student body due to a lack of resources and human capital. As a result, students not only struggle to pursue education beyond 12th grade, they often fail to graduate at all. Faculties are understaffed and school counselors, who are often tasked with the responsibility of helping students navigate through the college application process, are stretched thin because of their heavy caseloads and the multitude of other responsibilities that come with serving a low-income school. A new survey of young adults conducted by the Public Agenda for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation confirms that students themselves believe the system is failing and high school guidance offices struggle to address the needs of their student bodies.³ The American Counseling Association recommends a ratio of one counselor for every 250 students. In 2012, the Philadelphia School District employed 384 full-time counselors for the entire district. In 2013, that number decreased dramatically to 218 full-time counselors for 131,463 students—an overall ratio of one counselor for every 603 students.⁴

Without the proper support systems and resources, schools unintentionally undermine their students' overall

commitment and mindset towards education. A message develops that not only do their peers struggle to find success beyond high school, but also there are few adults to help them even get there to begin with. And when schools become defined by their lack of post-secondary success, students struggle to connect their present education to future goals, creating a perpetuating, negative culture of low expectations and disengagement. This calls for an active agent that distills a powerful counter-narrative, working to improve the learning environment and support all students on an individualized level.

Weaknesses in Current Solutions

In an attempt to increase college readiness and success, numerous reform efforts have focused heavily on improving content knowledge and core academic skills while implementing more rigorous coursework. While undeniably important, in the absence of an existing school culture where students see an obvious link between their present education and future success, students struggle to take their education seriously.⁵ It is a challenge to improve academics and motivate students when more than half of their peers do not pursue a meaningful post-secondary pathway—as is the case in Philadelphia public high schools. Instead, in these situations, increased rigor and difficulty can actually result in students disengaging from their studies entirely.

Furthermore, many existing college access providers only serve a specific subset of students, either those who are academically high-achieving or, at the very least, self-selected. Although these organizations certainly achieve success on a case-by-case basis, little is done to address the underlying issues that exist within the schools their students come from. These schools remain places defined by their low expectations and poor outcomes. By focusing their efforts only on particular cohorts, providers are limited in their ability to produce any long-term sustainable impact across the city.

Culture First

The effectiveness of a school is often determined by a complex array of contributing factors and influences, but research has shown that one of the greatest and most consistent predictors for a student's post-secondary success is whether or not he/she has attended a school with a strong college-going culture.⁶ These schools successfully create learning environments where students understand the value of higher education, connect present performance to future goals, believe a post-secondary education is a tangible reality, and receive consistent individualized support. Even further, schools characterized with these aspects averaged fewer absences and failures, as well as higher grades than those without a strong college-going culture. Unfortunately, schools in underserved communities face numerous

challenges that prevent them from creating these kinds of conditions. That's where we come in.

12+ partners with high schools to build positive, sustainable cultures that inspire academic achievement and empower students to pursue education beyond 12th grade. Present from the beginning of the school day to hours after it ends, our team is committed to providing our school partners the help needed to serve every student's educational needs while creating a powerful movement that redefines what is possible.

Through our evidence-based, whole-school approach, we aim to transform school culture by focusing on three key areas: 1) the environment, 2) the human capital, and 3) the message.^{7,8}

The environment: PLUS CENTERS

Built within the walls of our partner schools, PLUS Centers act as hubs of college, career, and academic resources previously unavailable to the student body. The Center is a space where students can safely explore their interests and receive the help needed to achieve their present and post-secondary goals. Each one is outfitted with a fresh and engaging design intended to highlight student achievement, promote learning and create a welcoming environment. This positive environment serves as a catalyst for the climate we aim to promote throughout the rest of the school, so that every student develops a

shared sense of belonging and support.

The human capital: FELLOWS INITIATIVE

Strong school cultures require equally strong systems of support. That's where the Fellows come in. Fellows are highly trained, recent college graduates who provide individualized support to every student—not just a select few. They represent a workforce that can be deployed cost-effectively and quickly into a setting where their youth and energy can best be capitalized, and they supply under-resourced schools the human capital required to address their students' unique post-secondary, academic, and social needs.

Fellows act as full-time advisors, tutors, and mentors, with the goal of equipping students with the information and skills to become successful learners. When it comes to applying to college, Fellows provide high-level, dedicated support ranging from identifying best-fit schools to obtaining financial aid, in order to ensure successful enrollment. Above all, Fellows strive to build meaningful relationships that place the well-being of the student as the highest priority. By developing relational trust, a community where students feel supported and empowered to succeed academically is steadily fostered.

The message: BELIEVE | ACT | INSPIRE

Emerging research has shown that an individual's mindset—the beliefs and perception of oneself in relation to

learning—has substantial effects on school performance, especially amongst minority students.⁹ As a result, through every 12+ workshop, advising session, or program activity, our team works to help students develop strong, positive mindsets about who they are and what they are capable of achieving. We direct our students along a pathway where they first identify their strengths and learn to BELIEVE in themselves, then ACT on those beliefs by pursuing their goals with the support of 12+ staff. Finally, we strive to raise student leaders who INSPIRE others to follow in their footsteps.

Impact and Growth

Through our evidence-based, innovative approach, we have already helped improve the college-bound rate at our partner schools (serving >1500 students annually) from an average of 13 percent to over 80 percent in just a few short years, a remarkable development that has allowed our schools to shed their images as chronically underperforming neighborhood schools. When students witness their peers—who have come from similar backgrounds—successfully pursue a post-secondary education, they begin to see college as a tangible possibility and develop a newfound respect for their present education. As a result, attendance and graduation rates have improved, grade point averages have increased, and students have stated a greater sense of belonging within their respective schools. All of these

components have steadily cultivated a positive culture that builds upon itself every year, and grows in its influence and impact towards students.

12+ is currently supported through a diverse funding stream comprised of grassroots donors, board members, philanthropists, corporate sponsors, and foundations. We are also an approved vendor to the Philadelphia School District, which permits us to receive federal, Title I funding from our partner schools. This past fall, we secured a unique partnership with a for-profit, private education company that has committed to donating a percentage of its gross revenue exclusively to 12+ every year. This will provide 12+ a consistent source of annual revenue with which to fund our operations. Our hope is that with increased support from both the local, state and federal government levels we may be able to scale our operations into all neighborhood schools in Philadelphia.

Our model is designed to be financially sustainable since, 1) launching each PLUS Center is a low-cost, non-recurring expense that requires little ongoing maintenance (e.g., no utilities, no rent), 2) Fellows represent a talented and effective team of individuals that can be deployed inexpensively and efficiently into schools, and 3) focusing on building sustainable college-going cultures should gradually remove the need for 12+ staff as schools build upon postsecondary successes every year.

References

1. Dale Mezzacappa, "New Date: Only 10% of Philly Students Earn a Degree," The Notebook (October 1, 2010), accessed October 17, 2016, <http://thenotebook.org/articles/2010/10/01/new-data-only-10-of-philly-students-earn-a-degree>.

2. Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020," Georgetown Public Policy Institute, accessed October 17, 2016, https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.ES_.Web_.pdf.

3. Jean Johnson, Jon Rochkind, Amber N. Ott, and Samantha DuPont, "Can I Get a Little Advice Here? How an Overstretched High School Guidance System Is Undermining Students' College Aspirations," Public Agenda (2010), accessed October 17, 2017, <http://www.publicagenda.org/files/can-i-get-a-little-advice-here.pdf>.

4. Kevin McCrory, "Philly School Counselors Struggle to Help Seniors with College Plans," Newsworks (December 23, 2013), accessed October 16, 2016, <http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/local/the-latest/63149-philly-school-counselors-struggle-to-help-seniors-with-college-plans>.

5. Harry J. Holzer and Demetra Nightingale, "Strong Students, Strong Workers: Models for Student Success

through Workforce Development and Community College Partnerships," Center for American Progress (December 9, 2009), accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2009/12/09/7059/strong-students-strong-workers/>.

6. Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Vanessa Coca, Eliza Moeller, Karen Roddie, Jamiliyah Gilliam, and Desmond Patton, "From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College," University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (March 2008), accessed October 17, 2016, <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/high-school-future-potholes-road-college>.

7. "Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do," Institute of Education Sciences (September 2009), accessed October 17, 2016, <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/11>.

8. Jennifer Ramsey, "Creating a High School Culture of College-Going: The Case of Washington State Achievers," Institute for Higher Education Policy (June 2008), accessed October 17, 2016, <http://www.ihep.org/research/publications/creating-high-school-culture-college-going-case-washington-state-achievers>.

9. Camille A. Farrington, Melissa Roderick, Elaine Allensworth, Jenny Nagaoka, Tasha Seneca Keyes, David W. Johnson, and Nicole O. Beechum, "Teaching

Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review (June 2012), accessed October 17, 2016,

<https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Noncognitive%20Report.pdf>.

Author Bio

Raymond John is the Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder of 12+, an education non-profit dedicated to increasing educational equity by building school cultures that inspire academic achievement and empower students to pursue education beyond the 12th grade.

Prior to starting 12+, Raymond graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2008, pre-med, with a degree in Psychology. He then moved to New York to conduct clinical research at the Hospital for Special Surgery as a precursor to pursuing a career in medicine. During this time, Raymond also worked at the Bowery Residents Committee, a non-profit dedicated to ending homelessness in the city. It was through this experience that he developed the conviction to redirect his career path and focus his efforts to addressing poverty within underserved communities. His steadfast belief in education as a means to break the ongoing cycle of poverty and his heart for Philadelphia brought him back to the city of

his alma mater to partner with his close friends and start 12+ in 2012. Since then, 12+ has grown to serve over 1500 students annually, and its work has been featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Fox News, Generocity, the Philadelphia Citizen, and more.

In 2012 and 2014, Raymond was bestowed the Philadelphia City Council Citation of Honor and Recognition for his work in Education. In 2013, he was awarded the Philadelphia Supporting Entrepreneurship in Education Grant and was selected as a Fellow for the 2014 Philadelphia Social Innovations Lab. In 2014, Raymond was also selected as a Fellow for USC's Network of Korean American Leaders.