High Expectations

Academic Expectations

Establishing high academic expectation is both a mindset and a series of actions. Teachers must believe that poor urban children can learn and achieve the necessary knowledge to enter college. Parents, who have never had family members go to college, must see that this is possible for their children, and students must buy into the dream of going to college. This mind set, however, is not enough. Curriculum and instruction must be robust, providing the academic knowledge that makes the dream attractive. High expectations are expected at each of the five schools and expressed in different ways although there may be similarities they are implemented and experienced differently.

As a non-sectarian, non-profit, community-based, K4-8 charter school Bruce Guadalupe Community School (BGCS) was created to foster high expectations and excellence for all of its students. These high expectations begin early. The lead administrator of the elementary school principal said their mission is to “get kids to the best high schools, get kids to have success in the high schools and move kids to the middle class.” This was stated similarly by the middle school principal who said, “Our overall mission is to make sure our kids are productive members of the middle class or upper class. That’s going to come through our putting them in the best high schools, make sure they’re going off to college, get their degree and join a very productive workforce.”

The Curriculum Coordinator/Assistant Principal is formally responsible for BGCS’ curriculum and instructional processes and, for example, she wants all teachers to write on the board the learning target(s) for that day or class. They are to take the form of “Students will be able to . . .” The learning targets should also be included in lesson plans that are submitted to the curriculum coordinator each week by email. A power point summary used by the curriculum coordinator ended with a slide that said, “Focus is student performance how to improve our instruction to meet the needs of the students!” The middle school dean of students felt similarly saying, “Push them and support them to be successful in education and character – building children to be future leaders.”

At Milwaukee College Preparatory School (MCPS) the emphasis on being prepared for college begins the moment one enters the building. Each room is named for a college, often the institution that the teacher graduated from. The colleges that alumni have or are attending are prominently posted. Administrators and teachers constantly talk about college entrance and requirements. Students learn college cheer songs and information about the college. Seventh and eighth graders visit colleges in the local area and as far away as Washington, D.C.

Similarly at the Young Leaders Academy, teachers post their highest University degree and/or certificate achievement at the doorway to their classroom and throughout the year they discuss the importance of attending college and guests are encouraged to discuss their college experience as a means of providing students inspiration to learn more about a variety of colleges. Seventh and eighth grade students are also given the opportunity to
visit Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as local area colleges and universities.

The MCPS curriculum is challenging. The curriculum is advanced one grade for all students. In other words, students in grade one receive instruction at the grade two level, etc. The expectation, for example, is that all four-year old kindergarten students will begin to read. MCPS leaders state that this is done “with hard work and love.” Balancing high expectations with compassion and nurturing helps shape the whole student.

At MCPS each lesson begins with the “end in mind.” Teachers post the expectations for each lesson so that students understand what they are expected to accomplish and they use a variety of techniques to ensure that all students are positively engaged with the lesson. Teachers insist on an answer being correct and a partially correct answer is not accepted. Rather discussion and analysis continue until the fully correct answer is obtained. This ensures understanding of concepts and reduces misconceptions on the part of students.

The hard work necessary to obtain mastery is constantly emphasized. The mantra, “The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary” is heard daily. Students are expected to both ask and answer questions in full sentences. Likewise, they are encouraged to explore multiple paths of understanding.

Finally, data regarding student achievements is reviewed weekly. If a student is having difficulty, it is the teacher’s responsibility to help the student overcome the difficulty. If the teacher is not successful it is his/her responsibility to solicit help through the academic dean to meet the student needs.

At Seeds of Heath a five-year academic plan was developed and during the alignment process the focus for teaching became preparing students academically to be successful in life. This was to be accomplished through a traditionally based academic program presented in a concept-based approach. The focus has been to improve basic reading and mathematics scores. The addition of student monitoring through ongoing assessments became a significant piece of the planning process.

The organization of a data management system and structuring staff meetings to analyze student data provided the means to adjust instruction to student needs. The end products were the development of academic support programs such as the pull out reading and math for either individuals or small groups, direct instruction, increased vocabulary skills, bilingual support, after school tutoring, and extended summer school.

The Seeds of Health Staff utilized the MAP testing format to evaluate student performance and as a means for their improvement. Data decision making confirmed what working and revealed gaps in a student’s learning. Team meetings were held after each MAP testing session the fall, in January and in spring. Individual student scores and whole-class trends were discussed to determine what meaningful data was. The first round of testing provided information so that teachers could develop intervention
strategies, the mid-year session established growth and progress towards established expectations. The classroom work and the assessments helped to bring reality to the continuous improvements needed for students. Further development in the assessment process allowed for individualized support and instruction for all students who needed something different in their educational plan. This informed decision-making tool supported teachers in a way that they can meet challenges and provide interventions for each individual student.

The defining elements of Woodlands are based in understanding the hallmarks of its programming and its social expectations which are built around RESPECT:

Respect for learning
Education that is integrated
Set up life-long learning
Pride in diversity
Excellence
Creative discovery
Time for living

Students and staff at Woodlands are encouraged to understand their strengths and weaknesses within the teaching-learning paradigm. Students in the upper grades, seventh and eighth, can openly express their learning styles and teachers respectfully acknowledge the teaching strengths by informally allowing the person best at “x” to assume the leadership for that subject within their team. High expectations supported by the efforts of teachers to facilitate students for both social and academic accomplishment. Expectations when met are rewarded to both student and teacher as one validates the other.

Woodland’s leadership consistently demonstrates high expectations for students by demonstrating knowledge of students and commitment to doing what it takes to facilitate a student’s learning. Adding to this is the expectation that infusing new elements into the educational program with both an expectation of the benefits and allowing staff to enter into the process of implementing a new strategy or approach to create teacher ownership. This was evidenced in the implementation of the MAP assessment initiative, which at this time is wholly owned by the teachers and the bringing of Character Education into the program with staff members saying, “We really do a lot of this already.”

The Woodlands Way, discussed previously, is rooted in developing those pro-social behaviors in students that create a learning climate in which teachers can teach and students can learn. The development of pro-social behaviors in students is a process of using rules, the basis for the rules and then converting those rules into students’ understandings and such values as ethics, character, managing conflict and above all accepting personal responsibility for actions sets the stage for effective learning.

The Young Leaders Academy (YLA) is determined to develop their youth as strong academicians who will be “character strong and college bound” through a rigorous
differentiated curriculum and a highly positive social environment. The YLA has a militaristic social and disciplinary character. Students march to and from classes and other places within the school, stand at attention and “parade rest” and students and adults wear uniforms; however they are not military uniforms, but rather are shirts or blouses, ties, slacks/pants or skirts and blazers.

In the early elementary grades direct instruction is often used and is used in some of the later elementary grades when students are behind their peers. The curriculum is challenging and most students are at or above grade level as was demonstrated by the WKCE and MAP scores. Critical thinking skills are developed, nurtured and tested regularly throughout the school year. The emphasis of being leaders is stressed from the moment students enter YLA and it is emphasized that to be leaders they must be college educated. Leadership is rewarded in a number of ways including membership to various organizations, the color of the ties and blazers, and student organization offices held are some of the examples. Teachers, administrators, staff, and students affirm leadership qualities of being ready to learn in order to lead. Positive feedback and awards are given to teachers and staff, just as they are to students.

YLA students are actively engaged by the teachers and administrators in the classroom and are encouraged to use all of the tools available to them whether it is a white board, computer, textbook, or a guest speaker who is present or “Skyped” in. Students are expected to answer questions fully and are expected to stand at attention when doing so.

The role of academic high expectations has been documented as an essential element in the making of a successful school and in the instance of these five schools this belief, value and commitment contribute much to the academic performance of these schools.
Behavioral Expectations

Parallel to the role of high academic expectations is the need for high behavioral expectations. This was evident at each school and while styles may have differed, the result of social behavior that facilitated positive social interaction and personal responsibility characterized as becoming independent learners and cooperative in the learning process. The role of high expectations is evident in both the academic and behavioral cultures of these schools. Some examples are discussed below.

At Bruce Guadalupe Community School (BGCS) the behavioral climate is essential to keeping everyone’s attention and energy focused on the educational program so teachers can teach and students can learn. It begins with the uniform. All students, from kindergarten through eighth grade, wear the same uniform: a white shirt or blouse and blue pants or skirt. In each classroom there is a version of the school rules:

- Be respectful of yourself, teachers, others and the building
- Be prepared for class: materials, assignments, be focused, listen and learn
- No gum, candy, food or drink allowed
- Maintain a positive attitude
- Keep your hands and feet yourself

In addition, some teachers have explicit classroom rules, such as the following posted in an elementary classroom:

- Make safe choices
- Use inside voices
- Follow instructions
- Be respectful
- Listen when someone is talking to you

All the children in this particular classroom signed the poster with the rules to show that they understood and agreed to follow these rules.

At the beginning of the school year the middle school principal personally goes through all the school rules with all the middle school students – gathered together by grade level. The students, and teachers, then sign the Codes of Conduct. The process is repeated at the start of the second semester. The principal observes that, as a result of this process, no one can say they have not seen the school’s rules.

The rules are consistent with the goals of Bruce Guadalupe which are repeated in morning announcements and are intended to instill in every student the:

- 3As: Attitude, Attendance, and Achievement
- 3Rs: Respect, Responsibility, and Resilience
- 3Ps: Projects, Performance, and Progress
Students when moving around the campus are always accompanied by a teacher. Needless to say, this is a little disconcerting to eighth grade students who feel they should be able to go between classes with supervision! However, the supervision is light and students are not required to be silent or to walk in strict lines, except in the early grades. Based on observations there are virtually no hassles in the hallways and very few students arrive at their destinations tardy.

Are there disciplinary problems? Of course there are but for the most part they are minor. The Dean of Students said, “No,” and chuckled when asked if she had to deal with fights or other major disturbances. A process observed in a physical education class is instructive. When a basketball went out of bounds during a game resulting in what might have led to a dispute about whose ball it was, two students immediately started to play rock-paper-scissors. The side of the winner took possession of the ball – dispute totally averted. That process took place several times during the basketball game. Similar tactics were used in other settings throughout the school averted potential disruptions.

At Milwaukee College Prep positive student behavior is achieved through the interwoven character education program that teaches students what to do rather what not to do and how to relate to others in a positive manner, the constant use of positive language that reinforces expectations and relationship building that creates positive interactions between students and teachers.

Students understand that they will be accountable for everything that they do. Teachers begin each day with a fable or story that highlights a positive character trait. Students are taught Sean Covey’s *Seven Habits of Effective Students*. Together these “character” lessons help students to understand their responsibilities within the school and classroom and how to work and live with others in a positive manner. Students learn, recite, and analyze poetry every morning. Poems are selected to highlight one of the values of the school. Teachers use a set of “proverbs” in response to student words and actions that spotlight the expected behavior.

Teachers “sweat the small stuff” not allowing any breach of decorum pass without helping student to understand their responsibilities. Teachers do this in a proactive (positive) manner. Positive praise is used in abundance to promote desired behaviors. In this way, students are taught what to rather than what not to do.

Teachers also build close relationships with students by constantly showing that they care about them. Teachers learn about the student and his/her family. They listen to student concerns and they follow through to address student needs both academically and emotionally.

The Seeds of Health Elementary approach to classroom management and behavior is centered on the belief that students want to do well and can learn how to get along in a positive manner. The strong relationship foundation allows a proactive system to permeate the school. Students are treated with respect and encouragement in order to problem-solve and make good choices in a variety of situations. Each adult in the
building has had the Capturing Kids’ Hearts training module. They continuously model the fundamental beliefs of the program like building a classroom social contract, encourage leaders from within, encourage behaviors around character words of the month, and giving positive affirmations to one another on a regular basis. It is a “feel good” environment from September to June.

The Capturing Kids Heart’s program is founded on the principle that a loving, nurturing culture will reduce disruptions and behavior problems by making students and families feel like they are welcome partners at the school. Therefore the program provides the staff with common language and approach as the basis for interactions with students and families. Another Capturing Kid’s Heart concept is that “if you have a child’s heart you have his/her mind.” This is the road map for Seeds of Health Elementary.

Through the various observations of the two locations of Seeds of Health it could be determined that the staff’s attitude toward success was based in Capturing Kids’ Hearts philosophy. This seems to be one of the core targets of the school. They are building a better school by being better persons through high expectations and the various character development activities. The adults and the students (families) are connected in words and actions. They are building a better school by being better people through high expectations and the various character development activities. These school-wide actions are present at all times. It is totally accepted as “the way we do things around here.” All staff members believe in the program and adhere to its ideas. The result is it brings everyone together supporting children in a similar way, which helps to maintain and reduce the need for any guessing on the child’s part.

At Woodlands it was apparent that one of the outcomes of the pro-social development of the students was the development of “student citizens” who accepted responsibility for their behavior and were willing to cooperate with others to achieve a positive learning environment. Students in lower grades did not express the student citizenship in obvious ways, but emulated that which was around them, while older students could express the ideals of the Woodland Way. Eighth grade students are required to present their final portfolio of accomplishments to a panel of external reviewers. In the process a UWM observer had the opportunity to serve as an external reviewer to give students a practice opportunity prior to their final presentation. This observer noted that it was obvious that students had internalized the values and elements of character into their required essay as part of the portfolio.

Teachers frequently expressed their reason for being at Woodlands was that at this school they “could teach.” The clear meaning of this statement was that the behavior of students was conducive to learning and that this pattern was consistent throughout the school. Without the social cooperation between teacher and student for a common goal the learning environment at Woodlands would be quite different. In many respects a teacher “feels validated” for their efforts as a student’s academic and personal growth are evident to them not only within the classroom, but also over time as they continue to have contact with students through the eighth grade. In a small school with continuity “everyone knows your name.”
One unique factor for the development of pro-social behavior is the multi-grade approach that is valued by this school. When the school year begins a teacher will have a classroom composed of students half of whom have been taught by her/him the previous year and the other half of students who have moved up one grade. Clearly the older students set the standards for behavior and thus the new students are expected to meet those standards.

One other factor that contributes to the success of Woodlands is the high retention of students from year to year; thus, reducing student mobility to a low percentage of turnovers each year. The value of low turnover is that students know the rules and social behavior expectation structures.

At the Young Leaders Academy there are high expectations of order and discipline in the classroom, hallways, cafeteria, gymnasium, and swimming pool which is established partly through the military persona of marching to and from one space to another in the hallways, stopping on command, no talking unless recognized (through the raising of the hand and when called upon by an authority), standing “at rest” or “at attention” where students are in line, at least an arm’s length from the person in front of and to the side of them, and are standing straight (no slouching) and are attentive to the leader. The uniforms worn by both students and staff reinforce the type of order and behavior expected of everyone in the school. A UWM observer observed and in discussions with teachers, staff and administrators who are stationed throughout the hallways noted that most students follow the rules of marching softly (sometimes to a soft cadence, particularly with new elementary students) but there were some who did not and upon asking found out that these were students new to the school and had yet to learn YLA etiquette. The marching, waiting for recognition before speaking, standing at attention or at rest, and the wearing of uniforms are designed to help foster appropriate behavior and respectfulness within the school, home and community.

Building high expectations is important at the YLA and it begins with the school year’s community-wide assembly where students and their family are invited to attend along with community leaders, selected former YLA student leaders and Board of Trustee members. At this assembly guests, teachers, staff, administrators and student leaders address the students and their families. Following this community-wide assembly there are daily assemblies where YLA students gather in the gymnasium prior to the beginning of morning classes.

At the daily assemblies students gather by grade level with their classroom teacher and line up in rows where they may take the lead in conducting the opening activities with assistance of their teachers and/or student leader(s) or as a group the classes will hear instructions and/or announcements, participate in competitive events, or receive encouragement. When there are competitive events they usually are related to a specific educational topic and are between a selected grade level (e.g. grade 5) and/or a specific wing of a floor within the building. There is a traveling trophy in the aforementioned areas and obtaining and keeping the trophy is intense. The competitions are not only
designed to build competitive educational skills but also to continue to build community and leadership skills.

One of the strengths of the YLA was that teachers and administrators work together in and outside of the classroom. Administrators were consistently in the classroom asking students and teachers questions about the lessons and learning that was going on with students responding as if they were teachers and teachers responding appropriately as colleagues.

What was very apparent across all five schools in this study was the role of behavioral expectations that promoted pro-social behavior and built character education across all the students. This process of teaching social behavior and sustaining high expectations for positive social interaction facilitated the learning process. Without this dimension of behavioral expectation in tandem with academic expectation these schools would probably not experience the level of success they have achieved.