Building Community

“Community” is a significant factor in the five charter schools’ high achievement. Community is definitely one of the common elements for success. Since building community is a theme that surfaced in the analysis of what creates success and high achievement, the understanding of community is an important detail. The following are components of the general concept of community as related to the high success rate in these five charter schools.

- A genuine belief in service to children and a culture that signifies that failure is not an option.
- Activities that bring administrators, teachers, students and parents together around the mission, vision and beliefs.
- The visibility of administrators in the school and especially the classrooms ensuring the continuity of instruction, behavior and the school’s mission is upheld.
- The attitude that we are in this together maintaining a consistent and complete buy-in perspective from all participants including students, staff and parents.
- The natural way in which affirmations are given to students and adults in the school community resulting in a self-concept of being valuable and capable.

Each one of the above elements is highly developed in each of the five schools. There is a strong sense of family derived from the attitude and actions of all members of the school. As I reviewed the five charters, the climate represented family with a bond between adults and students sustained over time. This sense of community was a natural way of being at the schools. It was not just the words on the wall or the listing in a notebook, but a sincere part of everyday happenings. The leaders intentionally place the mission of meeting students’ needs at the center targeting what is really important to the growth of all students. Then the teachers act toward one another in a shared collaborative manner. They believe each child can and will learn, and it is their responsibility to make it happen. Finally, this is a regular routine at the classroom level with the activities and events that reinforce the beliefs and values highlighted in the mission. The students respect and support one another becoming a room of children doing their best and believing they can do the required work. It all comes together. Community seems to be the culminating result. The leadership knows and understands the significance of these factors listed above therefore creating very successful schools with the end product of discovering each student’s potential. As the five schools are reviewed and analyzed, this becomes so clear. Within each element of success, an example from each of the five schools is listed. The individual case studies hold the key to a complete description of the numerous examples supporting the sense of “community” at the five UWM charter schools.
Service to Children

- Bruce Guadalupe School is within the agency called the United Community Center. The agency services families in numerous areas as well as educationally. Therefore through its foundation and name, it is a place totally involved in service to families and the surrounding community. A middle school English teacher stated that “the mission is community. We are all here for the children.”
- The Milwaukee College Prep School has developed a culture that believes that all children can and will learn, and they “will do everything possible to see that all children learn.”
- At Seeds of Health children are at the center of the school. There is a family atmosphere with a hug them to death attitude. A homework club supports any child needing that extra boost.
- At Woodlands teaching the whole child is at the center of all decisions. The foundation for their mission is based on using RESPECT as a model. Each of the letters in the word respect stands for a shared value. (R is respect for learning, E is education that is integrated, etc.)
- There is a strong belief at Young Leaders Academy that the staff must “make it happen here” and that they will make things work for their kids. The teachers will take extra time for a child who needs either a challenge or support in both the academic or social area.

Activities Demonstrating a Shared Mission

- On the Bruce Guadalupe website is a statement that the families must become a member of the school community. The requirement for one child is 30 hours of volunteer time. A record is kept by the Dean of Students. This emphasizes the fact that we are all a part of a child’s success in the future. The teachers greet their students each day in the gym during the morning meeting. The morning meeting provides a time to reinforce the school’s beliefs. Respect is highlighted on a regular basis as well as expectations for correct and appropriate behavior.
- The Declaration of Excellence is recited at the beginning of each day at Milwaukee College Preparatory School. It is at the morning gathering. The students say “I will use this day to the fullest…” The consistency of purpose is so vital in their success. The mission is kept out front of everyone on a regular basis during class time, teacher meetings and letters home to parents. There is also an emphasis on college and doing the best at whatever they pursue.
- The children and adults create a social contract each September at Seeds of Health. This is a strong component of the Capturing Kids’ Hearts model. The program’s focus is simple built around the idea of how do we treat one another. It has been the Seeds of Health character education program for over ten years.
- The “Woodlands Way”-Respectful Learning Culture is stated by all staff members and is a routine part of the school life. The school is organized through multi-age classrooms, which allows for understanding and cooperation across age definitions. Many activities utilize a buddy system to enhance the mission.
At the Young Leaders Academy, a morning assembly is held and led by student leaders. Students may read a poem, make announcements or recognize students’ achievements. The core values from the YMCA (founding body of the school) have evolved into a very strong mission at YLA.

**Leadership Visibility**

- The leaders of Bruce Guadalupe are involved in all aspects from curriculum to the morning assemblies. They are constantly moving around the school and stop in classrooms for informal visits.
- The leadership at Milwaukee Prep is unwavering in their school’s procedures, practices and processes. A major factor is that they are universally accepted and deployed without exception.
- The leadership team at Seeds of Health is visible in two locations. Hallways are crowded with teachers and administrators at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day. There is a shuttle bus from the elementary location to the middle level location. Administrators ride the bus back and forth. Parents drop off and pick up their children which allows for connectedness to the school.
- Administrator at Woodlands visits the classrooms on a daily basis and knows all the students’ names.
- Administrators are present in the YLA hallways and often engage in a student’s learning activity in the classroom. The administrators and the teachers are expected to participate in the programs at the school, but there is a willingness to do so not just a demand of their time.

**Attitude that We are Together**

- There is an established morning meeting at Bruce Guadalupe. The children gather in the gym and recite a standard saying to begin the day. They recite their name, the teacher’s name and when I go to college I will study_______.
- At Milwaukee Prep there is a feeling that they (the teachers) are a part of the organization, are respected and love being involved in decision making. They buy into the mission and welcome the varied opportunities. The strong belief that “students don’t fail, schools and teachers do” is a living and consistent piece of the focus at the school.
- During the teacher interviews at Seeds of Health (Windlake Elementary School), the expression came out loud and clear that “we are in this together.” Hiring is so important and a key to maintaining the mission. The Elementary Director devotes time to investing in the right person for the school above what would ordinarily be expected.
- Woodlands’ teachers believe strongly that the mission allows them “to teach.” New teachers are hired who have a belief in the mission of the school.
- YLA teachers and administrators work together and maintain a collegial presence in all aspects of the school. There is a tone of “no nonsense,” which is reinforced with the military style of expectations from hallway behavior to the classroom.
**Affirming Culture**

- During the morning meeting at Bruce Guadalupe, there is recognition of those students who have achieved and completed good work. The curriculum coordinator conveys to the teachers that the children need to be challenged and must believe that they can do the tough stuff.
- During the morning gathering at Milwaukee Prep, there are songs, dances and cheers building on the sense of community. There is a character education program that enhances the child’s school life. It is based on what a child should not do the negative side of actions. Teachers build relationships with their students and show them that they care.
- Adults and children are affirmed through the Capturing Kids’ Hearts program at Seeds of Health. Personal best is a daily expression at this school. The culture requires that the adults and children are respected and valued for their strengths and gifts.
- Woodlands School is a small community and the teachers feel validated for their efforts with the families and their students. Teachers are active participants in numerous tasks around the school like new teacher selection, analysis of performance data and curricular planning. Students learn pro-social skills in order to become “student citizens.”
- The attitude of “college bound, character strong” provides a balance to the program model. The students know exactly what their expectations are within the confines of the school environment. Doing ones best is evident and allows for pride and accomplishment.

After reflecting on the five charter schools, community is so strong within the walls of the school that it is a significant aspect of the learning environment. As an observer, community within abounds with the people within. It is definitely a contributing force to the academic success of the schools. The adults are dedicated to the mission of the schools as well as to each other and to the students and their families. It is a sincere professional attitude about their schools. The activities of the school bring the members together surrounding the belief of children first. Each individual school community takes pride in their ability to “Care” and therefore “Succeed.”