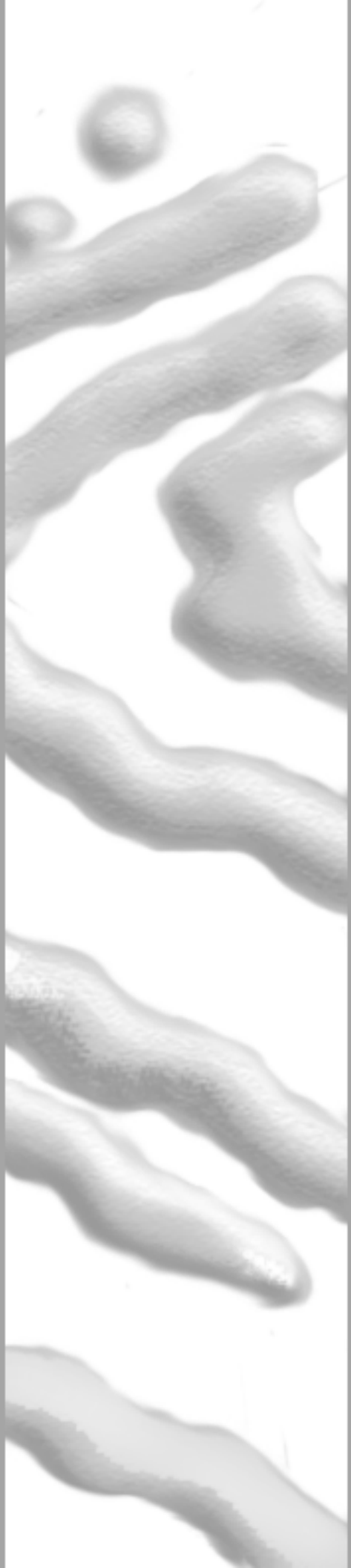
PART 2

Welcoming School Culture



An Action Research Study:

CHAPTER 5

Three Elementary Schools' Experiences with Access to Services, Welcoming Culture and Thoughtful Placement of Students

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Our dilemma

In the age of accountability and high stakes testing, our three schools face the dilemma of how to meet the challenge of increasing achievement for all students while serving a population of diverse, mobile and homeless children. Added to this dilemma is the under identification and lack of attention by our Districts to recognize the impact that highly mobile and homeless children have on academic performance as measured by state assessments. We recognize that our need for services for families goes well beyond the classroom or school setting. The three of us began participation in this project on a quest for best practices to assist our students in a more comprehensive manner and in turn increase the opportunities for their academic and social success.

Our Schools

Indian Peaks Elementary School – Longmont, Colorado

After completing four years as Principal at Indian Peaks Elementary, I understood why the school had seven principals during the five years before I arrived. The complexities of this school are immense. Indian Peaks Elementary School is a bilingual center school located on the south side of Longmont, Colorado. The school has between 360-390 students per year. Programming at the school includes a late-exit transitional model of bilingual education for Spanish speaking students. Students who come to the school speaking Spanish continue with a Spanish-speaking teacher to learn in their native language while learning English. Students fully transition to English by fifth grade. English speaking teachers teach other students, who speak English.

Free and reduced lunch rates vary per year but have been consistently between 45-60%. Our total Hispanic population in the school is 58% but only 38% of the total population is in the bilingual program. What this means for us is that students whose native language is Spanish but have been in English instruction in a previous school are placed in English instruction to avoid the confusion of constantly switching languages.

Mobility in the school is high with most of the turnover coming during the summer months. In a typical year, we will enroll between 100-115 students and drop close to the same amount. Because of this turnover and history of low achievement, we knew we had to make some changes.

Lincoln Elementary School – Colorado Springs, Colorado

Lincoln Elementary is a centrally located school with a population of 320 students. The number of students attending Lincoln has been in decline for the past six years, as has the entire student population for District 11. However, Lincoln's percentage of student turnover has increased throughout this time. Lincoln was built in 1948 at a site that for that period was the north end of town. As the economy grew after World War II, a large number of motels emerged along Nevada Avenue to accommodate new families and tourists, and businesses began to occupy the majority of the area, leaving limited space for apartment complexes. Additionally, Lincoln's boundaries include a flood plain suitable only for low-income mobile home parks. The lack of single-family housing available for ownership contributes to a high turnover in student population as the majority of the student population lives in apartments, motels, and trailer parks. Over the past five years, during the school year, Lincoln has averaged enrolling 220 new students and dropping 190 while maintaining a population of 325 students. The homeless rate has fluctuated between 12 and 17 percent of the student body.

Alsup Elementary – Commerce City, Colorado

Having spent seventeen years exclusively in secondary education, I knew I had a great deal to learn about elementary age children when I took my first principalship in August of 2003 at Alsup Elementary School. Alsup Elementary School is located in Commerce City, Colorado where a child cannot walk six blocks in any direction without facing the dilemma of crossing a truck route. Alsup is an urban, economically disadvantaged, PK-5 elementary school with approximately 490 students. The education level of the parents is quite low with 5% graduating from a four-year institution and 60% graduated from high school; the average family annual income is $20,000. It is difficult to determine whether many of our families fit the definition of homeless because they often live with relatives for extended periods. Determining if these situations are due to economics or just a cultural decision is frustrating. Often homeless and highly mobile children go unidentified and their needs go unmet. Defining highly mobile in our transient and multiple family housing communities is easier than defining those who are homeless. From October 1, 2003 to April 1, 2004 seventy-five students withdrew from Alsup and sixty-eight students enrolled. The 41% transient population creates a need for teachers to understand and successfully implement instructional strategies that quickly assess and affect the learning of every child. As the instructional leader I must provide supports and strategies to allow for positive academic experiences for highly mobile students, but first we need to identify these children.

Research Focus

Together, we decided that our three-fold focus would be the thoughtful placement of students in classrooms as they came into our buildings, a welcoming culture and access to services. To begin, our work built off the work of Indian Peaks and student placement.

Indian Peaks had begun development of a survey for the thoughtful placement of students (See Appendix) including a placement/entrance interview for parents based on the pyramid of interventions from the work of Rick DuFour. Also

considered was the work of R.W. Rumberger and K.A. Larson (1998), stating that local education agencies must create a culture of care by revising intake processes to assist the need of incoming students. Additionally, they suggested that schools must deal with the social integration of the students as well as the academic integration.

The initial emphasis for the interview was to thoughtfully place students with teachers that matched the students' learning styles. Before the interview, new placements occurred based solely on how many students a teacher had, and not on where they would best fit with other students and the teacher. While we were very good at placing returning students in classrooms at Indian Peaks, we found that just using numbers to place the new students was becoming problematic. Classrooms were ending up with lower level readers or behavior problems and with teachers who might not be best equipped to handle the issues the students would bring.

Working through the Building Leadership Team, which is the school accountability committee, a group of teachers and the counselor designed questions to help us learn about the student's previous history and learning style. After becoming a participant in the mobility/homeless action research project, Julie met with our homeless liaison and expanded the questionnaire to include information regarding legal, medical, and family histories so they would get to know the families and students that were coming in to the school. The survey has also focused the school to help families get access to services and creating a welcoming environment of the school.

During the COPAR sessions, Julie presented the survey to the administrative group. Lincoln and Alsup joined Indian Peaks to create a cohort, which would use this interview tool as a common denominator to collect information about the clientele. From that point in the school year, all three schools utilized the survey to gather data.

How Each School Implemented the Survey

At Indian Peaks, either the principal or counselor conducted the survey with the family. When a family came to enroll, they met with the records clerk. She

helped them through the registration process. They had Spanish-speaking office staff available when needed. Of course, all forms were in English and Spanish. If the family spoke English, the principal usually conducted the interview and if Spanish speaking, the counselor conducted the interview in Spanish. There were times that neither the principal nor counselor was available so an appointment was set up with the family. The interview took place within 2 days of registration. Once the interview was completed, the counselor and principal reviewed the information and decided on a placement for the student. The teacher then received the information orally and in writing. If the family needed other services, the counselor, principal and office staff worked to contact the appropriate agencies.

At Lincoln, essential questions that drove the need for the interview process were:

1) Is there an immediate need for a family that the school can provide assistance with in order to support the concept of increasing family stability?
2) Can we gather information that could make an immediate impact on a child's academic process?

The placement interview asked questions regarding educational background, language issues, health issues, behavioral concerns, legal issues, and parent involvement. Six families already enrolled in Lincoln interviewed first to test the acceptance of asking such questions. All six families felt comfortable with the questions and appreciated our interest in listening to their situations. Further review of the information collected demonstrated a need for additional questions. These questions focused on insurance issues and daycare needs. For new families to the area, additional questions asked about the need for community services such as employment assistance, Department of Human Services, Section 8 housing, and medical facilities.

Alsup did not have extra resources to initiate the survey with families. Lynn interviewed each family if one member of the family spoke English and for the four Spanish-speaking families she solicited the help of a paraprofessional in the building. Alsup's focus was around the basic needs of the family with housing and transportation being in the forefront of the adults' minds during the interview.

Feedback from parents was positive with a feeling of honor that the school took such an interest in the needs of the family and the child.

The Results

To gain perspective in addressing the needs of highly mobile children, we turned to Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1998). Payne explained (p. 61) that many of the attitudes students and parents bring to the school are part of the culture and belief system. Imposition of middle-class solutions should not occur when other, more workable, solutions exist. She also reflected (p. 39) that educators have a tremendous opportunity to influence some of the non-financial resources that make such a difference in students' lives. To date, 66 families participated in the interviews. Only three people, one at each school, have refused to participate. All families interviewed have expressed an appreciation for the questionnaire, many commenting that they have never experienced this level of interest, personally or professionally, from a school. Follow-up intervention for students and families include:

- Housing assistance (applications, damage deposits, utilities)
- RTD bus passes and transportation within the district
- Daycare support
- Medical, dental, and vision services
- Clothing and school supplies
- Food assistance
- Family counseling services (parenting classes, single parent family support group)
- Family literacy nights
- Adult Literacy and ESL classes
- Help with government, job and school applications

In regards to the thoughtful placement of students in classrooms, survey information matched student needs and teacher strengths. Teachers received a copy of the survey and discussed the results with the survey administrator. Michael Fullan

(2001) reminds us, “Improvement in education begins and ends with the teacher; it’s as simple and complex as that.” The information in the following table reflects summary survey responses from each of the three schools.

Next Steps

This research project is in its infancy in regards to conclusions. To date, the interview process and subsequent interventions do not correlate to the initial premise that such activity will stabilize families, getting them to stay at our schools for an extended time to give the school a better opportunity to raise student achievement levels. This will be a time intensive study. However, the collection of this information has led to quality discussions on what we should do next. In regards to the interview questionnaire, continuous refinement of the questions needs to occur to streamline the process and maximize the quality of information. Additionally, refinement of the database needs to occur. The volume of information has been so vast, it is cumbersome to record and pattern. In regards to interventions, two concepts are emerging that need attention: the need for a community school program and the need for a community liaison. Many of the needs of Lincoln, Alsup, and Indian Peaks’ families focus on community services. Additionally, many of the families do not have, or know how, to access community services. It is our assumption that providing these services in the evening at the school will increase the stability of the family unit, thus increasing the possibility that these families will

School	New Families Enrolled	# of Medical Concerns	# of Legal Concerns	# with Educational Concerns	# with Behavioral Concerns	# of Basic Needs	# with Transportation Needs	Total Number of Schools Attended
Alsup Elementary	27	5	2	9	7	20	10	81
Indian Peaks Elementary	18	4	7	6	5	6	1	53
Lincoln Elementary	19	7	7	4	6	13	1	51

want to stay in our area. Community schools have been successful other places. Schools should be the link between service providers and children and their families. (Abdai-Haqq, 1993) The concept appears to be a 'good fit' for our neighborhoods. Finally, coordinating these efforts take personnel. Schools typically function on 'minimum' staffing ratios, and do not have someone to perform these duties. Thus, another focus is to devise a plan to allocate monetary resources to support a community liaison position.

Conclusion

It is clear to us now that the interviews start a student and family off on a positive note with the school. We have developed relationships with the family and we know much more about the circumstances of their lives. While we may not prevent a child from moving, we can make their experiences at our schools productive, worthwhile and caring. We can help them access services in the community and they know we are here to help them succeed. The students are now in classes that we feel best meets their needs, and the transitions for students have gone much smoother. The students appear to be happy with their class and teacher and are exhibiting well-adjusted behaviors. They know the expectations of our school up front and are not surprised about the quality of work or homework required. We are able to help them with school supplies, as needed, or clothing because of our community connections. They feel that we care about them personally.

This process has made us realize how important it is to establish effective communication and create a welcoming environment for families and students as they come in to a new school setting. The relationships we have established are invaluable and work to improve the education of the children. We feel that we know the families better and when there are issues, we are better able to assist them in accessing supportive services.

Reflection on the Action Research Process

The action research process has pushed all of us to continue to refine our practice of acquiring useable information. As we went through this cyclical process, we gained clarity on the data needed to be most helpful to teachers, students and parents. Teachers assisted the cyclic process by seeking more information, thus clarifying the types of data needed from families. As we work on achievement of all students, we will need to further research best instructional practices for highly mobile children so we can create an environment where all are successful. The action research process will support our endeavors. While at times the process of cyclic revision in action research is frustrating, it also creates a more effective model for successful implementation of change. Data gathered allowed us to look for additional programming or grants that we may be eligible to receive thus enhancing the opportunity to increase student achievement and support the basic needs of families. This process has allowed the three of us to use parameters that are more formal in order to accomplish our goals. Through this process, we have created a relationship that has given us valuable information and ideas in coming together to meet a common goal, which is the success of all children.

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APPENDIX: ***CHAPTER 5***

Placement Interview

Child's Name:_____ Grade:_____Date:_____

Parent's Name:_____

A. Educational Background

1.What is the child called at home?

2.Who are the members of the child's family? Who among these lives with the child?

3.Who should receive communications from the school that concern the child? How should those communications be made?

4.Who will respond to communications from the school? How will those communications be made?

5.How many schools has your child attended?

6.Has your child had any disciplinary referrals? If so, for what?

7.Has your child been in any special programs?

- ☐ Special Ed. Disability
- ☐ Title 1
- ☐ Literacy Plan
- ☐ Gifted/Talented
- ☐ Preschool: ____Head Start ____Child Find
- ☐ Other_____

8.Is your child currently on a literacy plan?

B. Language Issues

1.What language did your child first speak?

2.What language was your child instructed in at their last school?

3.How much English does your child speak?

C. Learning Style

1.What would you like me to know about your child?

2.What do you see as an area of strength for your child?

3.What do you see as an area in need of improvement for your child?

4.What kind of teacher best fits your child?

5.How does your child learn best?

D. Health Issues

1.Does your child have their immunizations?

2.Is your child on any medications? Will they be taking them at school?

3.Does your child have any severe allergies?

4.Has your child been hospitalized in the last 2 years? If so, for what?

5.Are there medical issues/concerns we should be aware of?

6.Does your child have insurance?

- ☐ Medicaid
- ☐ Colorado Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+)
- ☐ Private Insurance
- ☐ None

E. Behavioral Concerns

1.What type of discipline is used at home?

2.What works?

F. Legal Issues

1.Are there any legal issues/custody issues (arrangements)?

2.Is there a current restraining order?

G. Parent Involvement

1.What do you hope your child will get out of school this year?

2.In what ways do you think you can help at home to support your child's education?

3.What roles do you see parents having at the school site to support the education of their children?

*4.*What can a school do to make you feel welcome?