

## Snapshot #25

### Building Positive Student Self-Concept

#### Stevenson-Carson School District Stevenson, Washington

Kathleen Cotton

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#### RESEARCH FINDINGS

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##### **"GOAL #1: STUDENTS WILL HAVE A POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT."**

When the staff and community of the Stevenson-Carson School District established this goal and gave it top priority, they were responding to three influences:

- Widespread agreement in the school and community that positive student self-concept is of primary importance
- District data indicating that improvement was needed in this area
- Research data showing the critical importance of a positive self-concept for success in school and in life.

Focusing on the support provided by research, it can readily be seen that many effective educational practices are typically in operation in schools and districts whose students have positive self-regard. The document, *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS/1990 UPDATE* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, April 1990), identifies the following practices as being particularly relevant to enhancing student self-concept:

At the classroom level:

##### **1.2.1 INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPS FORMED IN THE CLASSROOM FIT STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND AFFECTIVE NEEDS**

##### **1.3.4 STUDENTS ROUTINELY RECEIVE FEEDBACK AND REINFORCEMENT REGARDING THEIR LEARNING PROGRESS**

**1.4.1 THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING**

**1.4.3 PERSONAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ARE POSITIVE**

**1.6.1 STUDENTS AT RISK OF SCHOOL FAILURE ARE GIVEN THE EXTRA TIME AND HELP THEY NEED TO SUCCEED.**

At the school level:

**2.1.1 EVERYONE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING**

**2.2.4 THERE ARE PLEASANT CONDITIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING**

**2.4.2 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS ARE USED TO BUILD STRONG STUDENT AND STAFF MOTIVATION**

**2.6.1 STUDENTS AT RISK OF SCHOOL FAILURE ARE PROVIDED PROGRAMS TO HELP THEM SUCCEED**

**2.7.1 PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE INVITED TO BECOME INVOLVED.**

At the district level:

**3.1.1 HIGH EXPECTATIONS PERVADE THE ORGANIZATION**

**3.1.2 THERE ARE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES THAT SUPPORT EXCELLENCE IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE**

**3.4.1 IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS ARE ENCOURAGED, SUPPORTED, AND MONITORED.**

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**SITUATION**

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The Stevenson-Carson School District is a consolidated district made up of many small communities. Located in the "windsurfing capital of the world"-the Columbia River Gorge-the district serves approximately 1100 students in two elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. Some 95 percent of StevensonCarson' s students are white/non-Hispanic. The teacherstudent ratio is one to twenty-three or less at all grade levels.

Skamania County, in which the school district is located, has had the highest unemployment in the state of Washington for a number of years, due primarily to the general decline in the logging and wood products industries in the Pacific Northwest. While the unemploy-ment rate over the last ten years has averaged approximately 15 percent, at this writing it has reached nearly 30 percent. Other developments, such as a recently erected convention center and the designation of the Columbia Gorge as a National Scenic Area, are expected to reinvigorate the local economy, but their effect has not yet been significantly felt.

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## CONTEXT

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### **BELIEFS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT**

When Stevenson-Carson superintendent Tony Feldhausen became aware of NWREL's strategic improvement process, CREATING THE FUTURE (CTF), central office and schoollevel staff in his district were already engaged in research-based school improvement projects and had undertaken some of the components of strategic planning. Feldhausen and special programs supervisor Mollie Lopshire had, for example, provided Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) training to a number of the district's teachers. They had provided classes in the development of collaborative staff relationships, cooperative learning, and the use of research-based practices in lesson design. Small grants were also offered by the district for teachers to develop and improve these practices in their own areas of responsibility. The district had provided staff development activities for instructional assistants as well. In addition, administrators and teachers had been involved in direction setting, visioning, studying the change process, and reviewing/sharing research on effective schooling practices.

Reading a journal article about the CTF process, Tony Feldhausen saw a high degree of congruence between CTF and his district's current efforts. And since he and his staff wanted to take a more structured and systematic approach to districtwide school improvement, Feldhausen contacted NWREL and, together with supportive staff and community members, embarked on the CTF approach to districtwide school improvement.

Why did Stevenson-Carson stakeholders feel the CTF process was right for the district? The answer lies in the following list of philosophical and procedural features, which characterize both the district's direction and the CTF strategic improvement approach:

- All stakeholder groups in the district-board members, administrators, teachers, noncertified staff, parents, other community members, and students-should have a voice in planning and decision making.
- The improvement process should be led by a team responsible for guiding the effort, engaging the participation of school and community people, and keeping all stakeholder groups informed of activities and progress.
- Plans and decisions should be made based on their potential for improving outcomes for all students, including those identified as "at risk."
- Plans and decisions should be made based on knowledge of validated schooling practices as identified in the educational research base.
- Plans and decisions should be data based; that is, based on information about current student performance and community priorities.
- The role of central office personnel is to inspire and provide support for school-based management.
- Proposed improvement activities have the best chance for success when staff engage in collegial planning and projects.
- Real and lasting change occurs slowly, and those engaged in a change process can expect to encounter obstacles along the road to achieving their goals.

### **THE FOCUS ON STUDENT SELF-CONCEPT**

With assistance and support from NWREL staff, a broad base of district, school, and community representatives initiated a district-wide improvement effort in the manner specified by the CTF process. Guided by the district leadership team, this group developed a mission statement, a vision statement, and five student goal statements, with the development of positive student self-concept as the first priority goal.

Why self-concept? As planners utilized the CTF processes for identifying needs, determining their relative importance, and reviewing relevant research, they came to appreciate the critical role of positive self-concept in the school performance and overall well-being of students. In particular, they came to understand the close relationship between positive self-concept and academic achievement. They also became very concerned about the negative influences on self-concept experienced by many Stevenson-Carson students due to widespread economic hardship and its attendant family problems-drug/alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and depression.

Leadership team members and stakeholders developed and refined an action plan aimed at enhancing student selfconcept. At the same time, they specified measurable academic, behavioral, and affective indicators of selfconcept in order to be able to monitor progress toward the goal.

In keeping with the evidence that locally managed improvement efforts have the greatest likelihood of success, staff of each of the district's four schools were given the responsibility and the authority to develop their own plans and activities for improving the self-concepts of students within that school. Stakeholders did agree, however, that efforts to enhance self-concept should not take the form of separate programs. Rather, the use of research-based methods and techniques for building positive selfconcepts should be integrated into all aspects of the school program.

Both the educational research base and the experience of Stevenson-Carson educators pointed to the critical importance of adequate information, support, and resources in order for improvement efforts to succeed. Consequently, district personnel worked to give the self-concept development effort high visibility throughout the district and made themselves available to provide training and technical assistance to staff of each school as they planned and launched their activities.

For their part, board members approved the provision of release time to assure that staff development and training activities could take place, established criteria for assessing the level of caring and empathy exhibited by teachers seeking employment within the district, and authorized grant moneys for implementing action plans.

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### **PRACTICE: ACTIVITIES TO BUILD POSITIVE STUDENT SELF-CONCEPT**

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Visiting classrooms, talking with teachers, and observing school activities in process provided a wealth of information about each school's approach to fostering positive self-regard in its students.

**STEVENSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Ms. Jodi Thompson, a fifth grade teacher at Stevenson Elementary School, opened her classroom for observation as she conducted a Student Circle activity. Students were given the opportunity to offer one another support or advice, and to express "resentments" or "appreciations" they might have on their minds.

First came a review of the school's guidelines for interpersonal interactions and other behaviors. In response to Ms. Thompson's queries about the guidelines, students enthusiastically raised their hands, were recognized, and identified the following:

- Striving for one's "personal best," explained by one student as, "not your neighbor's best, but your own"
- Avoiding "put-downs," including a short discussion of "how put-downs make people feel bad"
- Everyone's "right to pass"; that is, each person's freedom to "pass" on suggestions or invitations that he/she knows or suspects are harmful, such as using drugs
- Telling the truth
- Building trust for one another
- Engaging in "active listening," which students demonstrated by looking at each speaker and communicating attentiveness with their body language.

Ms. Thompson thanked each student as he or she shared, and then directed the class's attention to the classroom "put-up" box. The opposite of put-downs, put-ups are messages of thanks or appreciation that students had written to one another or to Ms. Thompson and placed in a box specified for that purpose. As the box was passed from student to student and the put-up messages were read, there was much laughter and good cheer. "How does it feel to be put-up this morning, guys?" asked Ms. Thompson, to which responses of "Good!" and "Great!" could be heard.

An additional noteworthy feature of this class is that special education students could not be distinguished from their classmates.

Ms. Annette Medlin and Ms. Sue Lofberg, Stevenson Elementary teachers who applied for and received Self-Concept Grants from the district, discussed their self-concept development activities.

One use to which the grant resources have been put is the development and implementation of Arts Afternoons, a program grounded in Dr. Howard Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences. Ms. Lofberg explained that program students, many of whom have been identified as being at risk of school failure, interact with teachers, classified staff, senior citizens, and area artists as they express themselves through a variety of artistic media. Both visual and performing arts are emphasized. "Our intent is to enhance self-esteem using artistic expression as our vehicle," reads the grant proposal, which also provides the research evidence (as required of grant applicants) showing that activities such as those proposed have led to increases in student self-esteem in other settings.

Arts Afternoons activities conclude with a "Show Off" of artistic products, in which students display or perform their work for school and community people. An impressive mural developed by Arts Afternoons participants decorates an expanse of wall in one of Stevenson's hallways.

Arts Afternoons is characterized by frequent evaluations, involving its student participants, of

how the program is going-which activities have gone well, what needs to be changed, and solicitation of suggestions for ways the program might be improved. Student input is taken to heart and has been a major ingredient in shaping the program.

Ms. Annette Medlin's grant supported the development of Stevenson's "Record of Achievement" for students in grades K-3. In keeping with recent research favoring the use of performance-based assessment methods rather than relying on standardized testing, the Record of Achievement focuses on student demonstrations of skills they have acquired. A key element is an alternative report card which identifies the large array of learning areas and subskills presented to and acquired by children during their primary years. The card notes skills introduced and skills mastered, and includes indications of the student's level of effort. Reviewing Record of Achievement reports with their child and his/her teacher, parents get a much more complete picture of the child's learning progress than that offered by more traditional report cards.

The Record of Achievement also includes samples of student work, many of which are selected for inclusion by the student. In addition to the periodic parentteacher -student conferences, there are frequent conferences between teacher and student, in which student work samples are reviewed and, as the original grant proposal specifies, "a teacher must assess nonjudgmentally and gently and respectfully critique but not criticize." Having the opportunity to review his/her own cumulative record, says Ms. Medlin, "enhances self-concept by showing the student's growth and progress over time."

Another of Stevenson Elementary School's approaches to building student self-concept is through the KLUE (Kids Like Us are Everywhere) program, a 12-week class for children whose parents have drug or alcohol problems. Participants are self-selected initially and continue in the program if parent permission is granted. A tracking system is being used to determine whether involvement in the program reduces or delays the use of drugs and alcohol by participants.

## **CARSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Carson Elementary principal Chris Whetzel speaks of the school's self-esteem-building activities with a great deal of pride. He described the Kids Care program, in which each classroom of students, together with their parents, teacher, and instructional assistants, participates in an array of self-esteem-building activities while on a day-long retreat at a Forest Service retreat center.

When a Carson student is selected as Citizen of the Week, Mr. Whetzel calls his or her parents and draws their attention to the positive things their child has done to receive this honor. And in Carson's VIP (Very Important Person) classroom activities, students have the opportunity-one at a time in each class-to select and portray pictures which reflect the things each child feels are important about him/herself-pictures of family activities, sports participation, and other elements of the child's life. Not far from a VIP Board in one second grade classroom, the following affirmation was displayed on the wall:

I am the one and only me. I am an important person. I like myself. When I really like myself, others will like me, too. I am responsible for what I do and the kind of person I am. I am special.

As a complement to the many brief overviews of activities taking place at Carson, a visit with

veteran sixth grade teacher Mary Frenter provided an in-depth look at the way self-esteem-building activities are integrated into the work of one teacher. Ms. Frenter made no secret of the fact that, at the beginning of the current school year, her class was "unruly" and fraught with social interaction problems. She also made it clear that this is no longer the case. Asked what she does to ameliorate a difficult situation like this, she launched into a description of the many activities she conducts to enhance students' self-regard and help them build skills in interacting positively with one another. These include:

- Explaining and reinforcing her classroom's guiding principles: "Integrity, Kindness, and Respect."
- Weekly "spotlighting" of a given student, during which the other students write and communicate positive things about the week's featured student.
- Teaching students the importance of "seeing the good in one another" and continuously encouraging them to do so.
- Frequently changing the seating arrangement in the classroom and having students observe and make positive observations about their new "neighbors."
- Participating with her class in the Kids Care program.
- Displaying a "Put-Up Board," on which the positive comments students write about one another are posted.
- Teaching the use of "snakes": When students hear comments that sound like put-downs, they are encouraged to make a hissing sound and a "snake" gesture-holding one's hand with the index and middle fingers partially extended, as if they were the fangs of a snake. In this somewhat whimsical way, they can signal their unwillingness to listen to or participate in spiteful talk.
- Making use of a classroom "Me Board," which is similar to the VIP Board used in some others of Carson's classes, but somewhat more complex, befitting the greater maturity of these students. Me Board displays feature both pictures and words, with descriptions and images revealing the student's plans, hopes, and dreams, as well as their present circumstances. Each student presents his or her Me Board display to the whole class.
- Carrying out a practice whereby students who are disruptive must leave the room and are allowed to rejoin the class only after an analysis and improvement plan are made.
- Frequently focusing on helping students to see how their behavior impacts others.
- Having students "make appointments" with their parents to discuss things of importance to them.
- Encouraging parent participants in the school's open house to leave "warm fuzzies"-notes of praise and affection-in their children's desks.
- Working with parents in a program called "Preparing for the Drug-Free Years," in which parents learn how to deal constructively with their own emotions, solve problems, and develop greater understanding of young people through role-playing.
- Providing classroom activities to help students to manage their own anger and deal with the anger of others
- Teaching "politeness skills," for example, discussing the importance of both a person's words and tone of voice in conveying meaning. Students are encouraged to seek a "reality check" when they are unsure about what another person's tone of voice might mean.
- Recognizing that "we all feel sorry for ourselves sometimes" and permitting students to have "pity parties"-periods of self-indulgent sulking-for a maximum of 45 minutes.
- Teaching the importance of learning from failure. "I'm going to teach you how to fail," Ms. Frenter says, explaining that students, particularly those inclined to be perfectionists, need to learn that "the world doesn't end if you don't do everything perfectly."
- Making use of an array of activities from the resource book, GO FOR IT!, which was

developed with gifted children in mind, but which Ms. Frenter has found to be appropriate for all students.

- Focusing on elements from William Glasser's Reality Therapy, which identifies "love, power, fun, and freedom" as basic human needs. When students are having problems, Ms. Frenter works with them to analyze their experience in order to see which of these elements might be insufficient. Each student develops "My Basic Needs Circle," and this is used to help them create a better balance among their needs.
- Having students put items of their choice in a "time capsule," which she keeps and then shares with students when they become seniors in high school.
- Offering opportunities for students to earn recess time.

And more. Asked what designation she gives to this program of self-understanding and improved self-regard for students, Ms. Frenter says, "I don't know what to call it-health? science? social studies? I can't say; I just do it, and it works."

## **WIND RIVER MIDDLE SCHOOL**

The district's seventh and eighth graders attend Wind River Middle School and, as part of the school's approach to developing student self-concept, spend 30 minutes each day in a program called Home Base. The purpose of Home Base is to make certain that every Wind River student has a personal and ongoing relationship with a school staff member. Home Base groups are limited to 14 members, and attempts are made to group together students who are not already established friends. Time in Home Base is spent working on listening skills and other interpersonal skills, and students engage in short activities from the "Ropes" curriculum, which focuses on building trust, interdependency, and positive self-regard. Home Base teachers are alerted when their students are falling behind in their assignments and take action to assist and encourage them.

A different but complementary approach to developing students' self-esteem is the "cross-age coaching" program co-developed by Wind River physical education teacher Tracy Jennings and a teacher from Carson Elementary School next door. A course in which the two teachers were involved required that they design an innovative course. From their collaboration emerged a physical education course in which Wind River students develop and carry out lesson plans for teaching and coaching the younger Carson children in a variety of sports activities.

Outcomes of this activity have surpassed the teachers' hopes and expectations. Wind River students, particularly those who had a history of behavior problems, have experienced a great deal of success in developing leadership skills as they provide guidance and support to the younger children. Many have said that their teaching/coaching experience has made them more understanding about the discipline problems teachers face. For their part, the younger children respond well to taking direction from the older students and express feeling important and special because of the attention and help given them.

During the observation, groups of Wind River students could be seen playing with groups of Carson children in several different indoor and outdoor activities-golf, soccer, tennis, basketball, and volleyball. In the team sports, each team was made up of both older and younger students, with the older students being attentive to their younger classmates, coaching, encouraging, cheering successes, and providing reassurance following misplaced kicks or missed baskets.

## **STEVENSON HIGH SCHOOL**

The action plan for enhancing the self-concepts of Stevenson High School students has components ranging from student recognition activities to counseling activities in a variety of areas to programs designed to build students' academic self-confidence and success. Developed in response to research findings on effective practices, examples of programs and activities include:

- A Student of the Month program, featuring public recognition at a school assembly and breakfast as the guest of the principal, Jim Saltness.
- An annual Evening of Excellence event, during which students exemplifying excellence in different areas are recognized.
- A program for identifying and planning support activities for students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or attendance difficulties.
- Drug and alcohol aftercare for students requiring ongoing support after substance abuse treatment.
- A Peer Helpers program, which trains students in helping, communication, and problem-solving skills so as to be effective in assisting their schoolmates in need of support.
- A support group for parents focused on sharing problems and successes.
- Study skills development activities provided to help freshmen get off to a good start academically.
- Community volunteer tutors who make themselves available to assist students needing help with school work and provide other kinds of assistance to teachers and administrators.

An in-depth look at just one of Stevenson's programs was provided by Mr. Saltness and technology education/industrial arts teacher Bill LaCombe, who described the school's Summer Success Program.

Initiated during the summer just past, Summer Success is an eight-week program jointly financed by the school district and the Community Foundation of Southwest Washington. Participants include both successful and at-risk students, who are paid for their involvement in the all-day, five-days-a-week program activities. Twothirds of the 19 summer 1992 participants were selected based on factors such as low socioeconomic status, parental unemployment, poor attendance, behavior problems, and academic difficulties. The other thirdthe "role model" students-were selected based on having a history of school success. Summer Success activities included:

- Morning "icebreaker" lessons, such as challenging students with puzzles or mysteries to be solved using inquiry skills.
- Mathematics and language assignments set in real contexts that are meaningful to students. One such activity called for students to work cooperatively to prepare a written proposal for paving the school parking lot, including the computations for materials needs and costs.
- Ropes program activities aimed at building trust; e.g., a group of students holding another student off the ground, passing the student safely from one point to another.
- Day Camp leadership functions, in which Summer Success participants planned, practiced, and carried out activities for 60 children in grades K-6.

How did it turn out? Mr. LaCombe notes that there was distance and some friction between the at-risk and the successful students at the beginning of the summer activity, and that a few of the at-risk students never really became fully engaged in the program. For the most part, however, the goal of building trust and bonds between members of the two groups was met, and the

attendance of many of the at-risk students has improved following involvement in the program.

"When I first came to Stevenson," says Mr. LaCombe, "I thought it would be a short stop for me. Now, I don't see myself leaving here anytime soon. I'm proud to be a Bulldog. The staff work together like a family. In Summer Success I learned a lot about the hardships many students face. I have become more compassionate, and I make myself more available to my students. These 'atrisk' kids know a lot; they teach me things."

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## OUTCOMES

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Although the focused efforts to raise the self-esteem of Stevenson-Carson students have been in operation only a short time, staff have a wealth of anecdotal information about the positive effects of these efforts. Teacher surveys, for example, point to improved self-regard among students and indicate that teacher-student bonds have been strengthened.

Perhaps more to the point, however, are the findings concerning the indicators specified at the beginning of the improvement effort. Some highlights:

- Dropouts. The 1986-90 dropout rate averaged 8.75 percent. The 1990-91 dropout figure was 5.7 percent.
- Attendance. From the 1989-90 to the 1990-91 school year, average attendance at the elementary level increased slightly, decreased slightly at the middle school level, and increased significantly at the senior high level.
- Achievement. Of the many positive achievement indicators tracked by Stevenson-Carson staff, some are particularly noteworthy, including a dramatic reduction in the class failure rate of middle school students and a significant increase in the standardized reading comprehension scores of senior high students.
- Referrals. From 1989-90 to 1990-91 there was a 19 percent decrease in the number of senior high students receiving referrals and a 33 percent decrease in the number of middle school students receiving referrals.
- Student Perceptions. Average responses of middle school students to questions about staff acceptance, caring, and support of them improved dramatically from the period 1987-90 to the 1990-91 school year.

As Stevenson-Carson district-level and school-level staff have written and implemented action plans in other goal areas-skill development, knowledge acquisition, motivation, and values-they have taken care to continue their focus on building student selfconcept. Speaking of the key role of positive staffstudent interactions in building self-esteem, superintendent Tony Feldhausen quotes a bit of proverbial wisdom: "Students don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

Contact Tony Feldhausen, Superintendent, StevensonCarson School District, P.O. Box 850, Stevenson, Washington 98648, 509/427-5674, for more information on the district's activities for improving student selfconcept. For more information on the CREATING THE FUTURE strategic improvement process, contact NWREL staff members, Robert E. Blum (503/275-9615) or Thomas A. Olson (503/275-9644).

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