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Personal and Leadership Development in the Middle School Environment: The School STRONG Initiative

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Student Personal and Leadership Development Programs

In the Middle School Environment

School STRONG Initiative

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Dedication

To every student who walked through my door, you have challenged me to be a better teacher

and individual. To my husband for your unwavering support and love. And to my children,

Winter and Cole, for being an inspiration to create a better tomorrow… for you.

Abstract

Schools today are extremely focused on the academic rigor demands of standards and literacy that students aren't learning the skills necessary to become self-initiating individuals and leaders. Through the School STRONG Initiative, students and teachers will have an outlet for community, technical skills enhancement, and leadership and coaching development. With this program in place, schools will transition from the traditional schooling approach, to an authentically led learning organization.

Preface

During my first year of teaching, I was drowning in classroom management issues and the demands of a curriculum guide (not created by me) with which my students couldn't keep up. I remember sitting after class one day crying, trying to figure out WHY did I go into teaching? Was this the RIGHT choice? I knew I enjoyed the interactions with students: talking about their day, friends, problems; giving advice; one-one-one counseling; conversations about the things they didn't feel comfortable talking to their parents about… It made me realize, I went into the profession for the relationships and the connections, not necessarily the content. During my second year, I started a girls group called "The PINK Ladies." I noticed the girls needed a female role model that would push them outside the box and they were begging for the connection. We did fundraisers for Breast Cancer, self-esteem awareness, vision boards, etc. and I loved every moment. It was then, (4 years ago) my dream began to form.

I wanted to work with students on their personal development, not necessarily the academic side. I wanted to help students realize their potential, dream, and accomplish their goals. I wanted to teach them the skills they needed to be successful advocates for themselves. So, with my foundation in teaching I moved to San Diego and continued to teach, intertwining my love for relationship building in my classroom through activities and projects. Last year when the After-School Coordinator position opened, I was approached by the staff and offered to position, to which I immediately said yes. This was my opportunity to work with the students outside the classroom and really make a difference in their lies, through the avenue of their passions. During that time, I began my Masters at USD and realized the mountain of troubles I would be facing due to the complex systems of schools, families, communities, and even teacher groups. With my own school's design in mind, I started to formulate the ideas of a program that

would address the needs every teacher talk about when it comes to pitfalls of student skills.

Although I know my dream is still a far way off, I know it will make a difference in the lives of

every student and, if implemented widely, the world. My dream now is to be known across the

nation, I will make it big, and it will be because of the beginnings of my work displayed here.

Introduction

With the increased demands of a continually transformative world, schools are falling

short in the preparation of students for success in leadership positions, in addition to technical

life skills outside of the traditional academics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In our new-

found era of Common Core Standards and Next Generation Science Standards, our schools have

attempted to prepare students for a "college and career ready" schooling experience, and in doing

so, a life outside of school in a modern society. Schools have addressed this problem by infusing

technology into the curriculum, encouraging critical thinking skills, and highly rigorous

academic demands. Teachers diligently focus on the skill development of text comprehension,

text analysis, information synthesis, critical thinking, engineering, and problem solving skills.

However, the increased focus on academic skill sets is not enough to support the growth and

achievement of our students in and out of the classroom when it comes to personal and

leadership development. Schools need to transition from the traditional ideas of learning: "sitting

passively in schoolrooms, listening, following directions and avoiding mistakes…[where]

learning has come to be synonymous with 'taking in information,'" (Senge, 2006, p. 13) and

using it to complete a task, and move towards becoming a learning organization where people

can co-create and "continually [expand] its capacity to create its future" (Senge, 2006, p. 14) and

the future of the students.

Where is the Need?

Schools are so overly tunneled on test scores and Lexile (reading) levels that the focus on

academic development trumps any developmental help the student may need in terms of social

and emotional health, soft skills such as communication and leadership, or what I will refer to as

"technical skills" such as organization and time management. This lack of commitment and

vision to the development of ALL components of student needs for success and leadership becomes apparent during the transitional phases between each level of schooling: elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college. During the transitions, it is clear students are lacking the skills needed to be successful in management of the new environment and demands. As a seventh-grade teacher, I have witnessed first-hand the struggles of incoming students during the first weeks of schooling. Not only are students lost finding their classes in a larger and more complex environment, but they are also drowning in the influx of knowledge the first days of school brings with classroom policies, expectations, requirements, etc. Sometimes the first few weeks, teachers (especially at my school site) take time to build relationships with the students while they are learning the new routines. But once the community and relationships between teacher and students are struck, the real academic work begins and grades start to plummet overall. For a seventh grader in this transitional period, it may take some time and additional supports to understand the demands necessary to be successful…but are the schools providing these supports? Are students empowered with the necessary life skills to transition well?

Findings at my School Site

As a teacher at Montgomery Middle School in the Sweetwater Unified High School District, I was curious how the seventh and eighth grade students performed as they progressed Through the two years at my site. Would the seventh-grade students start out low and then succeed by the end of the year once they had built an understanding of the middle school environment? Would I see a more consistent trend with the eighth graders (since they already know what to expect) or would the results mirror the seventh grade? After all, there is still a transition to new teachers, and for some to a new school. To measure the student success during

middle school, I looked at the grades given at the sixth week, twelfth week, and eighteenth week (final week) to gauge how many students received a failing grade as an indication of success. In a comparison of seventh and eighth grade report grades, it became clear that seventh graders take more time to develop proficiency during the first semester, whereas the eighth-grade failure percentages stayed more consistent throughout the year. The following data includes information from Montgomery Middle School with a sample size of 450 seventh-grade students and 449 eighth-grade students, which is the entirety of the school population. Data does not distinguish for language needs, special education needs, or socio-economic status. However, within our school population, 34% of students are English language learners, 13% have special education needs, and 72% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

As seen in Figure 1, the trend for failing grades for seventh grade students begins low with the first progress report and then spikes in core subject areas for the second progress report. One of the factors to consider for this spike of failures is the increase of academic work between the first and second progress report. One-third (two weeks) of our class time prior to the first progress report was spent building relationships and learning about our students and their strengths. During this time, teachers also reviewed the classroom guidelines, expectations, and course details. Therefore, with the first progress report typically accounting for minimal assignments/assessments to base a grade, the second progress report is reveals the true nature of the student's ability to juggle the increased variety of teacher styles, expectations, and work load, in addition to their social relationships and life outside of school. Despite the increase of failures at the second progress report, the numbers drop at the eighteen-week mark. Typically, with the final report card approaching, students not only start to try harder, but they also have a better understanding of the expectations and of each teacher and necessary work ethic needed to pass

each class. Excluding English classes, seventh grade student failures decreased by a significant

amount from the second progress report to the final semester grade: English (+0.9%), Math (-
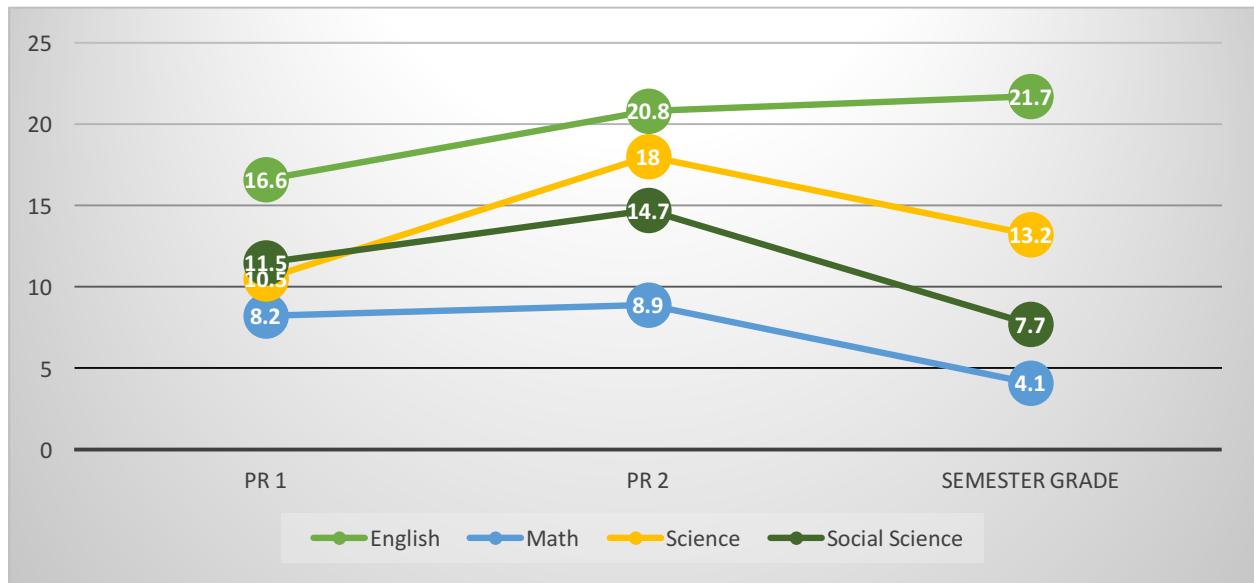
3.8%), Science (-4.8%), History (-7%).

Figure 1: Percentage of Failing Grades Among Seventh-Grade Students During First Semester at Montgomery Middle School (2017 **)**

On the other hand, the eighth-grade students showed more consistent results from the first

progress report through to the final report card. Except for Science, the eighth-grade results as,

shown in Figure 2, display a minimal change in failure rates: English (-0.3%), Math (-4%),

Science (-17.4%), History (-0.8%). This could be attributed to the eighth-grade students'

familiarity with the middle school environment (increased class sizes with decreased

personalized help), technical skills practice from the previous year, established social

relationships, and increased student involvement throughout campus and in the after-school
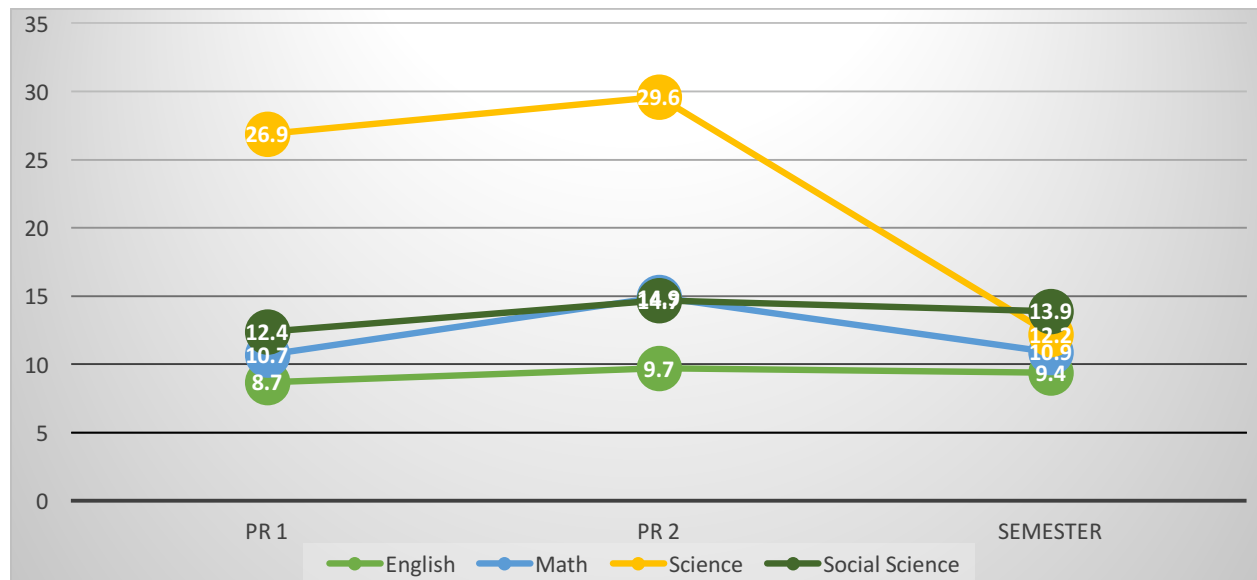
environment.

Figure 2: Percentage of Failing Grades Among Eighth-Grade Students During First Semester at Montgomery Middle School (2017)

With these results, it's clear that seventh grade students struggle more to grasp the demands of middle school, therefore resulting in an increase of failures for the second progress report when the work load increased and norms and procedures had been established, and therefore are expected to be followed without as much guidance. Since eighth grade students are more familiar with the middle school environment, the results remained consistent the entire year. So, what needs to be done to help seventh grade students accommodate and succeed in the middle school environment? What is the missing link for any student that is failing?

What Teachers Want and Students Need

I believe, students are in dire need of guidance and personal coaching in the areas of technical skills: organization, time management, decoding expectations; leadership development: self-initiative, resiliency, grit, self-esteem; and social/emotional support in forming, maintaining, and navigating relationships with peers and adults. Since schools are solely focusing on academic development, there is a larger gap in achievement during the transitional periods because students don't have the necessary skills to manage their learning, take initiative, or step

up as a leader in a new school that pushes them to be more independent. If these additional

technical, and social skills are emphasized more in the traditional school setting, as a result, the

academic achievement of students will increase. Overall, to empower the students to strive and

succeed, especially in times of hardship, schools need to focus on the whole student as an

individual, not just a scholar.

To add on, teachers already want students to develop as complete and independent

individuals. They don't want to train students to memorize, recite, and apply information,

teachers want more from their students! When asked at a faculty meeting what we, as middle

school teachers, want for our students the results were clear. The teachers at Montgomery Middle

School want our students to leave middle school Confident, Resilient, Happy, Resourceful, and

with Grit (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Teacher's hopes for students when the leave middle school: The figure is a compilation
of answers from teachers at Montgomery Middle School; words that appear larger were
mentioned more frequently.

But, despite the good will of teachers for students, the question remains: if educators want these

qualities to be the result of the student's middle school experience, how is it being taught in their

classes? Or even IS it taught in classes? How are the schools supporting this type of growth in the student population? Are these skills taught by scolding students for not finishing their homework, or writing referrals because they are still talking in class, or giving them a zero on a missed assignment, or having an F, or only focusing on the content?

A Systematic Problem

The answer is, most schools and teachers are not focusing on this type of personal growth and leadership because of the focus on standards and making sure the students are "ready" for the next level of education. However, for students to truly be ready for the next level of education, not only do they need the reading, writing, and arithmetic at grade level or higher, but they also need a supporting community, communication skills, organization, time management, healthy relationships and more. The demands put on teachers to rush through content and give out grades takes away from the opportunities of educators to make connections and teach the students something of value that can transcend into every part of their life, not just school.

It is clear the need for personal and leadership development is becoming more and more necessary. The formulation of programs designed to help students in the areas, especially during transitional periods of schooling, most notably the transition to high school and college, proves students need additional help in these areas. However, some of the approaches are ineffective, untimely, or need to be altered to increase student results, success, and confidence in their own skills.

Literature Review

Ninth Grade Transition Programs

Students success rates have always been a concern for education facilities. Beginning with No Child Left Behind, students success determined the success of the teacher and even the

school, threatening jobs and facilities if the expectations were not met. With the new Common

Core Standards, there is a push to perform at the level of the standards to ensure college and

career readiness. However, our students are not performing at grade level in relation to the

standards, as well as not making the cut for high school graduation exit requirements, causing

large drop-out rates, especially in low income and minority populations (McCallumore &

Sparapani, 2010). Many programs and schools believe the ninth-grade year is a pivot point to

success to high school, with achievement rates in ninth-grade being a good indicator of future

high school success and ultimately, graduation with "81% of the students who ended freshman

year on-track went on to graduate within four years and 85% of students graduated within five

years" in the Chicago Public School system (Royal, Thorton & Usinger, 2014). In addition,

"ninth-graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of

failing grades, and more missed behavior referrals that any other high school level"

(McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 448); a gloomy picture considering ninth grade is the

window to comprehensive high school success.

As a result, institutions are beginning to take on the responsibility to create transitional

programs in attempt to increase student success during the ninth-grade year and beyond.

Many ninth-grade transition programs tend to focus their efforts on two areas of emphasis:

academic achievement and the belonging and connectedness to the schools via relationships with

peers, teachers, and an established school culture. The transition programs can take on a variety

of forms from a single day to an entire year.

In my own experience, my high school provided an open house prior to the beginning the

school year where students could pick up their schedules, take our school picture, and review any

necessary paperwork from the school, including a map and student schedule. Furthermore, the

first day of high school was designated for freshman students only. This provided an opportunity for students to find their classes in a less chaotic environment, meet teachers, and search out peers. I felt this was an adequate transition because in that one day, I figured out where my classes were, which was my biggest worry.

Other ninth grade programs are more inclusive to the freshman population. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010), found that some schools form a team of teachers for only ninth grade students in the core subject areas. This allowed students to have a similar and shareable experience, thus building a community through class discussions in and out of the classrooms. Teachers also are a part of the community since the whole team knows all freshman students. This type of program also gives the teachers a chance to work together to provide interventions and mitigation when necessary for freshmen or "at-risk" students.

Despite the positives, this system would not work in all schools What if freshmen are on an advanced track and begin high school at a tenth or eleventh grade level math class, or if they want to take AP courses early to earn college credits? Most of these higher-level classes would need to be mixed level, therefore if this type of program were in place, ninth grade students may miss out on advancement opportunities academically as well as increased exposure to the rest of the school community and potential leadership opportunities. If freshmen only interact with freshmen in their classes, and the only chance to have cross-exposure is in the hallways and lunchrooms, there is a possibility that it would take longer to have the courage to be in a leadership organization in non-academic clubs, sports, or activities. How will they learn about enrichment opportunities which, in turn, could aid the development of these students finding their authentic selves and leadership? Throughout the graduate classes in our program I have come to realize the importance of diversity on growth and development, leadership, and change.

When exposed to diverse populations and opinions, one can learn more about other cultures, analyze biases and beliefs, and reflect and grow as a while. If the freshman experience is limited to a single exposure group within the classrooms, how will this create biased ideologies or hinder their social emotional and leadership development?

Even further, some schools create a "Freshman Academy" where freshmen students are taught by only specific teachers, but also secluded from the rest of the school in their own wing/area of the school. Not only will the students have the same teachers, but they also have the added comfort of being secluded from the larger student population. This helps decrease the stress of a new and larger environment while nudging ninth grade students into the high school experience and rigorous demands of the classes without the social burden of actually being lost in the larger school physically, socially, or emotionally. Despite the gains of a Freshman Academy: "improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parent contact" (McCallumore and Sparpani, 2010, p. 451), there are some immediate drawbacks also recognized by the researchers, specifically the social divide between the ninth-grade students and teachers from the rest of the high school community (McCallumore and Sparpani, 2010). This could be the most detrimental transitional program because although there are clear academic gains during the ninth-grade year (which in some research helps determine success in the years beyond), the schools are setting them up from failure in the tenth-grade year. The Freshman Academy program style is simply delaying the effects of the transition until tenth grade by providing a sheltered space during ninth grade. Students do not have the opportunity to mingle with other grade levels which limits their experience, and as stated previously, could limit their potential to join groups, enrichment activities, and sports which could lead to further self-discovery or leadership.

The programs designed for the ninth-grade transition have only the students' academic success truly in mind, even when they claim to build community and belongingness, it is only to the freshman experience and not to the high school experience. None of the programs for the ninth-grade transition provide any opportunities for leadership development, an apparent gap that is not addressed until most students reach a college level of education. If leadership were addressed earlier, the transition on to high school, in addition to later transitions into college and the work place my not showcase such dramatic decreases of achievement.

College Transitional and Leadership Programs

Colleges and universities have begun to recognize the need to increase students' self-awareness and leadership capabilities in the recent years, focusing again on the freshman population as they transition into college and, consequently, leading into the transition to the work place after college. With an ever-changing work environment, it seems there is a new trend or concept for the work force each month. Trends in technology and the evolution of start-up, corporate, local businesses, make the work place fluid and searching for adaptable leaders. Many institutions around the world have recognized that honing on the academic requirements of college students is not enough to guarantee preparation for jobs after college. As a result, many colleges are beginning to include leadership and technical skills development to prepare students for the years ahead.

For instance, my youngest brother attends Midland University in Fremont, NE. During a visit, I noticed in the student life center there was a board dedicated to the Gallup Strengths and Talents. The board showcased the "Strength of the Week" and providing a little reading material about that strength and how to use it. Upon seeing it, I recognized this as a small glimpse of building authenticity in the student population; helping students identify and take ownership of

their talents, and then focusing and aiming those talents into strengths. I inquired about the program put in place to address the student strengths and he shared it was part of a "Freshman 101" class that was required for all freshman students entering Midland University. The logistics of the class include sharing campus resources, time management, organization, and other basic technical skills necessary to juggle the demands and freedoms of college. My brother admitted that he did not take full advantage of the class, to which I deduced he was not given enough authentic opportunities to use these skills, and if he did have those opportunities, they were unappealing or irrelevant to him. So how could the program change? Was the strengths assessment and resources utilized to the best ability? Did the strengths initiative have any impact on authentic leadership capacity? Hopefully, the instructors are asking these same questions, or others based on the feedback received through course evaluations. This class could potentially increase student success as seen in Hong Kong.

Other universities are taking exponentially larger approaches to leadership development by requiring a credit-bearing course to address how incoming students "are less mature and often not ready for the responsibility of being in college… many student lack the resilience and are unable to summon strategies to cope… many students are often not prepared to be young 'adults' with all the responsibilities of life" (Shek, 2013, p. 48). Considering this, Hong Kong University developed a "Course for Tomorrow's Leaders" which included outcomes addressing: theories and research of effective Chinese leaders, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, self-reflection, and the pursuit of knowledge (Shek, 2013, p. 51). Although the class was only one semester, through post-course feedback forms, students seemed to enjoy the interactive delivery and collaboration the course included with 90% of the students saying the course was helpful to them in terms of holistic development and leadership, 94% said it helped them increase self-esteem. This shows

that if a curriculum were included into the core day, it may produce the most gains in leadership and holistic development. Despite the success of this program left wondering if the results would be similar in a different culture or education system, such as the middle school environment.

Furthermore, students are beginning to ask for more opportunities to practice and explore leadership possibilities. But, even with the increase of leadership programs, are they truly effective? Pharmaceutical and medical programs are implementing many leadership-based programs for their graduates based on the number of articles focused on this field when researching "student leadership programs" in EBSCO Host, an academic journal search engine. Despite the increase, the focus on adult education trends of teaching theories and practices don't seem to be making the cut once students graduate. In one article "Student Perspectives on Student Leadership Development Programs" from the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* (2014), the student claims the "Information does not seem immediately applicable to students" [and]… by understanding their ability to implement change now, students are better empowered to make changes as a pharmacist" (p. 78). College students are craving leadership opportunities that are engaging and relevant to their own lives, and through that experience, students can be more prepared to step into leadership roles once they are outside the classroom walls. Universities and colleges need to consider this, and take a play from how to teach and engage youth, when creating a leadership program.

Youth Leadership Program Exploration

Through my research, I found it difficult to find academic literature on leadership development of youth and specifically the middle school population. With the void of research on youth leadership development prior to high school, I turned to Google for a sense of the leadership development environment available to students. My search brought back millions of

results, however none of the programs I looked through seemed to address the executive

functioning skills, community building, and leadership all in one.

In exploration of the top searches my findings are as follows: Growing Leaders has a

focus of preparing students for real life by presenting them with "real-life challenges [that] call

for real-life leadership." The company has a whole section for middle/high school, however

when you click on the link for "Leadership Development" it only provides a high school

curriculum. The National Youth Leadership Council does have a focus on youth in the

"formative years" which can be defined by the World Health Organization (2018) website as 0-8

years old. Despite this they do have programming for older students with a solid focus on

developing leaders through service learning projects. Although the focus of service learning

could reinforce authentic leadership development and empowerment of youth, The John W.

Gardner Center also focuses on "Youth Engaged in Leadership Learning" (YELL) and can

provide a handbook to guide schools and groups through leadership development when they are

working on community-based projects. The YELL program was implemented included "350

middle schools and high school youth in two Bay Area communities [over the course] of six

years" (John W. Gardner Center, 2007). The downfall to this program is it is only implemented

in after school settings which limits the exposure to students. The "Students Against Destructive

Decisions" program prepares students for adulthood through youth leadership development,

however it focuses more on the sills that are needed to be successful in the workplace such as

"forming and working within diverse coalitions and working groups, fundraising, event

management, public health prevention, and working with the media, civic, and business leaders"

(Students Against Destructive Decisions, 2018). Through the program, students can choose to

participate on a community, state, or national level, but there is no apparent curriculum or

emphasis on school-wide development. In continuation, ASPIRA, an organization to inspire Latino youth has developed a comprehensive curriculum focusing on leadership development such as: types of leadership, power in leadership, the leadership process, as well as life skills such as: balancing a checking accounts, study skills, and time management (ASPIRA, 2016). The comprehensive curriculum is to be implemented over the course of four years starting in ninth grade or middle school, which also fits the student's population. Despite this, the program is still run through an ASPIRA club, meaning it is during after school time and can only address the needs of a specific and smaller student population.

Through the investigation of each leadership program, trends that make a successful leadership program became apparent: students need an opportunity to apply their leadership skills, an opportunity to form a group or community connections, smaller groups sizes (since most are implemented on a small level during out of school time), and a change to advocate for themselves or others.

Susan Redmon and Pat Dolan from UNESCO also developed a conceptual model of youth leadership development which focuses on the necessary skills, environmental conditions, and action necessary to facilitate youth leadership development programs. The program model is summarized below in Figure 4:
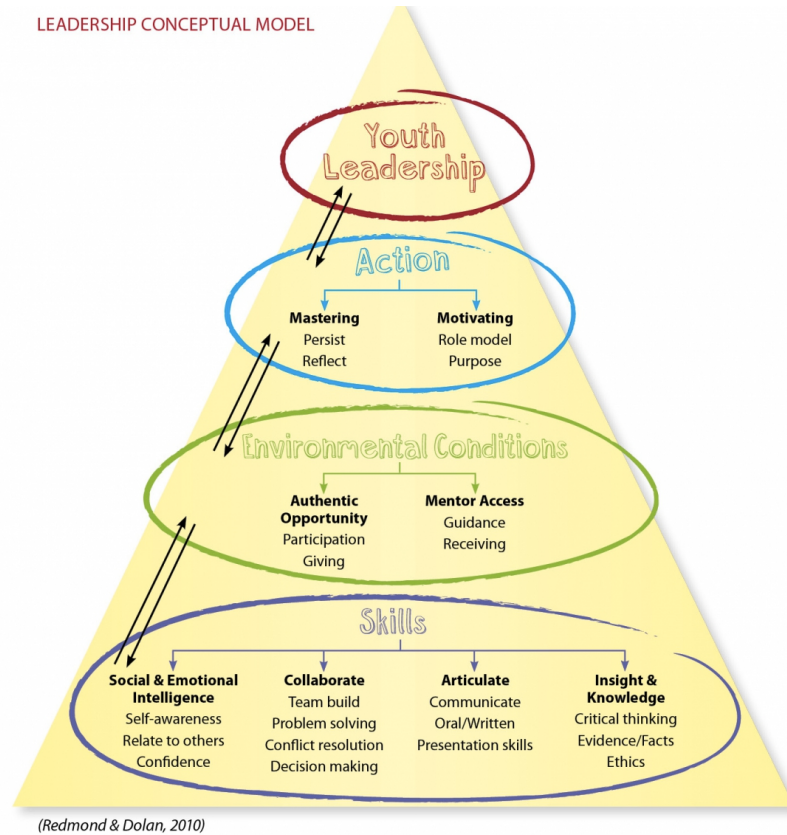
Figure 4: Redmond and Dolan's Conceptual Model of Youth Leadership Development

With this holistic leadership approach, if a program could implement the model, it could create an opportunity like no other. Redmon and Dolan claim that first youth need to develop skills in social emotional intelligence, collaboration, articulation, and insight and knowledge. To do this a program must include opportunities for increased self-awareness, relations and clear communication to others, and the technical skills necessary to solve problems. After the skills, youth must be given authentic, genuine opportunities to practice these leadership skills and learn through the process; this is paralleled by a connection to mentorship, both receiving and giving. R. Govan, J. Fernandez, D Lewis, and B. Krishner's (2015) idea of positive relationships coincides saying "relationships are critical to community organizing work and are pivotal to the leadership development of youth…[organizing] as either intergenerational, youth-adult

partnerships, or youth-centered" as forms of mentoring. After skills education and environmental needs are addressed, student transition into continued practice through mastery and motivation towards others or through a purpose. Govan et. al. suggests "valu[ing] youth voice and engage[ment] in decision making" (2015, p. 92). This would allow youth to take ownership of what they are doing and find passion in practicing the leadership skills they have learned.

R. Govan, J. Fernandez, D Lewis, and B. Krishner (2015) also advocate for active engagement and planning and decision making such as through extended opportunities for leadership such as: "participation on committees, recruiting peers, strategic planning for discussions, and public speaking opportunities. (Govan et. al., 2015, p. 95).

Overall, the need for students and youth to learn the necessary skills for leadership, coupled with authentic options to apply those skills, and furthermore valuable relationships with adults and those of their own community seems to be the backbone of what it takes to develop youth leaders who can function, advocate, and encourage themselves and others. However, as stated previously, most youth leadership programs are falling short by these standards, and none (including the conceptual model) provide the comprehensive experience to prepare students to be holistically successful in life outside of schooling in the work place, in new environments, in their own specific futures. How can one step into a leadership position without being able to manage the basics of time or organize accounts? Students and youth need a program that addresses all aspects of a student's development and as a result will increase leadership and ultimately each student's level of success.

My Solution: The "School STRONG Initiative"

To combat these quandaries, middle schools should begin to implement a mandatory small-group, student-centered personal and leadership development program, imbedded into the

school day, every day. It would provide students with the education and training to apply

technical and life skills, as well as time for teachers and students to hone in on the social and

emotional needs of each student. Borrowing from the conceptual model of youth leadership

development, the trends present throughout the literature of what makes an effective transitional

program, theories and practice developed through my progression of the coaching certificate, and

the foundation of my teaching experience and perceived needs of middle school students, I have

developed the Student Strong Initiative. Through this specified time, teachers could also

empower students with leadership skills and opportunities which could ripple throughout their

life. If this development begins in middle school, students will be more prepared for success

during the middle years, and they will be able to replicate the success during the following

transitional phases into high school and college. By empowering students with the technical

skills, a community to address the social, emotional, and a focus on leadership development,

students will be more triumphant in the now and in the later years of their life, finding more

triumphs and opportunities as they emerge.

Why Middle School?

The School STRONG Initiative is a year-long course beginning during the first year of

middle school (typically seventh grade) and implemented throughout the middle school years,

ages 11-13. Beginning this work at the middle school age is of the upmost importance due to the

progression of the developmental stages during the middle school years. As Owen states, "the

theories of student learning and development are particularly important to leadership

education… because leadership development and human development are inextricably

intertwined" (2012, p. 17-18). Therefore, when considering leadership development, we must

also consider the psychosocial development of the child. According the Erickson's stages of

development, students at this age are near the end of the Industry vs. Inferiority stage where it is

necessary for them to cope with new social and academic demands; success in this realm leads to

feelings of competence, and failure leads to feelings of inferiority (Leibowitz, 2018). This stage

of development starts at ages five and continues through middle school. It is clear when a student

walks into a class, they already have mental models in relation to their self-worth or competence

for a specific subject area. As teachers, we must try to break down these mental models of

inferiority and build more competence before the academic rigors of high school define our

students based on ability even more. In my experience, when students find someone believes in

them in their area of weakness, they are willing to try and improve because of that held belief.

        Furthermore, middle school students may also be transitioning into the Identity vs. Role

Confusion stage (ages 12-18 years) which is the time when teenagers are developing a sense of

self; success leading to trueness of identity and failure leading to a weak sense of self

(Leibowitz, 2018). By focusing on the authentic development of teenagers as individuals and

leaders in middle school, teachers and the institution can help students find community and

belonging. Alongside community, we can aid students in the identification of who they are as a

person; helping them claim and develop parts of their own identity, and eventually take on

leadership through real action opportunities, reflection, and mindfulness. By developing

students' leadership skills and giving them the space to explore and implement those skills, the

positive interactions could result in a more positive self-identity and self-worth. Leadership

development prior to this age would be ineffective because youth are coping with entering the

school environment with new academic and social expectations and rules; until those are

mastered, leadership development cannot occur. Based on my findings, I have concluded

students need an opportunity to develop school knowledge, technical skills to be successful in

the schooling environment, and leadership skills development in a structured, small, community-based environment.

Student Strong Initiative Overview

      Program Mission.

      Empower and encourage students to take control of their success and leadership potential through guided curriculum, mentoring, authentic opportunities, and group/individualized coaching to develop a holistic individual whom is proficient in technical and leadership skills.

      Program Vision.

      Students will be empowered to take initiative in their academics, build relationships with various groups, and accept and thrive in leadership opportunities on and off campus.

Overall Program Design

In designing the School STRONG Initiative curriculum model (Figure 5) I borrowed the concepts form Redmon and Dolan and enhanced upon their ideas to address the needs of the whole individual. The model comprehensively addresses the leadership development, technical development, coaching, systems in play, and individual results to represent the process and influences students and teachers will be concerned with as they journey through the middle school years together.

      Teachers will focus on a specific skill each week to address either technical skills (yellow) or leadership skills (blue). Then, after teaching/completing activities specific to the development of the skill, students will be coached, by the teacher, focusing on each student's personal goal in relation to the weekly focus. The coaching cannot begin until there is an established respect and trust between teacher and student and peer to peer. Therefore, the first

few weeks of SSI will remain on the outer circles of the model until the community and internal

system is formed to provide the environmental experiences outlined in Figure 5. Authentic

opportunities will come from the systems in play to practices these skills, as well as, access to

the resources and people who can help students along the way during classes, through

participation in clubs and sports teams, and in the home and community environment. The

system of the administrative/school leadership team will influence this process by providing

continued support to the teachers as they guide students during and alongside their own journey

of growth. Once students have the environmental conditions to practice the skills, they will put

them into action: consistently practicing and mastering the skills to find what works for them.

Furthermore, students will then be able to become a mentor to their own peers or to students a

grade-level below. Through mentoring, and outside opportunities, students can fine-tune their

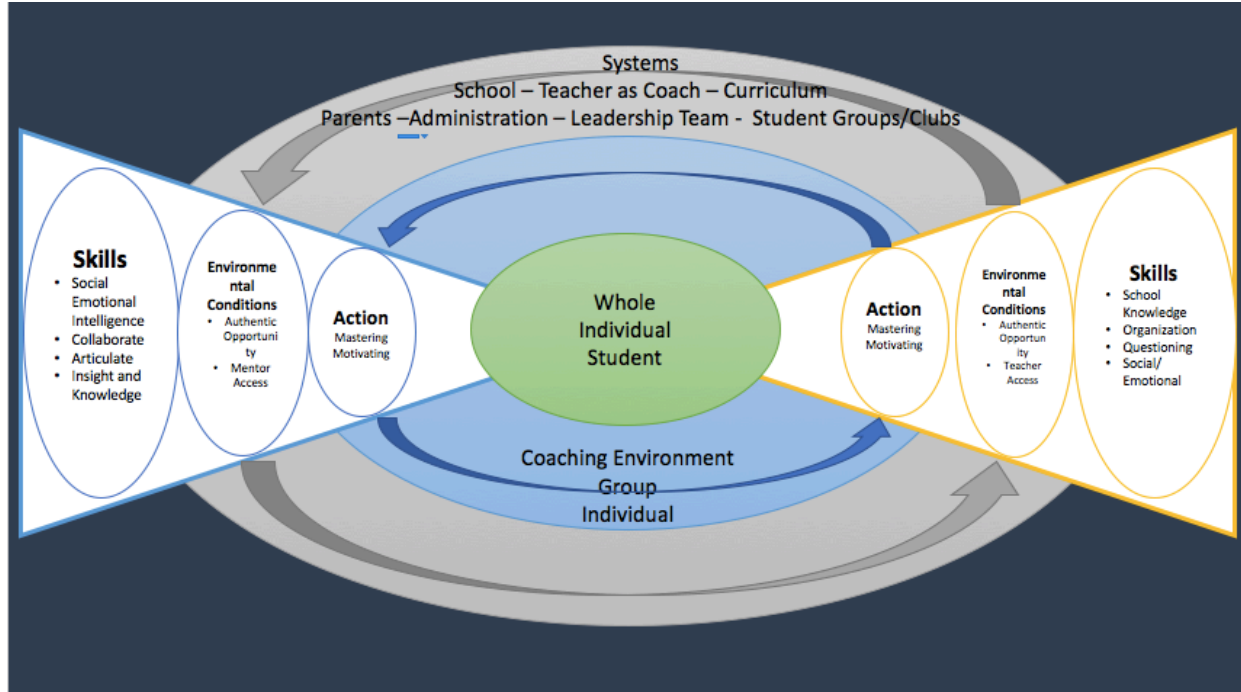technical skills and practice leadership skills.

Figure 5: The School STRONG Initiative Curriculum Model

Due to the intricacies and all systems at play in the model, the School Strong Initiative requires implementation in two waves: first with a focus on teachers, once established, then the focus can refocus on the students and their success, growth, and development through these formative years.

Through this process and the implementation of the Learning model, the school will begin its transformation to a learning organization. With an emphasis on the systems in play in the school, as well as those that influence the students outside of school, teacher leaders can begin to address the systems and not only focus on the here and now of a student's behavior and success. Personal Mastery comes through the continual practice of goal-setting, reflection and coaching by both teachers and students as they journey through the year together. During the coaching, teachers and students will also be able to analyze and check-in with their own mental models on what perceptions are present towards schooling should look like, and how this system will influence that system. Furthermore, by building on the teachers desired traits for students, the leadership team at the school site can begin to build a shared vision. This can be replicated further by asking students a similar question and adding to the vision. Then, the curriculum and learning design simply become a pathway towards achieving this vision. Additionally, if leaders, teachers, and students see problems within the culture of the learning organization, such as an influx of bullying, diminishing these actions becomes another part of the shared vision and the curriculum can be modified to a new weekly focus based on the needs. Finally, be building communities between teachers, teachers and students, and peer to peer for students, each person will be on their own path to success, but with their community behind them. Groups will go through the learning as a team to change the school as a while organization. By integrating these

disciplines in a school setting, the increased and constant exposure could result in a more holistic

developmental experience.

Program Design: Wave One- "Teacher STRONG"

School Strong Initiative is a two-part program design with the first wave focusing on

teacher competencies and buy- in, and the second wave honing-in on the actual needs of students

to develop and cultivate success academically and personally as a student and leader. Teachers

need to be the ones to implement the program because they are frequently in contact and

available to the student population. Therefore, emphasizing the focus on teachers and their belief

in the program is pivotal to the long-term success of the curriculum, as well as the

implementation of the curriculum throughout the year. By building a shared vision based on the

teachers concerns and desires for their students, and connecting it to the School STRONG

Initiative, educators will begin to see how the implementation of the program will be effective.

Also, by focusing on teachers during the first year, this provides time to develop a new

competency of coaching and an opportunity to experience success personally by going through a

similar type of program for the duration of the training.

In addition to the professional development and training, teachers will be placed in

"Teacher STRONG" groups of 5-7 teachers. Teacher STONG will provide the opportunity to

enhance team learning where teachers can improve to "create the results [they] truly desire"

(Senge, 2006, pg. 218) for their students as previously seen in Figure 3. This group will be in

service of sharing best practices, answering questions, and finding solutions on behalf of the

work in the SSI program. This group would be mirror the concept of a coaching circle; a space

where teachers can find community amongst themselves and share their experiences, challenges,

and successes. In this community, teachers can also find support as they learn and grow in their

own leadership abilities together. Teachers can also use this space to debrief discussions and identify and address their own biases in play. In theory, it would give teachers an authentic opportunity to reflect upon their role in the system as a leader, mentor, and individual; through this process teachers may learn more about themselves and develop a more authentic understanding of who they are as an individual and leader to students and peers. As referenced by Elena Aguilar (2013), Julian Weissglass insists "educators deserve support in processing emotions…reform programs that address only the cognitive and behavioral aspects of educator' professional lives neglect an important part of their humaneness and fall short of fully attending to the empowerment of teachers" (p. 166). Without the teacher STRONG groups, teachers will not fully be equipped to guide students and address their needs through the journey; teachers need this additional support for the program to be a success.

The teacher training prior to execution of the SSI program should occur one school quarter, even up to one year in advance of the student initiative. The amount of time necessary would be dependent upon the school's culture and climate in relation to teacher pedagogy, beliefs, and adoption of the coaching mindset. After the initial training of teachers, each consecutive year would consist of a two-day training prior to the beginning of the school year. There, teachers will review the program curriculum and learn/review the basics of how to coach vs. teach. Teachers will also receive training on types of organization, time management, and the Gallup strengths program. Teachers may also begin their coaching practice with peer to peer coaching focusing on the individual goals teachers have for themselves and their teaching or coaching practice. By teachers having a goal to work towards, similarly to how the students will have goals they are working towards, they will be able to experience the coaching process first hand prior to applying it in a group or individual setting with the students, increasing team

learning in the process. Additionally, teachers will have interim training days each semester to fine tune skills, learn new approaches, activities, the chance to discuss challenges and successes, and more chances for professional coaching. Teachers are the key to ultimate success in this arena, so enough time should be dedicated to showing them how this is worth their time and dedication.

This is the first step in transforming the school in to a new learning organization, however due to the time constraints associated with the program, I have not focused on the training development design or samples for the teacher training part of the Student Strong Initiative. My plan is to continue to work with the leaders at my site, Montgomery Middle School, to design such a program resulting in a full curriculum, participant booklet, and implementation timeline.

Program Design: Wave Two- "Student Strong Initiative"

The School STRONG Initiative (SSI) is structured to have one teacher per, no more than 20 students for 40-50 minutes per day. Each week, the curriculum will provide a "Weekly Focus" to be taught or discussed through various activities. Students will begin by addressing the needs of school knowledge prior to any skills development. Students will become familiar with the school layout, schedule, policies and procedures of the school and each class, just to name a few. Then, students will transition into the technical and leadership skills development. Through the activities and teaching, students will learn a variety of ways to implement the weekly focus. Figure 6 references some of the skills or leadership topics to be address and the variety of ways that will be presented to the students as options.

Skill/Leadership Focus	Various Forms of Implementation
Organization	• Binder organization • iPad Notability organization • Notebooks and folders organization • Google Drive organization- folders
Mindfulness	• Meditation • Journal reflections • Sitting practice, Centering, Heart Smiling • Breathing exercises/yoga
Presentation Skills	• Structured Speeches • Debates • iMovies • Advertisements and posters
Reflection	• Journaling • Taped recordings • Coaching conversations • Questionnaires

Figure 6: Example of the variety of approaches to a weekly focus

After the students are taught the technical skill, or have participated in an activity to build more authenticity, leadership skills, etc. students will then set a bi-weekly or monthly goal. After the goals have been set, the following week(s) will consist of community building, group coaching, and individualized coaching led by the teacher. This process will provide a constant loop of growth and reflection, with consistent and specific accountability for each student, represented by Figure 7. As the figure shows the students will learn a skill, discover multiple way of implementation, which will lead to a goal, coaching will address those goals, students will reflect and either create new goals, continue with coaching, or move on to the next skill. Through this process, relationships and community will be built innately, and students should witness success not only academically, but personally as well.

The constant loop of learning allows students to identify individual areas of growth and development in both realms: technical and leadership. Students can take control of their learning and their goals in a way that is rarely available to them in regular classes with an assigned

curriculum. Even though each week has a focus, students can still design their own experience

with their own, personalized goals. This pushes the students to take initiative of their growth,

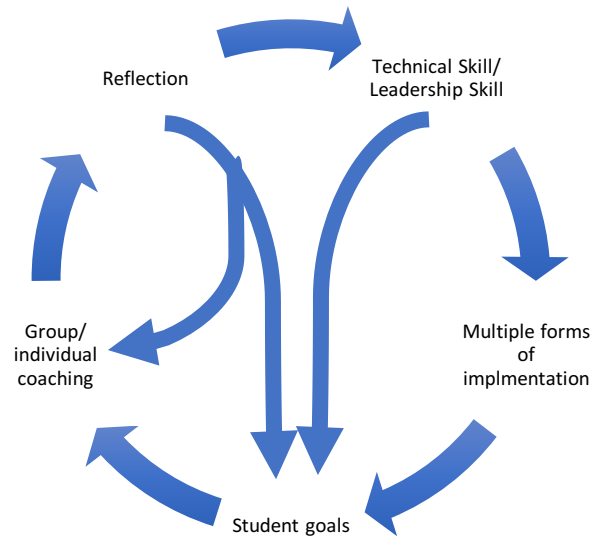establishes best practices that can be applied at any age or in any field, and includes

Reflection

Technical Skill/
Leadership Skill

Group/
individual
coaching

Multiple forms
of
implmentation

Student goals

Figure 7: Loop of learning in the Student Strong Initiative

constant accountability; this accountability is key to success due to the age of students and

primary exposure to many of the skills. The teacher also holds the power to challenge or push the

students along in their journey based on the desired outcomes.

Through the program and constant learning loops, students can learn more about

themselves: strengths, weaknesses, balconies, basements, dreams, and challenges all while begin

integrated into a supportive environment where it's "okay" to take risks and explore. This system

affords students the chance to reflect upon themselves and cultivate the change they want to

create within. In doing so, students learn more about themselves and find their authenticity and

ability to perform and lead.

Additionally, part of the Student STRONG Initiative would be a focus on student talents utilizing the Gallup Strengths Explorer. By having students take the Strengths Explorer assessment and taking the time to help student name, claim, and aim their talents, students will begin to develop an authentic understanding of who they are and WHY they are this way. The Strengths Explorer can help students find a more authentic version of themselves. At Montgomery Middle School, we have moved forward with the "Strengths Initiative" by having all students take the assessment and participate in activities throughout the year to help students name and claim their strengths. It has transformed many components of our school already. When students are "in trouble" teachers and administrators can shift the conversation to the students' strengths and how to channel those strengths instead of constant focus on the negatives. Students can now own who they are and can vocalize where they are using their strengths, or how they could use them to complete a task. Students realize they aren't "bad" kids, they have their strengths and they can use them to modify their own behaviors. Not only that, but it has given teachers and students a common language and insight into our relationships among each other.

Our "Strengths Initiative" has also provided leadership opportunities for a small group of students as "Strengths Leaders." These students have been given an authentic opportunity to own their strengths and become the face of change on our campus by leading activities, planning events, and engaging their peers in authentic discussions about who they are and at what they are good. This step has created huge change at our campus. Can you imagine if it were compounded and implemented in a more focused approach? Can you imagine the learning that would result? This could be the power of the School STRONG Initiative.

Potential Measurements

Although not yet created, it is my plan to have a well-designed measurement tool in place at the beginning of implementation of the School STRONG Initiative. The measurement tool would, in theory, be a survey conducted at the beginning of middle school, after each year, and into beginning of ninth grade. Students would use the survey to measure their technical and leadership skills as established throughout the curriculum. Students would also measure their implementation of these skills outside of the school environment to determine if the skill shave become an innate practice or if they are simply doing the skill because of the curriculum in place. By extending the survey into the ninth-grade year, we will be able to see the impact of our program and the skills taught and practiced outside of the supportive environment.

Desired Outcomes and Practices

This system provides students with a unique opportunity to focus on their weaknesses and areas of concern, all while building a knowledge base of opportunity and practice in a safe environment. With the foundational technical skills in place, alongside the leadership development, is can be assumed that ninth-grade transition programs will no longer be necessary because students will be empowered with the skills to be successful in a new environment after 2-3 years of practice. In addition, if we start the leadership development in middle school, imagine the impact if this type of development were continued throughout high school! Our students would enter college with the skill sets and knowledge of how to not only be successful, but also how to be a change agent and leader on their campus and hopefully into the world beyond.

Leadership Implications

The School STRONG Initiative is designed to enhance the authentic leadership capabilities of students starting in middle school. Throughout the program's weekly foci, students will develop a better sense of self and therefore more authenticity. This will be facilitated through self-discovery of the student via reflections, coaching with the teacher, and discussion with peers. In addition, students will have an environment and opportunities to put what they learn into action, giving them an opportunity to see what works and does not work for them, and in doing so, create an authentic leadership style.

This program also aligns with the Adaptive Leadership Theory by playing a vital role in addressing the adaptive challenge of student success rates with more than technical solutions. Many schools, including my site, are responsive to student failure with an intervention or credit recovery. But then, those same students are in the interventions week after week, year after year. This reaction is not an appropriate or effective solution and will not create sustained change. Schools look at the problem from an adaptive theory lens, analyze and consider the systems at play and how they affect the individual and the group. Not only that, but schools need to recognize the role they play in the system and what they can provide each student, not just a mind. This lens of theory should be continually used through the progression of the program to modify the focus when necessary to meets the needs of the internal demands of the adaptive challenge, instead of only looking at the surface. Students need more than another opportunity to take a class, they need guidance and support and the skills to function in the middle school environment. By moving towards the transformational approach of schools being a learning organization, we will truly be able to prepare our pupils for any challenge and leadership ahead.

Further Implications

In the future, I would like to pilot this learning and curriculum model with my own class or school-wide during an advisory or homeroom class. A program like this would take the cohesive decision of the entire teaching staff which can take time. In addition, finding a school to onboard with this program and the necessary mindset changes, as well as time constraints hinders the rapid growth of the program. Due to the nature of the timing of my graduate program, I could not feasibly implement the curriculum design and model. I would also like to continue the development of the curriculum (Appendix A) and the measurement tools and then, the implementation of the program. After implementation, it would be fascinating to see if a change was made in the students' and teachers' mindsets about school, the learning organization, community, and academics. Even further implementation could extend this type of model into a high school environment and beyond. Research could then be furthered to include student academic success and enrichment enrollment rates during the ninth-grade transitional period and throughout high school. With this data, the program can continually evolve to meet the needs of the students and the teachers to ensure academic and personal success and confidence.

Conclusion

To sum it up, schools need to change the ways they are teaching students and what the system is teaching them. By implementing the School STRONG Initiative, students will be able to connect with teachers and peers on a new level to create a true community. Students will also be provided individualized, yet guided personal development via the weekly focus and coaching sessions with their teacher leader. Through this coaching, students will authentically learn more about themselves. Students and teachers will also have authentic opportunities to apply their learning in and out of the classroom by participating in the co-creative coaching relationship, external

leadership opportunities, and within regular classes. With the continual practice, students and teachers will work towards mastery of all skills and towards the creation of their own leadership style. Hopefully, through this process, students will have more success in classes (especially during transitional periods), teachers and students will have a mutual language and mindset on which to center learning and leadership. This program could truly change the trajectory for every student and teacher involved. It could reform our school system. It could change the future.

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Appendix A

Curriculum Overview Example

Week	Outcomes	Activities	Resources
1	**Weekly Focus: School Knowledge** Students will begin to develop community through relationships and connections between peers and the teacher. Students will be able to recall class schedule, teacher names, and location of classes within the school. Students will be able to identify policies and procedures of each teacher by conducting a teacher interview and/or break down of the syllabus.	Various ice-breakers (1-2 each day at the discretion of the teacher and/or students) Class schedule and school map color coding Review of the school schedule (periods, breaks, lunch, etc.) Syllabus questionnaire	Schedule Highlighting Handout and Presentation List of Ice-Breakers Teacher Interview Question Sheet
2	**Weekly focus: Organization** Students will identify and try 3-5 organization strategies Using the strategies as a guide, students will formulate a personal goal with an organization focus.	Binder, Notablilty, notebook, bullet journal, folder organization techniques and presentations SMART goal mini-lesson Student goal setting	Organization techniques presentation Student goal setting sheet
3	**Weekly focus: Organization** Students will reflect upon their goal and modify or maintain their goal by completing a reflection activity and a group coaching discussion	Review of organization techniques Reflection sheet Group coaching discussion- successes, struggles, areas for growth Mindfulness practice	Importance of mindfulness TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes 5-minute guided mindfulness Coaching questions with the four quadrants of Human Experience Positive Reflection sheet
4	**Weekly Focus: Student Strengths** Students will complete the Gallup Strengths Explorer to identify their top three strengths. Students will analyze their strengths profiles and reflect on how their strengths are present in their daily lives.	Ice breakers/mindfulness Strengths Explorer assessment Strengths Report highlighting activity Strengths Story activity	Ice breaker and mindfulness list Strengths Explorer access codes Strengths analysis activity-highlighting and strengths story
5	**Weekly Focus: Student Strengths** Students will make connections between their strengths and different aspects of their life. Students will describe their strengths in their own words Students will reflect on how their strengths can assist in their organization goal.	Strengths Scavenger hunt Goal Reflection One-on-one coaching for each student in relation to strengths, organization goals, and personal life.	Strengths Scavenger hunt sheet and presentation Positive Reflection sheet Coaching questions- GROW model

*Curriculum would be shared via Google Drive to include hyperlinks for the various handouts