

Leading from the strawberry fields:

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP IN SANTA MARIA

Interacting with field-worker parents in their workplace helped develop a deeper understanding of school leadership's role in working across constituencies to support equitable educational opportunities for their children.

Goal No. 2 of the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District's Local Control and Accountability Plan speaks specifically to the issues of cultural proficiency and parent engagement. "Using supplemental and concentration funding, our district is working to 'create a culture of respect and caring that supports positive relationships among stakeholders' – as identified in our goal," said Santa Maria JUHSD Superintendent Mark Richardson.

As parents, community members and educators from across the Santa Maria community have engaged in school-community talks focused on recent increases in gang-related violence plaguing the community, a partnership among Santa Maria High School, Santa Maria Joint Union High School District, Santa Maria Bonita School District and the Santa Maria Police Department took the advice of one community member, leading to an unintended positive consequence.

Arnulfo Romero, a prominent member of the community, suggested a positive step forward might be to have stakeholders visit parents at their work settings, since many of the parents' work schedules do not conform to traditional parent meeting times. Romero thought the joint action by the school district and police department could lead to

building stronger community ties, thereby developing trust.

He felt that if change was ever going to happen it would require an organic and new approach, such as visiting parents at their work sites. In the case of Santa Maria, near the Southern California coast, the parents work in the local strawberry fields. School personnel did not often visit homes, and certainly never the workplaces of migrant workers.

The authors of this article have been engaged with colleagues studying the Tools of Cultural Proficiency as a means to narrow and close access and academic achievement gaps experienced by far too many of our students. Our study has led us to immerse ourselves into the leadership work of researcher Carolyn Shields.

We have learned it is important to differentiate transactional exchange processes and transformational internal improvement processes from internal/external transformative processes that involve the community in substantive ways. In doing so, we learned that it is important to recognize, value and utilize the assets possessed by the parents

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and agencies in our community.

“Through hard work and dedication, our staff is building an organization that strives to be responsive to our parents and our community,” Richardson said.

As a result of our journey toward becoming culturally proficient, we are gradually shifting from a school-centric to a community-centric perspective – exactly the perspective propounded by Romero and other community members.

Santa Maria High School is in the early stages of moving to an organizational culture that embraces transformative leadership through our understanding of and work toward cultural proficiency. Transformative leadership is evidenced when all stakeholders are working collectively, courageously and collaboratively.

The vision and mission of school and community leaders includes meeting the needs of students from our diverse student-parent communities. Moving in the direction of our vision and mission requires building a more authentic and deeper trust among the Santa Maria Police Department and the two Santa Maria school districts in which a focus on student achievement just might ameliorate the current gang violence.

“Transformative leadership in education presents an alternative approach to leadership for deep and equitable change,” according to Carolyn Shields (2013). We were aware of the power of cultural proficiency in our lives and in our schools; however, we were not prepared for the law of unintended positive consequences inserting itself into our overall plans.

A visit to strawberry fields

Working with Romero, who is a sergeant in the Santa Maria Police Department, two educators from the Santa Maria-Bonita School District, and two administrators from the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District made arrangements for a parent meeting during the lunch break of the workers at a local strawberry field.

Co-authors Flores and Domingues represented the Santa Maria JUHSD on the visit as an outreach of respect and as an opportunity for parents to show their commitment to their students’ learning.

We made our journey to the strawberry fields with high hopes and experienced an



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unintended and very positive consequence. During the time we were conducting the parent meeting a grower-owner joined our meeting and expressed that he could see value in this type of parent participation and invited us to return.

Grower-owners ultimately made a commitment to give parents paid release time to visit their children’s schools. The conversations that took place with parents were authentic, and we learned more about them personally. We felt that we, the educators, gained mutual respect from the visit – from both the parents and grower-owners.

Once we concluded our “school meeting,” the parents gave us a tour of their work area and tasks. The parents demonstrated a sense of pride showing us the complexities and care of their hard work.

Lessons learned

Our objective in taking the school to the community was to more directly engage parents with their children’s education. We were able to inform the parents about the need to have them involved in helping us stop gang-related activity within the community.

We were helping build bridges for stemming violence and at the same time surface some of our own falsely held assumptions about youth gang members. Migrant workers are willing to be our partners to protect and serve their communities and educate their families.

We knew this was only the “first step” in what might be a long journey, but it has become more than a first step. It represents many steps for us as school leaders in recognizing and valuing the diversity of our community.

As importantly, we developed deep appreciation for this inside-out, interactive

role of field workers and grower-owners and the manner in which both are important constituencies of our schools. Finally, and maybe most importantly, we have a deeper understanding of ourselves as school leaders in working across constituencies in supporting equitable educational opportunities for our students – their children.

“Our district looks for opportunities to improve our communication with all stakeholders in conventional ways, but also we look for unconventional methods to assist in this effort,” Richardson said. “We are proud of the progress that we have made in this area, but we are always looking for new ways to connect.”

So, we ask you, “Where are your strawberry fields? Who else do you need to engage in your community to better serve your students?”

Transformative leadership takes you into the community and requires that you ask questions about who is being well served by the school and district and who needs to be served better or differently. What will it take for you to discover your strawberry fields?

Resources

- Lindsey, R.B., Nuri Robins, K. and Terrell, R.D. (2009). “Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders,” third edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Shields, C.M. (2010). “Transformative leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts.” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 558-589.

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