

R R R Rigorous, Relevant Relationships

Behind every authentic assessment and well-developed instructional decision at this school is something both critical and pivotal: real relationships.

When our school received the exciting news that we had moved from 714 to 752 on the API, we were shocked, elated and paralyzed with fear. While the 38-point increase was a well-deserved shot in the arm for our hard-working and incredibly talented staff and students, it was also scary news. Where would we go from here? How did we get here in the first place?

On reflection, as we attempted and continue to attempt to make sense of the wondrous results of our collective efforts, it has become apparent it is simply not just one thing, but rather the interaction and interdependence of three critical tenets: assessment, instruction and relationships.

We know that assessment is a key feature in any solid academic success, and that it is linked to decisions about instruction. Like most schools that struggle with the challenges of reluctant, below-grade-level, or just lost learners, assessment is a constant process in which we engage.

When our leadership teams, professional learning communities and various focused intervention teams diligently study assessments, dialogue around data becomes impera-

tive. Quite frankly, this process of dialogue around data, revising plans for instruction, and revisiting student progress is an incredibly familiar pattern. We screen students, we study results, we target the needs – often with interventions – and we instruct.

We wait several weeks and assess again, to determine how our instructional strategies are meeting students' needs and revisit progress, and to determine how to facilitate conversations about data and dialogue about instructional practice. We review, revise and reform, with a "wash, rinse, repeat" no-nonsense attitude.

Why was this year so different?

At our school, this pattern of assessment and instruction is very familiar. Indeed, we have done this multiple times over a decade; our staff is incredibly adept at the process. So this year our success is exciting, warmly welcomed and yet wonderfully perplexing. We ask this: Why and how was this past year so

By Julie Perron

different when we have been doing so many things we have done all along?

Our thoughts lead to an “aha” moment: We do have something to add to our assessment and instruction emphasis, and our reflection is delightfully uplifting and rooted in common sense. At our school, behind every authentic, solid, well-developed assessment and every informed instructional decision derived from assessment, is something gravely critical, silently pivotal, and painstakingly challenging to sustain: real relationships.

I am speaking of more than the cliché that “We all get along here,” and “Our children and families are loved.” These are lovely sentiments, but simply not enough. Beyond warm and fuzzy, the concept of relationships is actually the third piece of our pedagogical pie as we move students forward. The role relationships play in the assessment and instruction loop is often underestimated, frequently over-quoted and regularly forgotten.

Perhaps as instructional leaders we have supported and encouraged relationships to be built, but we haven’t treated relationships with the same respect as we have assessment and instruction. Seriously, do we discuss relationships at our staff meetings, in our PLCs and with our focused intervention teams with the same vigor and the same expectations with which we discuss assessment and instruction? Do we devote time to discuss how relationships are working in our buildings? I think not.

Often we say that “relationships matter,” but we do not set up dialogue, discussion or a study session on this piece, the way we do for assessment and instruction. We do little to examine how the relationships impact assessment and instruction. And yet relationships deserve the same consideration and treatment our dimensions of assessment and instruction receive.

Socialization matters

Daggett and Nussbaum (2012) assert that within the most successful schools, leaders understand “humans are social creatures and that socialization based on strong relationships – between and among students, among students and staff, and with the larger community outside the school – are critical to optimizing growth for every individual.”

The authors contend, “Socialization matters, whether a part of everyday classroom learning or in the more subtle but critical learning that takes place elsewhere in the school, whether in arts and music programs, clubs, extracurricular activities, or through coaching and mentoring.”

But really, it is time to reach beyond these descriptors to realize that at the same time we need rigorous, relevant and engaging assessment and instructional practices that focus on

student learning goals, we must have rigorous, relevant and engaging relationships as well.

My conviction is that this is what fueled our API increase this year – the dedication of time to the discussion and dialogue about relationships, and then putting those conversations into action. With our mentoring program, after-school activities, leadership opportunities for students, alternative recess peer tutoring, spirit rallies, environmental efforts, peer leaders, English classes for parents, a parent center, and student recognitions, we are walking the talk of relationships. We are proving that the tenet of relationships is a prime player in the assessment and instruction arena.

It's all connected

We do not assess to drive instruction. We do not instruct to increase our assessment results. We do not build relationships to raise test scores. Rather, we remember that central to assessment, instruction and relationships is the student. We have begun to recognize and hold sacred the interconnectedness of assessment, instruction and

relationships each and every day.

Clearly, our API growth has regenerated our efforts and motivated us even more to move from good to great to excellent. Our staff and students are on a journey that is both exhilarating and frightening. We are starting to climb into a space where we shine, and yet it’s terrifying to face the unknown. We assess, we instruct, and we create relationships with rigor.

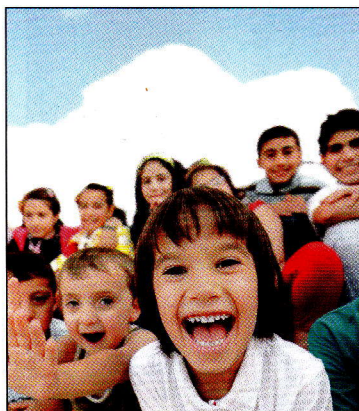
Letting the light shine

Of course, it is scary to experience success, because there is always the fear of falling. I think of the words of Marianne Williamson: “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we’re liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

If we, as instructional leaders, envision and activate the power of the indispensable interdependence of assessment, instruction and relationships, our light will shine brightly as well. ■

References

Daggett, W. & Nussbaum, P. (2012). “How Brain Research Relates to Rigor, Relevance and Relationships.” *International Center for Leadership in Education*. www.leadered.com/whitepapers.html.



Julie Perron is an elementary principal in the Newport Mesa Unified School District.