

Developing Student Ownership and Responsibility in High Schools

The National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU)

spent the **2011-12 school year** conducting intensive case studies of four Fort Worth, Texas high schools to understand what differentiates higher and lower performing schools. We found that high schools can address gaps in student achievement by developing policies and practices that help students learn how to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. This brief highlights what we've learned from our work with Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) and provides examples of policies and practices to develop student ownership and responsibility.

Why Student Ownership and Responsibility?

Trying to understand what makes some high schools more successful with at-risk student groups, we examined four FWISD high schools. Our research distinguished between higher value-added (HVA) schools, which were especially good at serving those students, and lower value-added (LVA) schools, which were less effective. We found that part of the reason HVA schools were so successful is that they held high expectations for all students and used school wide practices that helped students assume ownership and responsibility for their learning. In other words, these schools were successful because they made a concerted effort throughout their schools to increase student ownership of and responsibility for their academic success (SOAR). Further, not only were students held accountable for taking responsibility for their learning, but teachers and other

adults in the school were also held accountable for encouraging SOAR in all areas.

The importance of student ownership and responsibility also has roots in the broader research literature. Students who take ownership of their learning have a sense of self-efficacy and are able to deeply engage in learning activities. Among the benefits of SOAR, we found that students who take responsibility for their own learning are personally invested in their schooling and committed to understanding school work. These students also try more difficult tasks, have higher engagement

with their academic work, demonstrate more persistence despite setbacks, and have higher achievement in many academic areas. In addition to academic benefits, increased SOAR also leads to improvements students' non-academic abilities including their self-regulating behaviors, ability to focus, and understanding that doing well requires hard work.

When students have a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning, they:

- Believe they can achieve challenging academic tasks;
- Are personally invested in academic success;
- Come to class prepared, complete assignments in a timely manner, seek additional help when they are struggling;
- Are engaged in class, ask questions when they are confused, monitor own learning, and attempt to master material with which they struggle, and
- Demonstrate life skills such as initiative, self-direction, and attempting to master difficult material.

Promising Practices: Lakeside High School

One HVA school in particular, Lakeside High School, provided an excellent example of how strategies of academic press and academic support were implemented with one another throughout the entire school to increase student ownership and responsibility. Lakeside's systemic, integrated approach to implementing SOAR practices was key to their success. This approach included two core interrelated practices: the Lakeside Code and Learning Time.

After years of work by school leaders to develop a shared understanding of the need to reduce student dependence on teachers and build student responsibility in order to improve student learning, Lakeside created a school-wide code of conduct. The Lakeside Code set expectations for academic and instructional behaviors of both students and teachers. The Code was summed up by the school motto, Effort Required. The specific requirements of the Code defined for students what it means to exert appropriate effort in school: be on time with materials; complete missing assignments after being absent; talk to teachers about assignments where you struggled, and attend Learning Time whenever you encounter material that you don't understand. Learning Time, which was offered during the extended lunch hour when teachers were available to tutor students, was another school practice that worked in conjunction with the Code to increase SOAR. Students were required to attend Learning Time unless they had an 81 percent or above in all classes. Teachers were also required to be available during Learning Time four days a week.

Part of what made these practices effective was their integration and alignment with each other and all of the general school systems. Together they increased SOAR within the school because the Code provided academic press for students and Learning Time provided academic support. Integrating the Code into other school

systems, staff members were expected to know the elements of the Code. School personnel also linked the Code to implications such as attending Learning Time, being referred to the Intervention Committee, or receiving in-school suspensions. By carving out time within the school day and setting clear expectations for participation, school personnel and students saw participation in Learning Time as standard behavior and did not have the belief that attending tutorials was an

Core Elements of Developing Student Ownership:

In order to promote student ownership and responsibility, schools should:

- Have high academic expectations for students
- Hold students accountable to high standards and higher level thinking
- Maximize productive learning time and create a sense of urgency
- Provide classroom instructional supports to help students meet high expectations
- Provide school-wide organizational supports to help students meet high expectations
- Use techniques to deeply engage students in academic work
- Model and explicitly teach students the behaviors that demonstrate a sense of responsibility
- Empower students and build on their intrinsic motivation

optional activity. Through the Code and Learning Time, Lakeside sought to help students develop a sense of efficacy by recognizing that they have the ability to achieve if they exert the effort required to succeed. Students and teachers throughout the school saw the benefits of increased SOAR and said that the Code and Learning Time helped all Lakeside students meet and exceed academic expectations.