

Student Expositions as an Opportunity to Feel Proud: One Antidote to Expectations of Failure in Zone Schools

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Abstract: Expositions of student work at the end of the extended school year are one of many reform efforts in a specially formed School Improvement Zone in Miami Dade schools. This descriptive analysis offers examples of successful attempts to engender pride even in the face of formidable social and cultural obstacles.

In schools where both faculty and students expect failure, often little energy and few resources are expended to find ways to engender pride and motivate students toward successful work. To address this, most large-scale urban school reform efforts of the last two decades have centered on standards set at the district, state, or national level, coupled with decentralizing authority to local school districts to develop means to meet those standards. Incentives typically have been provided for schools to meet standards, and accountability measures have been enacted through various punitive measures when schools have not. Simmons (2005) describes this model as emphasizing *will* rather than *skill*, operating under the assumption that educators know what to do, but only need the incentives, resources, and freedom to do it. The underlying assumption of these ‘standards-based’ reforms is that teachers and principals would have the motivation needed to foster continuous improvement in student achievement when flexibility and resources were exchanged for accountability (Elmore & Rothman, 1999). Cuban and Usdan (2002) have described this reform model as emanating from the business ideal of goal setting coupled with sanctions and rewards. All in all, as evaluations and analyses of these reform efforts have surfaced, the results have proved less efficacious than hoped for, especially in low-income, urban schools.

On August 18, 2004, 39 schools of Miami-Dade County Public School district (MDCPS) designated low-achieving were incorporated into a special School Improvement Zone. At odds with prevailing notions of reform, Dr. Rudy Crew sought to emulate the New York Chancellor’s District initiative he established from 1996 to 2003. The initiative removed state-identified low-performing schools from their sub-district authorities, “to accelerate their improvement by imposing a centralized management structure, a uniform curriculum, and intensive professional development” (Phenix, Siegel, Zaltsman, & Fruchter, 2004, p. 1). Approved by the School Board of Miami-Dade County, the School Improvement Zone initiative encompasses four major changes: (a) a core literacy program that extends from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, (b) a structured curriculum and instructional strategies that build across grade and school levels, (c) an extended day and school year to provide intensive literacy instruction for retained and struggling students, and (d) the provision of professional development activities and Student Development Teams to ensure that the human resources needed in these schools are available.

Prior to the January 2005 initiation of the Zone, Dr. Irving Hamer, then serving as Deputy Superintendent of School Improvement for MDCPS, asked Center for Urban Education and Innovation (CUEI) at Florida International University (FIU) to undertake an independent

evaluation of the SIZ implementation. This report is based on the field notes from a two-day slice of the FIU research team's participant observation specifically at the Student Expositions, exhibits of student work held during the last week of the extended school year, on Tuesday, June 7, and Wednesday, June 8, 2005. The FIU team visited seven Zone schools in these two days and the observations gathered reflect on one component of the initiative, viz, how the extended school year was used.

At a time when there is a fervent emphasis on high-stakes testing, Dr. Hamer envisioned the Student Exposition as an event that would shift the focus from student FCAT scores to the more personal and informative nature of student work. One of the ideas behind the Student Expositions was to emphasize success and achievement in schools where there has been a prevailing culture of failure and/or low performance and expectations.

During the extended week when the student exhibits were displayed, white banners decorated with fireworks, the planet Earth, and a NASA-labeled rocket ship soaring into outer space adorned all Zone schools, imploring all who attended in Celebrating Success. The Student Exposition was an entreaty on the part of Dr. Hamer to shift emphasis from high-stakes testing to "the real work: teacher-student relationship, student work, teacher judgment" (personal communication, June 28, 2005). Even though the Expositions functioned to draw attention to the vital aspects of teaching and learning, Dr. Hamer's message manifested itself differently within each school.

Method

Descriptions of all observations made during the Student Expositions provided by all members of the FIU team are based on the methodology of standard ethnography. During the time spent observing, FIU team members made brief jottings on note pads of the events, activities, performances exhibits and comments from participant teachers and students. After the day's observation period, these jottings were expanded into extensive notes to flesh out the details of that day's observations. Each member of the observation team followed a protocol of observations and questions for teachers, students and parents to allow comparison among the schools. Several common themes emerged.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Looking ahead to anticipated interviews with parents, the FIU team was especially interested in the Parent-Teacher Conferences, an integral component of the Student Expositions. These conferences were slated to be student-led. The teacher's role was to facilitate the discussions, and the parent would ask the questions. Upon receiving permission from the teacher, the parent and the student, all FIU observers were prepared to document this interaction as their first priority. Despite letters sent to parents announcing the Student Exhibitions and the Parent-Teacher Conferences, and despite the outreach through the media, only two or three or no parents at all appeared at any of the Zone schools where there was an observer from FIU. Even though the members of the FIU team positioned themselves to potentially sit-in on the scheduled parent-teacher conferences, none were observed because of the lack of parental response. This was true even for one of the middle schools that drew a gymnasium full of family members for their traditional awards ceremonies and 8th grade promotional exercises.

Although outreach to parents is typically the burden of individual school administrators and teachers, the district expended significant effort planning outreach for the Student Expositions. A member of the FIU team observed and documented one of the phases of preparation for this event at a planning meeting for the Student Expositions held at a Zone Retreat for MDCPS District Staff. During this meeting, numerous plans were laid out primarily

dealing with getting the word out about the exhibitions. Strategies of how to publicize the celebration included letters for parents from the principals, flyers in three languages (English, Spanish and Haitian-Creole), letters to faith-based organizations, letters to Dade Partners, the University and Community Advisory Board, and local Chambers of Commerce, a WLRN interview with Dr. Hamer, radio Public Service Announcements (PSAs), and ads in the Herald and Nuevo Herald.

We were unable to document how much and what form of outreach was extended to parents or by what means communiqués were directed at parents. Also, we cannot say how extensive the outreach to media and the other entities was. Among the sub-sample of schools observed by the FIU team, there was little evidence that outreach to stimulate parent teacher conferences had adequately touched its intended audience.

Overall teachers were dejected by the lack of parental response to the Student Expositions and Parent-Teacher Conferences. Some teachers expressed anger and frustration and perhaps their expectation of failure. Other teachers expressed compassion and an understanding of the real circumstances of many of their students' families. Even though the lack of parental involvement in the education of children is an endemic problem, teachers also realized that the message may have not been delivered. Many teachers suspected that parents never received the letters announcing the Student Expositions because the students were charged with taking them home. One teacher revealed that she watched these letters become paper airplanes in her classroom. At the very least, one school administrator confessed that it would have been better to schedule these meetings with each parent individually and directly.

Community Participation

Hopes that community members and business organizations, both targeted in the outreach for this event, would support children during this occasion did not materialize. Except at one elementary school, the team did not see or hear reports of any members of the school Board or representatives from regional or central office administration visiting. This may have been because these people were at one or more of the 32 other Zone schools not observed by the FIU team. In some of the seven schools we did visit, our team member was the only audience or visitor over the course of several hours. A particular point of contention for teachers was the lack of visibility of Zone officials throughout the Zone schools, and during the Student Exposition. This perceived show of disinterest certainly had more impact on teachers than on students. Turn-out by district staff and School Board members could have been an appropriate strategy to build morale and support for the Zone among teachers.

Attendance

Just as the community was absent, there was also evidence of considerable student absenteeism at the high school and to a lesser extent at the middle school level. Absenteeism was not notable at the elementary schools. Absenteeism affected the Student Expositions, but was also a symptom of a more profound problem with the extended school year. Teachers' analysis of the high rates of absenteeism at the high school level centered on two critiques, the timing of the Student Expo during the final week of the extended school year and the lack of motivation for students to attend the final week.

The Exhibits and Performances

Of the seven schools observed by the FIU team two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school were in full exhibition mode on the two days scheduled for the Student Exposition. The other three schools (two high schools and one middle school) were in the process of dismantling their exhibits and were clearly not expecting any visitors. Of the

schools with their exhibits up and awaiting visitors, one elementary and one middle school were sadly lacking either an internal or external audience. The few students who were encountered at these schools were eager and proud to explain their exhibits. One elementary and one high school carried on festively in the absence of an outside audience. At the elementary school (Laura C. Saunders), students and staff formed appreciative audiences for performances and exhibits. At the high school (Miami Edison), students were not absent and were observed proudly and enthusiastically appreciating the exhibition in the media center. Their teachers were equally proud and admiring of the student work.

At all but two elementary schools and one high school, the student expositions were conglomerates of individual and group projects mostly showing regular classroom work. Many were impressive and creative and amply demonstrated successful work performed by students. At two elementary schools (Laura C. Saunders and Florida City Elementary) and one high school (Miami Edison), the expositions were organized around a central theme and one staff member coordinated efforts to put on a specific two-day program.

At all the schools where FIU researchers observed, they found teachers and students who demonstrated a vibrant sense of pride and joy with the effort, quality, and aesthetic presentation of student work produced for the Student Exposition. With the particular success enjoyed at Miami Edison Senior High, many teachers were more than willing to share their thoughts on why the student exhibits developed into such a positive experience. Several teachers verbalized how excited they were to see the tremendous effort put forth by the students. Many teachers voiced their pleasant surprise at how everything came together. Most of all, teachers displayed an immense pride in the way that the students had made every effort to research independently and efficiently and creatively display the products of their research. Face beaming with happiness, one teacher said, “this was such a successful event, the kids need this.”

Despite the pride and enthusiasm elicited by the nature of the student exhibits, there was a pervasive discontent among teachers. Critical of its timing, many teachers explained that the student exhibitions were inconvenient for them because they had to have their classrooms completely clean and cleared out before the end of the week. At four of the seven schools FIU researchers observed, students and teachers were cleaning out storage areas and restocking shelves with new books for next year, and classrooms were void of student exhibits. Teacher comments reinforced their preoccupation with end of the school year obligations, and how this conflicted with the Student Expositions.

In addition to logistical concerns, there were also prevalent objections reflecting the perception that there existed a lack of support and direction to plan, prepare for, and stage the Student Expositions. Of particular importance, the teachers felt that they were excluded in the planning of the Student Exposition.

By focusing on the successful Student Expositions observed at Laura C. Saunders Elementary and Miami Edison Senior High, it is evident that these productions shared some attributes. Notably, even though the student exhibits demanded a collective effort on the part of students, teachers, specialists, and school administrators, one individual was primarily responsible for the organization of the student exposition. The expositions at these schools were conceptualized as spiraling around a common theme. With the ‘Taste of the Islands’, the coordinator at Miami Edison H.S. organized an opportunity for the high school students to explore the diverse social, cultural, and political landscape of the Caribbean. Considering the demographics of Miami Edison Senior High, the cultural connection that linked the students to this theme was particularly fundamental to the commendable effort displayed leading up to, and

during the student exposition. According to one of the teachers, “The work was actually relevant to their backgrounds and they were engaged.” As a result, these students responded with both academic and aesthetic flair. At Laura C. Saunders Elementary, the coordinator chose the ‘Under the Sea’ theme. Students were able to be an appreciative audience of each other’s performances and other work on this central theme.

The process by which students prepared their student exhibits was also revealing. When teachers gave their students class time to work on their projects, it became evident to teachers that this exercise harnessed essential learning skills. Noting that his students usually score very low on the Reference and Research component of the FCAT, a teacher from Miami Edison Senior High stated, “I think a great benefit of the expo is that it is a useful way to teach reference and research skills. It helped the creative learners. Teaching research skills across learning styles is important because some are visual learners; some are more right brain than rational.” Consequently, teachers promoted these skills by reserving time in the Media Center for those students needing to do research for their student exhibits.

Researches repeatedly heard teachers’ complaints about being excluded from the planning and preparation for the Student Expositions. They perceived the event as imposed without consultation. The idea was handed down from the District Staff to school administrators, who then assigned new responsibilities to school practitioners; some of the teachers’ lack of enthusiasm or commitment to this event could be explained by the fact that they were not involved in the process from the beginning. Additionally, the manner in which the message was delivered to teachers varied. Whereas the message was attached to a coordinated theme in successful cases such as Miami Edison Senior High and Laura C. Saunders Elementary, those cases where the value of the message became lost during delivery engendered fruitless expositions. Many teachers expressed resentment toward what they perceived to be a lack of support that had been promised from the Zone. Combined with this perceived lack of support and direction, the lack of agency on the part of teachers resulted in more frustration and confusion than celebration.

Even though the MDCPS district conducted a coordinated mass effort of promoting and publicizing the Student Exposition using every available media channel, the paucity of parental participation in the event, and the absence of community and business organizations, is still a discouraging finding. Even though there are several reasons why parents did not attend, from ambivalence to employment, the use of students to deliver newsletters beckoning parents to take part in the celebration of student work is clearly ineffective. As suggested by a school coordinator, it would be more constructive if each school reaches out to parents individually, especially for scheduling parent-teacher conferences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As might be expected, observing the first Student Expositions revealed both positive and negative indicators for engendering both student pride and participation. This analysis offers constructive recommendations for future productions. Because the most impressive student exhibits and presentations were successfully managed by a common theme, it is recommended that each school determine a mechanism by which a theme can be generated. This theme should be relevant to the students, their backgrounds, and the unique history, environment, and setting of each school. The theme should foster a personal connection with the students, eliciting an effort and energy from which vibrant student exhibits can be precipitated. It is recommended that an individual, or group of individuals, be delegated the responsibility of coordinating,

organizing, and overseeing the student expositions at each school. As part of this commitment, this individual or team should be sensitive to input from students, teachers, and the community. A forum should be assembled so that input can be generated to determine the best time to schedule this event on the school calendar. It is apparent that discussions as to how the student exhibitions are positioned related to the FCAT will be prominent. Further attention must be paid to how to motivate students and successfully use the extended school year and avoid rampant absenteeism. Since teachers observed the promotion and development of important learning skills during the process by which students prepared their student exhibits, it is recommended that students be given designated class time to work on their projects. It was specifically noted that students employed reference and research skills, one of the five components of the FCAT. Additionally, this endeavor engaged students from across all learning styles. It is also recommended that, since many students may not have computers at home, the Media Center be utilized so that students may use the Internet as a research tool. Since the extended week at the end of the school year represented an obstacle that hindered the success of student expositions at most schools, it is recommended that consideration be given to scheduling these student exhibitions earlier in the year. Since teachers play an integral role in the work and achievement of students, it is imperative to address their exclusion in the process by which student work and achievement is commemorated. It is recommended that a mechanism be established that incorporates teachers more directly into the vision, logistics, and content of the student exposition. Teachers should be encouraged to share their ideas and be included in all stages of its conceptualization, facilitating a greater commitment and enthusiasm in the preparation, planning, and production of the student exhibits. Additionally, in order to address the lack of support and direction from the Zone verbalized by the teachers, it is recommended that Zone officials make a more concerted and consistent effort in their involvement and visibility within all Zone schools. Even though considerable efforts were made to invite parents and community organizations, it is recommended that more personal efforts be made to elicit parental involvement. Specifically, an investment at each school needs to be made to individually contact each parent or caretaker, informing them of both the celebratory vision of the student expositions, and the opportunity for student, parent, and teacher conferences.

In summary, it is clearly evident that the concept behind the Student Expositions is a worthy one as so many people, from Zone officials, school administrators, teachers, staff, and students were observed taking pride in schools where formerly low achievement, complacency and failure were the expected standards.

References

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