

*The change is palpable
at Sunnyside
High School—in the
ethos as well as in
graduation rates.*

**by Suzann Girtz, Chuck Salina,
and Joanie Eppinga**

Washington District Keeps Culture of Learning at Center

Sunnyside High School in Washington State, a school of more than 1,600 students, had a graduation rate below 50 percent in 2010. More than 80 percent of the students were Hispanic/Latino, and 94 percent qualified for free and reduced lunch. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) had repeatedly identified Sunnyside as a low-performing school—that is, in the bottom 5 percent of the state’s high schools and therefore qualifying for support. Yet five years later, the graduation rate reached 90 percent (figure 1). Disproportionality in graduation rates—the opportunity gap between economic or racial/ethnic groups—disappeared altogether.¹

During the 2009–10 school year, Sunnyside received a federally funded School Improvement Grant (SIG) and chose the transformation model, one of four models on the federal menu. The model, among other things, required the school board to hire a new principal to facilitate school improvement. In April 2010, the school was awarded a Title I grant of \$1.5 million for each of the successive three years to improve its graduation rate.

Many schools that received the SIG took a traditional approach of using it to hire outside consultants to improve curricula and implement program-based activities. In contrast, leaders at Sunnyside sought to change school culture, and so they used the funds to highlight problems and to create systems of support for everyone in the school that leveraged resources that were already available—teachers, counselors, administrators, and coaches.

Another difference between SIG schools that have not succeeded and Sunnyside was that Sunnyside had a higher education partner: Gonzaga

University. The university offered a full-time professor as the new principal, as well as research support and a liaison with its counseling department to further the high school’s turnaround efforts.

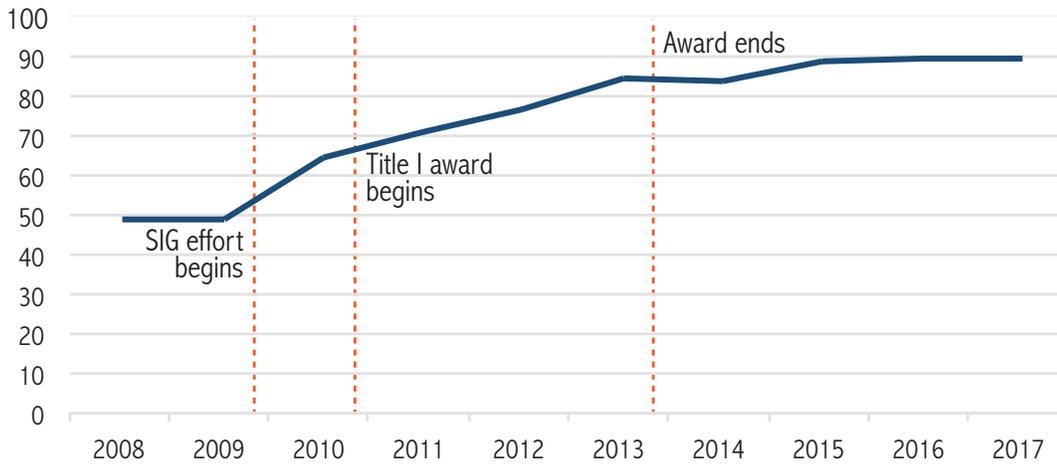
Clearly, something sparked change at Sunnyside, and that change had a meaningful impact on students. As Assistant Principal David Martinez said, “If we would have stayed at a 60 percent [graduation rate] starting in 2011, 727 students would not have graduated over the last seven years.”

The foundational element that allowed leaders at Sunnyside to improve graduation rates was the development and implementation of a conceptual framework. This framework shows the relationship between academic press and social support, held together and enlivened by relational trust (figure 2). Graduation rates and grades increased with an increase in relational trust, as measured by the Center for Educational Effectiveness.

This approach has since been identified in other Washington schools that reduced disproportionality across underachieving subgroups while improving graduation rates. In all, 11 districts shared stories, resources, and data with each other, the state, and researchers via the state’s Graduation Equity Initiative. OSPI’s goal for the initiative was to identify common frameworks, components, and practices in districts that are seeing improvements, particularly in higher graduation rates with improved equity for low-income students.

The common “why” among these institutions has been a commitment to excellence through equity. The “what” of the work is clarified in the conceptual framework, and the “how” of the work is the action framework.² These frameworks

Figure 1. Sunnyside School District Graduation Rates, 2008–17 (percent)



were developed, in part, out of the collaboration between Gonzaga University and Sunnyside School District. The turnaround principal, effectively “loaned” from the university, was able to apply the lens of a scholarly practitioner with a team of researchers alongside him. The principal was able to bring previous research to bear in a new, applied setting but developed the frameworks organically based on experiences in the school.³

By focusing on a shift in culture rather than increased test scores, scores improved. Too often, the outcome is seen as the goal instead of as a byproduct of reaching the larger goal. The frameworks used at Sunnyside highlight the benefits of this different focus—something policy language tends to overlook when it conflates outcomes with goals and can doom it when educators conclude that their work is focused on the outcome measure.

Because schools are not static, their status needs to be observed and questioned daily if they are to improve. Underlying principles in the conceptual framework guide leaders in asking the right questions and putting the answers to work. Yet even as leaders adhere to those principles, they must be light on their feet, ready to adjust to shifting circumstances and to let the principles manifest in new ways. One example from Sunnyside High Schools was the use of a school-level dashboard—a simple, user-friendly data system—to communicate data formatively so that staff could make real-time changes in

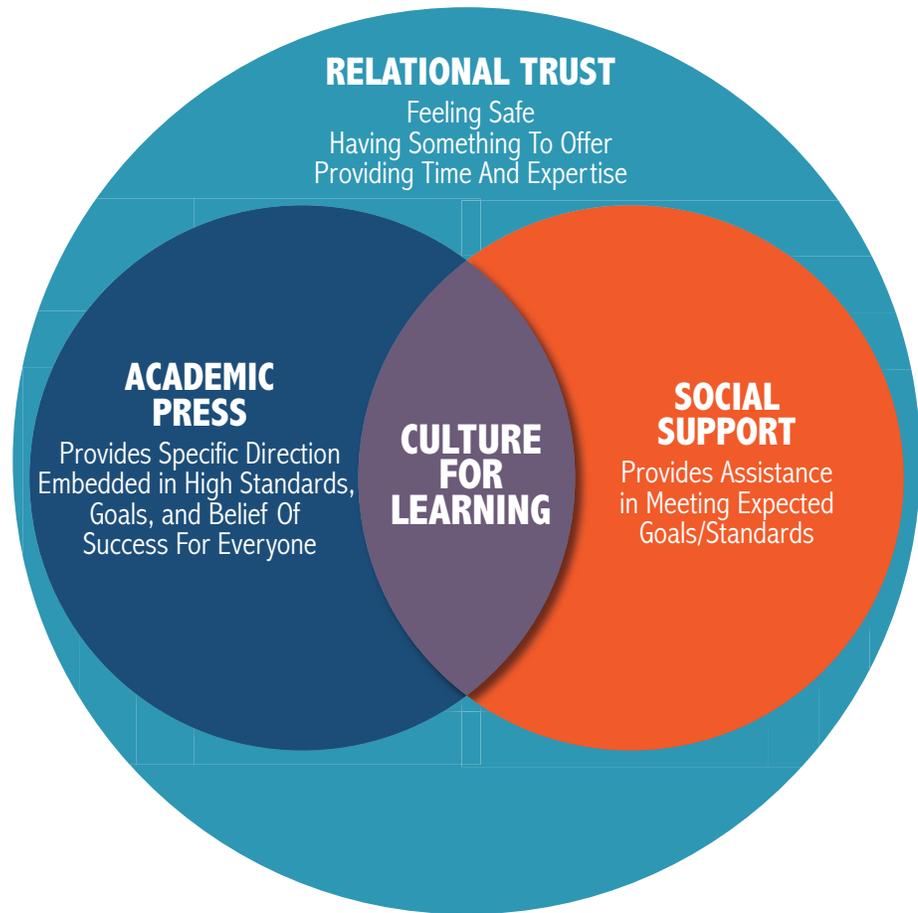
supports for a student proactively, rather than waiting for a crisis. A conceptual framework that guides school turnaround has to be flexible enough to enable practitioners to respond to present difficulties while maintaining alignment with a vision for the school—always with the understanding that there is no perfection in a school, only movement toward an ideal.

The conceptual framework that Sunnyside uses applies to everyone in the school district. It is supported by research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research showing that students respond well to a combination of academic press—in which adults have high expectations of students and demonstrate their belief that students can meet those expectations—and social support—in which the school ensures that students feel supported by and connected to the school.⁴ Conversely, when the focus is solely on academic press, the outcomes are different: “For students who do not have much social support to draw on, attending a school with high levels of academic press does not help them learn.”⁵

Academic press and social support are widely understood, important concepts, but they are insufficient without the powerful, actuating factor that helps create a culture for learning—relational trust. Relational trust is a group’s sense that they can rely on one another, both to do their own jobs and to support others in doing theirs.⁶ It is foundational to school change efforts. If relational trust is to be jump-started

By focusing on a shift in culture rather than increased test scores, scores improved.

Figure 2. Focus on Culture for Learning



Students indicated that once they realized the adults were truly invested, they too became invested—for example, going to lunchtime and after-school tutoring sessions.

in a school whose students and teachers feel powerless, three factors need to emerge from the formal leaders' behaviors: Staff must feel safe, perceive that the leaders have something to offer, and believe that the leaders will put in the time to help them be successful.

Students Notice the Difference

Improving a school district's culture for learning requires that formal leadership demonstrate new behaviors that show staff they are serious about change. When that happens, staff beliefs change in turn—a necessary precursor for changing a school culture. When beliefs and behaviors align, leaders send a message of professional integrity regarding the mission of the district, and staff become willing to follow.

Students also note the difference. After Sunnyside implemented the framework, Gonzaga University researchers conducted follow-up interviews with students, teachers,

and administrators to get information about why graduation rates were rising. One student said, "They [teachers] used to tell us we could do it, but now they are putting in the time to help you. Now they are really doing it." And another said, "They take the time to show us that we are doing better."

Students appeared to correlate teachers' investment of time with caring, which inspired them to try harder and behave better. In the follow-up interviews, they indicated that once they realized the adults were truly invested, they too became invested—for example, going to lunchtime and after-school tutoring sessions to improve their grades. Data were used intentionally to inform and take action rather than to punish students, and students responded positively, viewing the new data use as a form of caring. When data showed a student failing a class, for example, a counselor would go to the classroom and talk with the teacher and the student about how the student could catch up.

Once students began to feel cared for, they began to show that they also cared. Their ostensible initial indifference to graduation requirements shifted toward excitement as progress toward graduation became a group activity supported by everyone from teachers to custodians to administrators, and most importantly, to their peers. The valedictorian of the first year of the turnaround summed up the new attitudes in her graduation speech, saying, “We as an entire high school started to care about our attendance, grades, and graduation. Not only that, but we started to care about other people too. You could hear people say, ‘Come to class.’ ‘We want off-campus lunch.’ ‘Get your grades up. You can graduate!’ These kinds of changes are what was really important this year.”

This approach may appear commonsensical or unremarkable on its face; yet school turnaround efforts across the country do not reflect it. Teachers still look for a one-size solution to problems that will not distract them from their day-to-day challenges. Leaders adopt the latest fix rather than developing an overarching vision and plan driven by systemic goals. State and federal policymakers mandate requirements and reporting to ensure compliance. Working on policy as issues arise can lead to regulations being developed in isolation, unintended consequences, trendy inclinations, and teacher and leader burnout as a school hops from one initiative to the next.

In situations like this, policy distracts from the real work of schools, and implementation is not generally aligned with policy intent. Educators are “so busy trying to keep up with and implement state and federal mandates that they have very little time for reading, reflecting, sense-making, and applying research-driven practices.”⁷ Such approaches will not feed educators’ sense of connection with one another or enable them to harness their strengths to the school’s mission.

Leadership, School Change, and Policy

The kind of cultural shift we witnessed in the Washington state schools is most powerful when pursued districtwide, and it must arise through systems and processes that support all stakeholders’ success. Giving everyone a voice, expecting them to take responsibility, and encouraging them to take considered risks

minimizes the propensity to blame others when something goes wrong. Leadership will “send a message to the teachers: ‘I recognize the importance of your work, and I trust in your ability to do it.’”⁸

Once systems based on behavioral, social-emotional, and achievement goals are highlighted and receive board-level support, leadership can pursue systemic change by increasing building-level autonomy with accountability. That accountability has to be examined through all three lenses—academic press, social support, and relational trust—coupled with consistent leadership planning based on a data dashboard that can inform stakeholders about their progress toward goals. For example, building leadership decided to connect off-campus privileges to the cleanliness of the school, grades of C+ or better, and a collective attendance rate of 95 percent. Once the public goal was set, data were shared and available to all—including students—on a week-to-week basis. If goals were not met within the week, everyone stayed on campus. All students were responsible for group and individual goals and often would remind each other. Behaviors and expectations shifted correspondingly, and students regained the privilege of leaving campus for lunch.

Leaders constantly readjust to ensure alignment across the district, school, department/grade, and classroom. The day-to-day needs of the classroom level will drive these shifts, but each level influences the others. And when board, district, school, and department/grade-level alignment is achieved, then “rapid change will take place in the classrooms because individual teachers will see the collective whole working together to support their efforts.”⁹

In effective districts, formal leaders analyze the health of their institutions and foster a culture for learning in which people believe in and trust each other, solve problems collaboratively, and put systemic supports in place to enable all students and staff to succeed. The leader begins by asking, “What will I do differently to have an effective school?” Additionally, when it is safe and people are supported, they begin to engage with the question, “What am I willing to be held accountable for?” Shifting to personal accountability versus compliance-driven accountability changes the culture of the school.

Initial indifference to graduation requirements shifted toward excitement as progress toward graduation became a group activity supported by everyone.

In time, such a shift in thinking and behaving brings about improved teaching and learning. When policy is implemented effectively, collaborative schoolwide systems follow, and those shifts foster individual growth and teachers' ability to self-supervise at the classroom level.

Role for State Boards

We know state and federal policy has far-reaching capacity to influence school practices—but not always for the better. For example, No Child Left Behind had a beneficent intent but not an entirely beneficial impact. The Every Student Succeeds Act holds the promise of shifting the spotlight to new indicators that can promote the right work in schools, but the compliance-oriented focus centered on outcome measures should also change. For example, if high stakes are attached to attendance as an indicator of school quality, schools will focus on attendance. If leadership instead is free to improve school culture, increased attendance will follow.

As MJ Bolt, an elected member of the Washington State Board of Education and NASBE board member, said, “We must be open to working differently with each other instead of doubling down on the same practices that have shown limited improvement, and perhaps some harm, over the last decades. How we can create policy that capitalizes on the strengths and talents of educators instead of encouraging a fear-based compliance mentality?”

Elegant policy enables trusted professionals to contextualize their work. By building feedback loops and tracking results on relevant items, school leadership can monitor and adjust implementation at the building level to ensure that they are living within a framework that supports the state's educational vision. State boards of education can provide a foundation for the work at the school and district level by asking the following:

- What conceptual framework guides the board's change efforts, and how do we use it to systematize, focus, and prioritize our work?
- What are the implications for the factors that states measure? Are state agencies and the board tracking the right things while simultaneously promoting accountability and allowing for flexibility?

- How does the board help ensure that regulatory bodies and implementation maintains fidelity to the intent of policy?

Like schools and districts, boards also must have a framework from which to develop policies, as they have long been counseled to do by NASBE. Putting such a framework in place will promote alignment and coherence while promoting a process that supports the state's vision for its education system. Likewise, policies developed within a framework likely will have a longer lifespan, without needing to be revisited annually. However, if the frameworks put outcomes at the center rather than principles that shape a culture for learning, they will be rolling the rock uphill, as Sisyphus of old.

Sunnyside School District has demonstrated that a district that combines academic press, social support, and relational trust is vibrant and responsive. When boards at the national, state, and local levels align their work and ground it in an effective conceptual framework that includes these elements, policies are more likely to be not only more effective—but also to make learning part of a joyous, lifelong endeavor. ■

¹Washington State, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, “K–12 Data and Reports: OSPI Performance Indicators—Data and Analytics,” <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/PerformanceIndicators/DataAnalytics.aspx#graduation>.

²Both are available via OSPI's website and are also detailed in our books, available at powerless2powerful.com.

³Such research includes, e.g., Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform,” *Educational Leadership* 60, no. 6 (2003): 40–45; G. Sue Shannon and Pete Bylsma, “Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools” (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, June 2007), <http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/NineCharacteristics.pdf>.

⁴Valerie E. Lee et al., “Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago” (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1999).

⁵Valerie E. Lee and Julia B. Smith, “Social Support and Achievement for Young Adolescents in Chicago: The Role of School Academic Press,” *American Education Research Journal* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 907–45.

⁶Bryk and Schneider, “Trust in Schools.”

⁷Charles Salina, Suzann Girtz, and Joanie Eppinga, *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1.

⁸Ibid., 22.

⁹Charles Salina, Suzann Girtz, and Joanie Eppinga, *Transforming Schools through Systems Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 66.

If the frameworks put outcomes at the center rather than principles that shape a culture for learning, they will be rolling the rock uphill, as Sisyphus of old.

Suzann Girtz, Ph.D., and Chuck Salina, Ph.D., are associate professors of education at Gonzaga University, and Joanie Eppinga, M.A., is a Spokane-based editor. Together they have written *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change and Transforming Schools through Systems Change*, published by Rowman & Littlefield.