

Chip Wood, M.S.W.

cwood180@comcast.net

Summary Observations and Reflections – February 7, 2012

Two Day Residency and Consultation

North Hampton School, North Hampton, NH - January 25-26, 2012

Overview

At the invitation of North Hampton School’s “We Are One” Task Force, I spent a two day “residency” with the school community that included time in nearly every classroom, as well as observation on the playground, in the cafeteria, conversations with focus groups, a workshop for teachers, a parent presentation, and two meetings with the Task Force, one at the beginning of the visit , one at the end. The Task Force provided a good deal of advance information prior to visiting that allowed me to get a good preview of the school and the work the task Force had already completed. This enhanced my observation time and helped me to better understand how the Task Force sought to influence and improve the social emotional learning of students, the social climate of the student body and the interaction and communication in the adult community.

Appreciation of Context

I have spent twenty years working in education as a teacher, principal and district administrator, and another twenty as a consultant, professional development presenter and facilitator in scores of schools nationwide. North Hampton is one of a handful of public schools I have observed making such a concerted and sustained effort to create a learning community intent on fostering higher order, critical thinking skills and a service orientation in its students, in classroom environments of mutual trust and support. This is done with faith in and a focus on the individual student and the inherent teaching skill of the staff rather than on the implementation of external programs. This, in itself, is highly unusual these days. I believe these may be the most significant variables in the overall quality of both the academic program and school climate. Added to this is longevity in administration and a relatively even spread in teacher tenure in the school helping to sustain the rich academic and service traditions.

There is much for the school to celebrate. The very creation and work of the We Are One Task Force speaks of the desire of representative leadership from the school and community to model the fostering of higher order, critical thinking skills in approaching essential questions about social and emotional learning, effective communication and problems solving strategies that can help improve the quality of education and relationships in the extended community of North Hampton School.

Appreciation of Differing Viewpoints

Every school community is comprised of several constituencies: parents, teachers, staff, students, administrators and elected representatives. Each group has members with some shared interests, but also a wide range of ideas and opinions, just as is true across the school community as a whole. By creating and naming the We Are One Task Force, North Hampton School acknowledged the need and desire to come together around a stated goal, “to further promote the feeling of connectedness to each other through the development of social and emotional caring for each other.”

Observation of Strengths in Social-Emotional Competencies

- Each class has unique and identifiable character and personality
- Class size and teacher-student ratio create the conditions for each student to be well known and well taught
- Students at all levels are enthusiastic and eager learners
- Students are productive independently
- Service learning projects at all grade levels provides direct experiences with kindness, altruism and empathy both in and outside the school
- “Baby in the Classroom” provides opportunities for students to see parenting modeled outside their own experiences with their own parents and to recollect about what it might have been like when they were babies; both experiences preparation for their own futures.
- Social and emotional competence is learned through the ways teachers structure learning and conversations and projects in the classroom rather than through any external SEL curriculum. This is evident at every grade level and noticeably effective in the Inquiry discussion groups and community meetings in 7th and 8th grades.

- The pace of learning in most classrooms is relaxed and calm and children can be observed in deep concentration on their independent work and able to engage in useful conversation with teachers and peers when being instructed or working together on a project.
- There is a general sense of safety and friendliness in hallways, and cafeteria

Observations of Areas Available for Growth of Social-Emotional Competencies

- Increased utilization of partner work in academic and service learning.
- More common utilization of real classroom and school “chores” that can be carried out by students as a means of developing shared responsibility as members of a community.
- Translation of the core groups of social and emotional competencies into child friendly language, i.e. “self-awareness” = “knowing who you are, how you feel, and how you affect others”
- An expanded role for Student Government such as an exploration of what is working and not working on the playground through discussion groups led by student leaders at each grade level

Reflections on Social-Emotional Competencies in the Adult Community

- Adults at North Hampton are friendly, welcoming, and socially and emotionally (as well as academically) engaged with their students and with their teammates.
- Communication – a core social-emotional competency--- is on the minds of parents, teachers, staff, administration and the We Are One Task Force. There is a great diversity of opinion as to what constitutes the most effective means of communication between constituencies. Even within the “We Are One Task Force” there is considerable controversy about coming to agreement, or a shared understanding, of goals and expectations surrounding communication. I observed a measure of defensiveness surrounding this topic in each adult group I met with. What opportunities or activities could the Task Force envision that could open more trusting dialogue to take place on this subject?
- Collaboration – another core social-emotional competency-- is easily observable in individual classrooms among the adults that work in that room and at grade level as well. A question I was left with was what shared

sense of responsibility do adults feel or act on in common areas such as hallways, cafeteria and especially the playground?

Possible Direction

A question I raised during my visit was, “What practices, if held in common, would strengthen the school community?” I believe this is an honest, open question worth considering. I also believe there may be a framework in plain sight to help with this question.

- Currently there are four important school documents that seek to explain and clarify the ideas and policies most important for everyone to know and understand at North Hampton School. Interestingly, a majority of the expectations explained in these documents fall under the realm of social and emotional competencies. The four documents are:
 1. The Mission, Guiding Beliefs and Vision statements
 2. “The Tenets that Undergird Our Current and Future Work with our Students and the North Hampton Community”
 3. “Skills Development in the Areas of Social and Emotional Competencies”
 4. The School Handbook – that details school rules

These are all exceptionally well-crafted and meaningful documents but they each currently stand alone, speaking from different vantage points to the school community – to parents, to teachers and staff and to students. Documents 1 & 4 are documents voted and approved by School Committee. Documents 2&3 are working documents created by a Task Force. Revisiting all of these documents together as a community, with representation from all constituencies, could create a living school handbook of exceptional merit that would mirror the exemplary goals currently being articulated by the We Are One Task Force.

North Hampton School is a special place; courageous for seeking to live deeply into your shared beliefs and to look for ways to improve. Thank you for the opportunity to help you, however, briefly in your quest. It has been a privilege.