

Principal Larry Lucio “It’s all about the Kids”

Written by Brenda Colston
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On Thursday March 11, 2010, Stadium View School, in conjunction with the Juvenile Detention Center of Hennepin County, hosted a celebration marking the accomplishments of the school, the students and its Principal Larry Lucio.

The guest speaker for the day was Dr. Dorothy Wodraska, Director of Juvenile Transition for Maricopa County in Phoenix, AZ. Wodraska has been working with Stadium View since the Fall of 2008. They are seeking to make a difference in the way institutionalized students are educated. Wodraska and Lucio believe that the best way to impact institutionalized kids is to serve them better instructionally.

Wodraska said there is a critical need for a shift in philosophy, within the system, when it comes to education. Her model suggests a movement from correction through punishment (i.e serving time and making amends) to correction through reform which includes correcting problematic behavior and learning something about the problem; and correction through transition (focus on total person and develop and expand productive skills and abilities).

“They are not bad kids --these are broken kids making bad decisions for which there will be consequences. We should strive to create an environment where they can learn hopefulness and even redemption; while gaining skills and knowledge for the future. We must build and nurture a belief system that holds all youth can succeed – NO Exceptions,” said Wodraska.

Wodraska further noted that more emphasis should be placed on diversion with appropriate community support in place – in lieu of incarceration. Programs should focus on transition services that expedite community reintegration and reduce recidivism, she said.

Each youth who enters Stadium View School finds hope and understanding and the support necessary to achieve lifelong learning, success and social and emotional well-being. To deliver quality educational services in an inclusive environment that prepares students to succeed as they transition back into the community.

As the session further proceeded, Stadium View staff members were given the opportunity to express their part in the learning process. One by one, each staff member passionately shared their daily journey. Each person expressed the importance of connecting with the student on whatever level they functioned on.

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Each staff member also held on to the reality that they could possibly have only one day with a student. That did not matter. Each student is treated with respect and made to know that they are important and their life is not over. Staff members also research what options will be available to students when they leave the school, perhaps going into an adult facility. The key is to offer them hope. Staff members also seek to re-assure and re-label those that may be gifted and talented.

All of these successes could not come to fruition without the talented support staff. Lucio is surrounded by a very capable group of people who seem to be as concerned about the children as he is. Brenda Johnson, Transition Specialist, believes that families can benefit from support that promotes the vision and mission of SVS and with the connections provided by the staff of SVS and the community at large. Her goal is that every student who enters SVS will connect with her. She also remains in contact with the families within the first thirty days of re-entry.

"Transition starts at the day of entry to the short-term detention center by empowering students and parents to have a voice. Parental support, Sunday parent visits, Parent Council and Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center Staff impact school policy changes. Last year I reached 200 parents. As of today I have met with 86 parents via Sunday Visits," explained Johnson.

She added: "Approximately 80 parents have attended Parent Council meetings. I have made over 100 parent follow up calls since September. I am excited about the parental involvement and the trajectory in parents I am making contact with. I provide bus cards, transitional services, school supplies, homeless and highly mobile resources and transportation support to families. I am attempting to merge worlds that may otherwise not be heard from. My goal is that every student who enters Stadium View connects with me. Over 50% of the students that enter Stadium View are students of color. To meet culturally specific needs of our students and their families, partnering with culturally matched service agencies is vital." Johnson is the main connection with the partnering community agencies.

Lucio is well-supported by the Juvenile Detention staff. Jeff Townsend and Andy Miller of Hennepin County Corrections are great assets to him. They assist in making transitions for students easier. They have been instrumental in eliminating rigidity in some of the policies; they were referred to as the “mold breakers”.

Principal Lucio has drawn together an amazing team – their entire focus is to make the vision come to life. He is not a micro manager. He allows them to walk their own paths; yet he believes in getting results. His hope for this event was to draw the community together to seek and accomplish “what’s best for the kids.”