

Growing, Cultivating, And Nurturing Successful Relationships

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Summer 2009

Saturday, September 15, 2007

Jan Kaplan and Pam Dunst were riding home from the first Collaborative Nutrition Initiative (CNI) meeting of the year at 12:30 PM. They volunteered in July 2007 to participate in the program. Part of the initiative was for the second grade teachers to participate monthly at the University in a CNI learning community mentored by a college professor assisting the CNI group in developing the action research required for participants. Jan and Pam have taught together for 8 years in the same school and at the second grade level. So far they are the only two teachers they both know in their school who collaboratively plan together. They wanted to make a change in their classrooms from an emphasis of test-taking to an emphasis on hands on learning. What they really wanted was for the students and parents to take on ownership of learning opportunities through the teachers' emphasis on student engagement and parent involvement. They felt it would increase their high-stakes testing scores and in turn become an agent of change in the school. Jan and Pam made the personal decision to become leaders of Harvest School when they signed up for the CNI program. The CNI program focuses on nutrition and diet with a hands-on garden on school grounds as a learning vehicle.

"Wow! What did we get ourselves into?!!" exclaimed Jan as she put the keys into the ignition.

Pam snorted, "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. You owe me one."

"Well, just look at it as a twenty month adventure. We also get a stipend. And think of all the fun we and the kids will have learning new ways to do things, too!" replied Jan.

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Pam sounded worried, “Yeah and you’re right about the fun and learning part. I don’t know anything about gardening, and look at me - about 15 pounds overweight. I guess the exercise will do me good, but what worries me is the parent participation. You know I don’t usually see my kids’ parents except for Open House and the End of the Year Promotion. How are we going to change the parent perception about participating in their kids’ school? And all this talk about us being leaders, initiating change in our school by just stretching ourselves out of our normal routines - sounds ridiculous. Do you think it will bring the staff to working and talking more together as we model our new program?”

Jan agreed, “At this point I don’t know, I see more immediate problems like what is Mr. Johns, our beloved custodian, going to say about tearing up his precious grass to plant a garden. You know how he feels about having to cut the grass around the trees and here we are adding our garden.” Jan and Pam both laugh.

Pam asks, “Have you ever seen our assistant principal’s hands dirty? Maybe she’ll break a nail. She’ll probably provide her assistance through her office window! I wonder how involved she’ll become. And what about the cafeteria manager – nutrition and diet- she’ll consider that meddling with her turf!”

Jan imitates the teachers who will smirk and mockingly says, “How can you find time to do that stuff? I’ve got real teaching to do! I don’t have time to do fun stuff like that; I have to get my students ready for the FCAT. A gardening project, humph, what is that going to teach them about real life.” Much laughter followed.

“It’s like some teachers don’t even think of life outside of the classroom for their students. It is important to relate their home life to school life. In these hard economic times it is important to know how to grow your own fruits and vegetables and to stay healthy by practicing good nutritious habits. I wish I would have learned this when I was younger,” replies Pam.

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The subject was dropped until Jan dropped Pam at home. They both agreed to do their best and promised to work together despite what might happen.

Harvest School

Harvest School was a large, urban public Title I elementary pre-k through fifth grade school with a total of 850 students, 780 of whom were receiving free or reduced lunch. Most of the children were English Language Learners (ELL) – the primary home language being Spanish. School notices were sent home in English and Spanish. The composition of student population at the school is 2% White (non-Hispanic), 44% African American, 51% Hispanic, 3% Asian American, American Indian, or multi-racial.

The Collaborative Nutritional Initiative (CNI) was an initiative addressing the need to change the eating habits and improve the diet of second grade students and their families. The Southeastern Health Foundation awarded The County Education Fund a \$200,000 grant for the Plant A Garden Collaborative Nutrition Initiative (CNI) in partnership with Southeast County Public Schools and others interested in assisting schools implementing hands-on approaches to healthy diet education. Over the course of two years, the students worked “hands-on” to plant and maintain an herb/vegetable garden on school grounds while teachers used the garden to educate them about healthy eating and nutrition. The organizers were hopeful that a two year project would nurture more than just the garden. The students were supervised by the teachers and the school’s assistant principal. In addition, the students would study lessons including botany, life science skills, agriculture, nutritional literacy, dietary choices, and culinary tastes integrated throughout the second-grade curriculum. Parents and families were encouraged to participate in the process by helping out in the garden and attending evening workshops held on the school grounds. The initiative was definitely a “hands-on” process. The teachers were required to use an action research approach—providing documentation and advocacy for the adoption of the program district-wide. The five teams met monthly with a university professor and other trained professionals to provide a supportive learning community for sharing and analyzing data.

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Before the CNI program began, parent involvement had been virtually non-existent at Harvest. The school staff was committed to maintaining Harvest School's ranking of B given by the state. However, the school did not maintain the B ranking and dropped to a D for the first time. Fewer teachers have transferred from Harvest School compared to previous years, and collaborative, cooperative relationships within the staff have been non-existent. The school culture was one of competition between the teachers focusing on whose class will score higher on the high-stakes testing that takes place March. The majority of talk in the teachers' lounge was one of complaint. The new administration, Ms. Wright (principal) and Ms. Jones (assistant principal) was testing the waters to define a clearer vision for the staff, students, and parents.

Second Year of Project

August 27, 2008 – First Teacher Workday Before School Begins

Jan and Pam were sitting on the ground surveying the garden. "Gosh Pam, it's that time of year! Remember last year when we were full of trepidation. It's only the first teacher workday and I've had six parents stop by the classroom to chat and a number of teachers inquiring about the gardening project. I was thinking we'll have to get the surveys out to the families and begin to start planning just what we're going to do with this year's garden," said Jan.

"Yes," Pam agreed, "You know I can't believe how excited and involved everybody got last year. Wasn't it great that Mrs. Osborn (a fourth grade teacher) volunteered to cook the collard greens for us and Ms. Jones (first grade teacher) cooked the cornbread for the class? I've already had two first grade teachers ask if we would meet with them and help them start a class garden of their own. They are willing to meet with us at least once a month. By the way the art teacher is going to be here in a few minutes. I told her we were meeting this afternoon to discuss the garden set-up. She has an idea for a special artistic design. Mr. Johns has a few starter plants for the garden; remember how we thought he was going to be a problem. One of my parents from last year found some tools at a garage sale that he is willing to donate. Looks like

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more people are getting on board this year. It feels like the staff is developing as a team together rather than separately. I already have a sign-up sheet from last year's parents who want to help the new parents get started. We'll live up to our name of the Harvest School with all the gardens."

Jan giggled, "Even those teachers who mocked us are showing interest this year. Last year, I saw a big change in parent involvement and a change in behavior in my students. They were engaged and ever so faithful to get the work done. I had more homework returned, fewer behavior problems, and more on-task behavior overall in all the subjects. Suddenly, everything was related to gardening. The Science Club wants to start their garden. Even Ms. Wright and Ms. Jones came a few Saturdays to work on the garden. Don't tell Ms. Wright and Ms. Jones but I saw both of them on many afternoons stopping to pick weeds on the way to their cars. I feel a current of change. Maybe it's just my change in attitude or my desire for a positive change."

Pam said, "What surprises me the most was the extended learning that the students did outside of school. Many of the parents I surveyed said they felt their kids were more aware of their environment and were thinking in terms of science. Most of the parents said that science became more interesting to their kids and to them because of the hands-on learning for the whole family. Lots of them started family gardens. Our assessment scores across the board took a jump compared to the other classes who didn't work in the garden. I feel like I really invested in my students and their families last year. I spent the summer at the Garden House picking up a few gardening classes. I have some new ideas to share with you."

Jan exclaims, "I do, too, but Ms. Jones requested the honor of our presence before we leave today. Now might be a good time"

Jan and Pam knock on Ms. Jones, the assistant principal's door. "Come right in! I'm so happy that the two of you came together. I have a proposition for you from Ms. Wright (the principal). We spent the summer at a leadership conference discussing how to create an environment for school change and found out the buck starts with us. We

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are in the process of forming a leadership team and we both agreed that you were the two people we needed for the team! Last year, you showed initiative in bringing the CNI to our school. Your hard work has created a stir among our community. Would you be willing to serve on the team and help us develop a vision. Please, say yes?"

In unison, both agreed reminding themselves of their first CNI meeting and personal decisions of becoming a leader by choice not default.

August 28, 2008 – Team Meeting – Principal's Office – working lunch

Seated around the table were the members of the team for initiating change within Harvest School. Along with Jan and Pam were Ms. Jones, Ms. Wright, Ms. Forbes (the Media Specialist), Ms. Robinson (PTA President), Mr. Albright (Math/Science Coach), and Ms. Wood (the Reading Coach).

Ms. Wright introduced everyone and then stated the purpose of the meeting. "The purpose for this meeting is to come up with a catch phrase and vision for our school to promote and motivate our staff, students, and parents."

Ms. Robinson eagerly responded, "I love the idea of the CNI garden. Ms. Kaplan and Ms. Dunst really got a lot of parents motivated last year. How about if we do something around the words cultivating, growing and harvesting?"

"I have an idea! How about cultivating minds and harvesting excellence? Isn't that what we try to do daily?" suggested Ms. Wood.

Ms. Jones agreed and made a motion making the school slogan "Cultivating Minds and Harvesting Excellence." The committee wholeheartedly agreed. Mr. Albright suggested that the science club hold a contest to design a flag for the new motto. The garden aspect began to stimulate the committee members. Ms. Robinson suggested the vision for children to grow in knowledge and wisdom that was developmentally appropriate and challenging no matter the age and exceptionality. Ms.

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Forbes was excited about providing a nurturing school environment for maximum growth.

Ms. Wright ended the meeting “We’ve decided on a new motto and we’ve discussed great ideas for fleshing out our vision. At the faculty meeting tomorrow and at next week’s PTA meeting I will share our motto and the ideas for fleshing out the vision and ask if anyone who would like to join this team or share ideas for our vision to come to our next meeting. I have learned that if we let the staff and parents participate they will become participating stake holders in our school community. We will have our next meeting in two weeks.”

January 5, 2009 – Monday after school: beginning of “Crunch Time”

“Crunch Time” was a district-mandated strategy designed to help students prepare for the state-wide diagnostic test known as the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) lasting from the beginning of January to the beginning weeks of March. Second graders are not assessed with FCAT, but by the SAT-10. Second graders have their own form of “Crunch Time” activities consisting of dozens of worksheets for reading, math, and science to be completed and graded every day.

“Good afternoon Jan and Pam! Can I see you in my office for a minute? I won’t keep you, I know it’s the first day back from break” requests Ms. Jones, the assistant principal. Pam and Jan sat down ready to hear what Ms. Jones has to say. “Ladies your garden is going great, just a little wind damage during the break. It’s looking better already. Maybe next break, the parents who live close to school can come and take care of it with their kids. I have noticed this year you have your old students’ parents and the new parents working together. More parents are showing up at the PTA meetings. The vision is being bought into by the staff, parents, and students. I think we have you two to thank for your leadership and CNI involvement. Well, what I wanted to say is I realized you suffered last year with “Crunch Time” and I think the students did, too. Would you be willing to experiment with the administration this year and continue your hands-on gardening with your students and your usual routines during “Crunch

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Time.” Perhaps you can do a few “Crunch Time” activities so I can say we complied, but take the stress off the students? Could you do that? We’ll compare your class data with the other two second grade classes and see what happens.”

Pam and Jan shook their heads in surprise. Pam answered, “You bet and we believe you will see great results. By the way thank you for your support and involvement in the CNI project. We really didn’t believe you would participate to the level you did and now that I know you better, I believe you enjoy getting your hands dirty.”

February 7, 2009 – Saturday Morning – CNI Meeting

Jan and Pam arrived at the University for the 9 AM meeting with the CNI Learning Community setting down their contribution for the healthy pot lunch that is held at break time. Jan and Pam are sharing with the group.

Jan says, “Gosh, look at this spread! Remember when we had our first luncheon and all we had was brownies and sodas with pizza on the side?”

Pam answers, “Yeah, and we were all pretty chubby, too. I must say this program has made me healthier and look at you- slim and trim. I’ve lost those 10 pounds I’ve wanted to lose for years and the family is enjoying our own garden. Last night we had pasta primavera using tomatoes and broccoli from my very own garden. You know when we started this at the beginning I didn’t think it would have an impact on me. Sure, I thought it’d be fun and the kids would enjoy but I didn’t expect that I’d have my very own garden and it would impact me! Well, I remember them telling us at the very first meeting that we would become leaders and CNI have not only a personal impact but a school impact. Imagine the two of us being team members on a school leadership committee and having a voice in our school vision. Seems like the project had an impact on that and on the changes with the staff, too! Its exciting seeing teachers sharing their best practices at faculty and grade level meetings. I’ll tell you I don’t miss that competitive edge attitude one bit.”

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Jan adds to the conversation, “I agree. I’m even visiting the teacher’s lounge more frequently. Can you believe the talk is more upbeat? You know this garden thing has really had an impact on everyone’s choices. The parents are telling me through the surveys and personally that they have started gardens at their home and are eating more vegetables. Not only eating more but their kids are asking for vegetables at the grocery store. I feel that the school is becoming more of a leader in our student’s personal life. I have parents and kids coming in from last year checking on the garden even though their kids are not involved. Maddy’s mom came and picked oregano yesterday for her lasagna dinner. Even Ms. Lawrence (cafeteria manager) offered to use our tomatoes to make us a pasta lunch. She’s been scoping out the herbs for her recipe.”

“Remember Chris, my autistic student who wouldn’t touch dirt for about the first 6 weeks this year?” asked Pam. “His mom stopped by and said that over winter break all he talked about was the garden and he thought he should plant one in the yard. His parents caved in and planted a few tomato plants. She says now they have beans, broccoli, and marigolds. Chris says you got to have the marigolds to keep the worms off the tomatoes. His mom is so pleased that he is talking more with the family as they interact in the garden.”

Jan replies, “Many of my parents are doing the same. With the current economy it helps to have a garden. I can’t wait to see the results of our testing. The students were excited about taking the test; it was the first time in years my kids really wanted to show all they learned. Buddy, I think we did good don’t you? I can’t wait until next year!”

TNLI RESOURCES FROM PAST AND PRESENT ACTION RESEARCH

Doyle, Cheryl. MetLife Fellow, Miami, FL. “CNI Action Research Paper.” To be submitted 2008-2009.

Gil, Elizabeth. MetLife Fellow, N.Y., “Leadership by Design: How a Team Experience Shaped Teachers’ Views of Themselves as Leaders.” June 2005.

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Gordon, Peggy. MetLife Fellow, Miami, FL. "Me, Me, Just Let Me Do It! The Importance of Adding Science Process Skills and Hands-On Science Experiences in the Pre-K Classroom." 2006-2007.

Gravity, Leslie Ann. MetLife Fellow, Santa Barbara, CA. "Teaching Science through Inquiry-Based and Hands-On Practices. 2001-2002.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Brown, Rexford. (2004) "School Culture and Organization: Lessons from Research and Experience. A Background Paper for the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform."

Hinde. E. R. (2004) School culture and change: An examination of the effects of school culture on the process of change. *Essays in Education*. Winter: Vol. 12.

Peterson, K. and Deal T. (1998). How leaders influence the culture of schools. *Educational Leadership* 56 (1), 28-30.

Reeves, Douglas. (2006) "Leading to Change: How Do You Change School Culture?" *Science in the Spotlight*. 64 (4) 92-99.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What kind of impact has CNI had on Harvest School culture? How do you know?
What else could affect school culture?
- 2) How can two-way communication and parent participation could further be developed at Harvest?
- 3) What initiative can we take regarding curriculum so that students can learn the information without getting learning or test anxiety?
- 4) How does the emphasis of teaching "Crunch Time" limit access to creative, enriched experiences that encourage and elicit higher-level thinking and discussion opportunities? Are these ways to include these kinds of activities while teaching "Crunch Time"? Explain.