

Words Into Actions – Building Positive School Cultures

by Connie Kamm (2003)

After thirty years in education, I have come to the conclusion that true school growth occurs when students are actively involved in establishing a positive school culture. In *The Meaning of Educational Change* (1991), Michael Fullan writes,

Educational change, above all, is a people-related phenomenon for each and every individual. Students, even little ones, are people too. Unless they have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail (p.170).

Too often educators think of students as customers, the receivers of curriculum and instruction, and the beneficiaries of educational reform efforts. I maintain that to view students primarily as the consumers or the recipients of our programs is a serious error. Rather, we should regard our students as partners in our enterprise, as crucial members of our team.

As an example, my focus turns to Mountain Pointe High School in Phoenix, Arizona. Mountain Pointe has 2,248 students and 111 faculty members. The student population is extremely diverse. The socio-economic profile spans from wealth to poverty with about one third of the population falling in the lower socio economic range. Approximately 40% of the students are from minority populations. Mountain Pointe faces all of the struggles of a large, metropolitan school. Yet, at the beginning of the 2003 school year, Mountain Pointe won state awards in four separate areas: cross country, badminton, band, and drama.

This performance is not unusual for Mountain Pointe. The school, which opened in 1991, has won more awards than any other school in Arizona. *Red Book Magazine* selected Mountain Pointe as the best school in Arizona in America's Best Schools Competition. *Business Week* honored Mountain Pointe with one of ten national awards for *Instructional Innovation in Character Education*, and Mountain Pointe has been selected three times as an A+ finalist for the State of Arizona. In addition, the high school has won the prestigious Earl McUllar Award of Excellence four times for the most outstanding 5A Athletics Program in Arizona and it has earned the Tony Komadina Award for the best girls' athletic program in Arizona. Mountain Pointe has also been presented with the Arizona State H.A. Hendrickson Award three times for best overall school in interscholastic (activities and athletics) competition and the Hascal Henshaw Award seven times for the most successful athletic program in Tempe, Arizona. To what does Mountain Pointe attribute this excellence? Achievement is inherent in the school's culture.

The Mountain Pointe culture is based on clearly articulated vision, mission, and values statements. These words were generated by the students and staff at Mountain Pointe, and they unify members of the community. As a symbol of this accord, Mountain Pointe has chosen the "Pride," a family of lions, as its mascot. The Pride's vision,

mission, and values are posted in large letters on the school walls; they are hanging from great banners in the school lobbies; and they are displayed on posters in every classroom. The vision states:

*“Establishing **Purpose**,
Instilling **Pride**,
Empowering **Performance** –
One Person at a Time”*

It is important to have words that guide schools, but words alone are not enough. These words must be built into the fabric of the school’s culture. At Mountain Pointe, students and staff know and apply their easy to remember vision slogan to their lives. In *Building Character in Schools* (1999), the authors Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin from Boston University quote a Mountain Pointe student reflecting on her high school experience:

There are three things that I live by. These three things have only been there for a few years, but I hear and see them every day: “Purpose, Pride, and Performance.” Purpose—the word that reminds me of why I am here and what I have to accomplish. Pride—what makes me stand tall each time I hear my name. Performance—the actions I take to move forward in my life. I have had four years at Mountain Pointe High School to live by these vows, and they have definitely made me a better person. I may not be a perfect role model, but I feel I have accomplished more at this school than I have anywhere else (p. 58).

In addition to a powerful vision, the Pride community has gone one step further. The vision statement guides the direction of the school, but the values are the core principles and ideals that generate behaviors. They direct decisions and actions. The Mountain Pointe values are identified and defined as follows:

Perseverance: *“We demonstrate dedication, determination, and personal responsibility in pursuit of our goals and dreams.”*

Respect: *“We celebrate the integrity and worth of each individual and esteem the diverse cultures, talents, and skills that each individual brings to our community.”*

Innovation: *“We foster and reward new, creative, and imaginative approaches and ideas.”*

Dedication to Lifelong Learning: *“We emphasize learning as essential for continuously expanding horizons and achieving dreams.”*

Excellence: *“We seek to be the best we can be in all aspects of the Mountain Pointe experience.”*

Through retreats and workshops, students and teachers have identified specific behaviors that demonstrate the Pride values. These behaviors are written and posted for all community members to see. For example, at last year’s Pride Leadership Camp, students stated that they demonstrate the value of *Respect*:

- By showing appreciation to all others
- By giving time and support to community service projects
- By treating others how they themselves want to be treated
- By being open minded, polite, and friendly
- By valuing themselves
- By appreciating and accepting people as individuals and by staying away from group stereotypes
- By reminding friends to show respect when they are being disrespectful
- By supporting club and team activities

It is the next step in this campaign where the magic occurs—after defining the Pride values and their corresponding behaviors, the values are applied to daily life. The Mountain Pointe students are crucial leaders in a campaign that is called *Our Values in Action*. It is at this point that students take the lead in reinforcing the school’s culture. Because the student-featured assemblies, publications, camps, community service projects, and other values-generated activities are too numerous to itemize, I will focus on only a few chapters in the Mountain Pointe story.

Story is a word deliberately chosen. Societies are built on stories. Stories provide characters and incidents that serve as examples for guiding people’s lives. Likewise, the stories that are told by a people reveal the priorities and the mores of their culture. Part of the *Values in Action* campaign involves sharing the Pride values’ chronicles with the students and staff inside the school as well as with the supporting community. It is through their stories that students reinforce the Pride values. It is through their stories that they inspire and teach one another.

One of the *Values in Action* stories involves the creation of the PRIDE Vision Team, a group of students whose sole purpose is to guide the Mountain Pointe *Values in Action* Campaign. In addition to advising the principal on school policies and procedures at a monthly lunch meeting, the Pride Vision Team organizes *Values in Action* assemblies, leads an annual school-wide philanthropic project, plans a yearly leadership camp, generates homeroom writing activities around values topics, and publishes these student responses in a *Values in Action* book. The PRIDE’s most recent publication is an impressive spiral bound journal with a cover featuring the Mountain Pointe Seal. The contents of this amazing student-prepared project celebrate the Mountain Pointe values-based culture and capture students’ thoughts in quotes, stories, poems, essays and pictures. For example, in reflecting on the value of *Perseverance*, one student records her thoughts on Mountain Pointe’s state championship cross-country team:

This team of cross country girls awakens at 5:00 a.m. to grind up and spank four to six miles of dirt and gravel, while the rest of the world is sleeping. The girls continue with tongue-biting resolve to finish their last half-mile . . .

Another student reflects on the Mountain Pointe value of *Innovation* when she writes,

The students, teachers, and administrators on campus are always looking to create new ideas, programs, activities, and events for our students and community to enjoy. Whether it be by creating new theme for dances, assemblies, spirit weeks, sports clubs, or lunch games, there is always something new to take part

in. There is always an innovative approach to get everyone involved in this great school community.

The *Values in Action* book is published and circulated widely among people in the community as well as throughout the school.

The Pride Vision Team's incredible assemblies also radiate Mountain Pointe's spirit. Last March, over one hundred and seventy students joined together to produce an awe-inspiring event that rallied the community. A reporter who attended the program describes the excited, "standing-room only crowd that filled the large auditorium." The reporter goes on to write,

The program featured an arrangement of inspirational pop music as the background to a collage of video clips and pictures demonstrating each of the [Mountain Pointe] values. Footage of Mountain Pointe athletic championships and academic accomplishments alternated with photos of the world's finest leaders. Some represented political history like Indira Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., while others represented various art worlds like Mozart, Walt Disney and Frank Lloyd Wright. Homage was also paid to technology, including figures Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and Bill Gates. To make the connection between history and the present, students performed cultural dances, gymnastics, karate, and music, in a show of how each student in the auditorium has the ability to accomplish greatness (Yara, 2003, p.1).

After the production, one of the students who worked on the assembly wrote,

The assembly we put together . . . altered the way of thinking of every individual who had the opportunity to participate. Students and faculty were shown what an amazing school they are a part of, and a sense of pride comes along with seeing that.

As a follow up to the assembly, teachers in the English Department asked all of their students to reflect on the Mountain Pointe values in reference to the school's improvement goals. Students were directed to write a brief narrative explaining how they apply one or more of the Pride values to a school goal. For example, one student chose to focus on the following academic goal: "Students will improve their performance in reading, writing and mathematics with the support of all subject areas." This student wrote:

I accomplished my goal by using perseverance and excellence. I was having trouble with my grades in math, and I used dedication and determination to raise my grade by staying up late at night and studying whenever I had the chance. Excellence also took place while performing this goal because I tried my best. My teacher understood that I was trying my best to raise my grade, and I eventually accomplished my goal. Perseverance and my desire for excellence made a big impact in my life, knowing how to make myself try my best.

The Pride Vision Team is not the only student group on campus leading Mountain Pointe's values campaign. Last year, the students in National Honor society, an academic organization for juniors and seniors, decided to buy Eric Weihenmayer's book, *Touch the*

Top of the World, for the freshman class at Mountain Pointe. Weihenmayer is a blind mountain climber who has scaled seven of the highest mountain peaks in the world. His accomplishments clearly illustrate Mountain Pointe's five values. After an intense fund raising campaign, National Honor Society raised half of the money, and the English Department matched their funds. The books were purchased. In addition, National Honor Society applied for a grant in order to bring Weihenmayer to Mountain Pointe for a school-wide assembly. The club was awarded the grant and was not only able to schedule Eric for two presentations and a book signing, but they also scheduled his base camp manager to address all incoming freshman on their first day at Mountain Pointe. Eric's amazing saga of perseverance, respect, innovation, dedication to lifelong learning, and excellence is being read by the Pride freshman this year as well.

The Mountain Pointe Art Department also joined the *Values in Action* campaign with a spectacular mosaic project that focuses on the Pride's values. Students from the art classes are designing and building mosaic murals throughout the school created out of intricate, colorful tiles that have been donated by tile companies from the community. One of these masterpieces is housed in a main school lobby and focuses on steps of development and learning. Beneath this four-panel design depicting different stages of life are the words of one of the values, "Dedication to Lifelong Learning." These permanent testimonies in art celebrate the Pride's values and remind and inspire all who see them.

There are many more examples of the student-led values program that have been built into the core of Mountain Pointe's culture. Dedication to Lifelong Learning has also inspired a student-driven tutoring program. This tutoring center is open before and after school, during lunch, and throughout the forty-five minute academic lab period. Student volunteers staff this center giving their time to tutor sixty to seventy of their peers daily. In addition, the newspaper staff devotes two pages of the *Voice of the Pride* to a spread that they have titled "Indivisible." This section focuses on the *Values in Action* stories that occur daily at Mountain Pointe. The advanced commercial art students are developing a *Values in Action* Website that they will continue to update. The Unity Club is celebrating the value of Respect by hosting Ruby Bridges for a keynote address to the student body in January, 2004. The Pride *Values in Action* program has developed its own momentum.

The Pride vision and values culture is intrinsically rooted in the thoughts and actions of the students and staff. In *Rethinking Leadership*, Thomas Sergiovanni (1999) reflects on the characteristics of a community: "Communities are organized around relationships and ideas. They create social structures that bond people together in a oneness and that bind them together to a set of shared values and ideas" (p. 111). Too often, schools forget to involve students as active participants in building this community. In a recent conversation that I had with Larry Lezotte, a prominent school reformer, he stated:

We are not going to make the necessary changes in the system simply by working a little harder. We have to go back to the basic structure and systemic nature of schools. What we need to do is transform the system from a teacher-centered system to a learner-centered system. And that requires a new paradigm (November 11, 2003).

If schools are to become learner-centered systems, then students are going to need to be more involved in determining and living the values, vision, and goals of their schools. The Mountain Pointe *Values in Action* campaign is based on the premise that values generate behavior. By helping students to identify, define, and live their values, Mountain Pointe is encouraging positive performance. By helping students to see the authentic relationship between living their values and achieving their goals, the Pride is building learners for life.

References

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