Personalizing Schools

Educators can build better schools by knowing, trusting, empowering, connecting, and honoring all their students.

Dan Hoffman and Barbara A. Levak

At the Ohio Center for Essential School Reform, our vision of good schooling calls for attention to both academic challenge and the personalization of the school environment for each student. During the past decade, as we have worked with schools across the state that adhere to the Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1984), we have learned that both of these forces are essential to improve student achievement.

In recent years, the education pendulum has swung so far in the direction of academic challenge—as defined by success on state-mandated, high-stakes tests—that educators may be blinding themselves to issues of personalization. This inattention to personalizing education for students has contributed to devastating dropout rates, mounting special education designations, and growing student alienation.

Personalizing our schools requires a concerted and intentional effort by all adults who have a stake in our students' well-being. Toward this goal, the center has developed a Framework for Building Safe and Serious Schools, which centers on five areas in which schools can focus their personalization efforts:

- Knowing our students better.
- Trusting our students more.
- Empowering our students in authentic ways.
- Connecting our students in meaningful ways.
- Honoring all students in varied systems of recognition and reward.

We can examine how personalized a
We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well.

School is by determining the extent to which all students are known, trusted, empowered, connected, and honored.

Knowing Our Students
To create schools that function as personalized communities of learning rather than anonymous institutions where some students feel they belong and others feel ignored, we must know our students—how they think, what they need, and what they want. As Sizer states,

We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well. At its heart, personalized learning requires profound shifts in thinking about education and schooling. (1999, p. 6)

Knowing students obviously has instructional implications, but it also has safety implications. When we consider well-publicized cases in which students became so alienated and desperate that they believed that their only solution lay in violence, we must ask, How could no adults have known? How could these students have believed that they did not have a single adult to whom they could turn?

School leaders in Ohio with whom we work have found many different ways of knowing their students better. For example,

- Several large high schools have created daily, 10-20-minute student advisory periods. The advisory groups include different grade levels so that older and younger students get to talk and share.

- Other schools have installed interactive journaling. Teachers may give students a daily prompt or allow them to write on any topic. Either way, the students and teachers come to know one another in a safe format.

Trust is a critical factor as we consider school improvement and effectiveness. At all levels of the organization, trust facilitates productivity, and its absence impedes progress.

Examples of ways in which schools are creating a tone of trust and decency include the following:

- Students are given opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their learning and behavior.
- Teachers are encouraged to communicate openly and honestly with students.
- Administrators work to build rapport with students and treat them with respect.
- A culture of accountability is fostered, with all members of the school community held responsible for achieving goals.

The adults in schools set the tone for trusting relationships. When they model trust in their relationships with one another and with students, decency and trust begin to permeate the school.

Tschannen-Moran writes,
going to the gym to shoot baskets; doing additional work in a classroom; finding a quiet corner to do homework; or finding a place to socialize. Although teachers remain on duty throughout the school, this free period sends a clear message that the school trusts students to make good choices.

Service-learning projects and internship programs convey the important message that the school trusts students to do meaningful work with adults, often during unsupervised periods of time off campus.

Empowering Our Students
Zukav (1989) maintains that our society too often sees power as external and hierarchical in nature. We perceive people "at the top" as powerful and valuable and people "at the bottom" as powerless, less worthwhile, and vulnerable. Some schools unintentionally create power structures in which small groups of students are seen as important and others are merely tolerated. Instead, we need to create ways to empower all our students. Some schools have taken on this challenge:

- One high school principal determined that he wanted to hear the voices of all students on his advisory committee, not just the elected leaders of traditional student organizations. He watched the natural selection of student groups in the cafeteria for several weeks and then asked each table to choose one representative to serve on the committee.
- Several high schools have student representation on teacher and principal interview committees.
- One urban elementary school holds regular grade-level meetings with students to elicit their thinking about matters related to their grade or to the building.

Connecting Our Students
Students crave connections not only with ideas and information but also with their families, with their histories, with one another socially, with institutions and organizations, and with their own spirituality (Thompson & Hallowell, 1993). Schools should play an explicit role in building all these important student connections, rather than relegating this task to the unwritten curriculum.

Personalized schools focus on the importance of student-student and student-adult relationships. These schools also deal directly with issues of prejudice and inequity. Although schools inevitably reflect the social values, norms, and idiosyncrasies of the larger society, they also have the opportunity to influence those values, norms, and idiosyncrasies. Ignored values and norms fester and often deteriorate; addressed values and norms can bring clarity and new insights.

Schools that take on the difficult challenge of dealing with sensitive issues have a chance of recognizing differences, connecting all kinds of students, and cultivating new relationships. A renewed sense of democracy and equity can prevail. Many schools have found various ways to connect students:

- One suburban junior high school began a tradition of parent-organized student activity evenings one Friday a month. Students connect not only to adults but also with one another.
- One teacher in an urban elementary school has instituted "Comments and Compliments," an end-of-the-day period during which students gather at the rug area and voluntarily comment on the day's activities or compliment a peer.

Honoring Our Students
A quick scan of high school rites and rituals tells us that the top three qualities honored in most U.S. high schools are good looks, athletic prowess, and money. Whom do we honor in the homecoming court? In our pep assemblies? In the touchdown club? Perhaps the better question is, Which students do our rites and rituals ignore?

Our inability to diversify our system of honoring students has sent subgroups of our school population in
A letter jacket for one student becomes a trench coat for another, but the message is the same: All students need and want to be recognized as valuable and unique individuals.

cafeteria pass that identifies those students who qualify for assistance while respecting their privacy.

\textbf{A Process to Raise Staff and Student Awareness}\n
We often present our model for building personalized schools through a three-hour workshop for school staffs throughout Ohio. At one large, urban school about 50 miles south of Columbus, the principal requested that we have both teachers and students work through the main concepts. Like many urban schools, this one faces challenging problems of poverty, student attrition, and teacher frustration.

\textbf{The Process}\n
search of their own ways to honor one another. Unfortunately, those ways are often disconnected from the norms of traditional society. A letter jacket for one student becomes a trench coat for another, but the message is the same: All students need and want to be recognized as valuable and unique individuals.

Many schools have developed policies and practices to honor all of their students. For example,

- One urban high school has changed its method of identifying students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Every student shows a coded student population. As we gave an overview of the day and explained the purpose of our visit, some students appeared eager to participate; others appeared skeptical about whether their opinions would count.

To permit both whole-group and small-group discussions, we randomly divided the students into 10 groups. We began by sharing with the whole group our definition of and beliefs about the first topic— \textit{knowing}—and providing examples from other workshops.

We then asked each student to reflect individually on the following prompt and to write his or her response on a separate sticky note: What policies, practices, and procedures do your teachers or your school use to know all students? The students wrote furiously. Each student selected one or two methods that he or she deemed most effective for \textit{knowing} students and shared it with the smaller group. The 10 groups then chose another one or two ideas to share with the entire group. This sharing generated a great deal of involvement and revealed that although some students felt known in the school, other students felt merely tolerated or totally ignored.

All participants placed their sticky notes on large pieces of chart paper marked \textit{Knowing}. They then created affinity diagrams of their work, grouping and labeling similar ideas. Finally, each student was asked to rate the degree to which all students were known by at least one adult in the building on a continuum of 0 (not at all known) to 10 (well-known).

Participants repeated this process for could be generated for some of the areas. The concept of \textit{knowing} generated the most sticky notes; \textit{trusting} had the fewest. Only certain segments of the student population felt \textit{empowered}, generally only those students who held leadership roles in the school.

Although most students reported some degree of feeling connected, this connection was often limited to their own social group. During conversation, all students admitted that many cliques existed in the school and often treated other groups with ridicule, put-downs, and even bullying. Only a small proportion of the students felt connected to the school as a whole; these students were generally the same ones who felt trusted and empowered.

Similarly, and not surprisingly, the same groups of students who felt trusted, empowered, and connected also felt honored and could point to specific events through which the school publicly recognized and celebrated their achievements. Students who felt mistrusted, disempowered, and disconnected also did not feel that the school honored or valued them. They believed that only "some people" mattered to the adults in the school.

Later that afternoon, we facilitated the same work with the staff. Overall, they believed that they had a large repertoire of policies, practices, and procedures to know, trust, empower, connect, and honor all students. But they, too, struggled to generate ideas for some of the topics. Like students, staff members had the fewest ideas for trusting, and their beliefs about what constituted trust varied widely from those of most students. Students believed that trust meant that they were given the responsibility to act appropriately in the school without constant adult supervision, whereas teachers viewed trust more in terms of guided and limited responsibility in the classroom— for example, allowing students
empowering, connecting, and honoring. Staff members and students frequently had different interpretations of the meanings of these concepts and the degree to which the school had policies, procedures, and practices in place for all students.

**Implications and Next Steps**
Following the workshops, a researcher from Ohio State University tabulated and compared student and teacher results. Armed with the results of the affinity diagrams and continuums from both students and staff, the researcher returned a few weeks later to present the information, first to the principal and then to the staff.

This analysis confirmed our initial impression that the perceptions of students and staff differed considerably. The implications of this disparity became the next step for the school leaders.

"At its heart, personalized learning requires profound shifts in our thinking about education and schooling."

By addressing the question, How can we close the gap between student and teacher perceptions?, the school can create a more personalized environment for students, teachers, and the community.

Our work to personalize our schools is a complex quest, certainly, but one that we must undertake. As Barbara Kingolver challenges, "Be careful what you give children, for sooner or later, you are sure to get it back" (1995, p. 107).

**References**

Dan Hoffman (dhoffman@ohiomes.org) is Executive Director and Barbara A. Levak (blevak@ohiomes.org) is Program Director of the Ohio Center for Essential School Reform, 6515 E. Livingston Ave., Ste. 9, Reynoldsburg, OH 43068; (614) 751-9346.