

Supporting Students to
**Reach High
Standards**



PROJECT FOR SCHOOL INNOVATION
FOUNDED BY THE NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE CHARTER SCHOOL

Project for School Innovation
21 Queen Street
Dorchester, MA 02122
617.825.0703

www.psinnovation.org

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Supporting Students to **Reach High Standards**

A Step-by-Step Guide to Building a Culture of Achievement

By Teachers For Teachers Series Volume # 14

Modeled on a Successful Program at the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School

Developed by professional public school educators:

Nisha Abraham
Jennie Diefendorf
Nora Duane
Nick Krippendorf
Jolinda McLellan
Elizabeth Weston

Edited by

Priya Chandrasekaran
Ruth Feldman
Michael Rothman
Matthew Wilka

Additional Research by

Priya Chandrasekaran

Designed by

Joanne Tarlin Franklin



Supporting Students to Reach High Standards

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The Project for School Innovation

The Project for School Innovation is a nonprofit organization committed to transforming education by sharing success. To support and strengthen this mission, PSI offers a range of services – including consulting, workshops, books, videos, and planning tools – for educators to explore, document, and share effective practices.

Support and Study Groups Using an asset-based exploration methodology, PSI helps educators at successful public schools to reflect upon what they do well. This action-based research is pursued within individual "Model Schools" as well as with educators of common content areas or roles. Most importantly, this work is accomplished among and between educators from public charter and district schools.

Document & Disseminate To complement this exploration, PSI documents and disseminates the successful practices shared. PSI disseminates via books, videos and online tools, as well as by supporting PSI Associate teachers in providing workshops and coaching for fellow educators to make positive school change.

By Teachers For Teachers Series

About this Book

During the academic year of 2005/6, six Academy of the Pacific Rim faculty members engaged in facilitated discussions to explore their approach to cultivating academic achievement in students and to better understand the specific practices and systems that give each student the support he or she needs to strive for and reach rigorous academic goals.

This book documents effective practices identified in that research process and serves to provide educators in any other school or district with suggestions on how to best support students while maintaining a high level of expectation for their ability and academic achievement.

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Measuring Success: Tips and Ideas on Formative Assessment Practices

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Including Every Child: Tips and Ideas on Effective Inclusion Practices

Model Practices from the Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School

Create Your Own KidLab: Tips and Ideas to Make Science Engaging, Imaginative, and Fun

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A Note From Our School Leader December 20, 2007

Dear Reader,

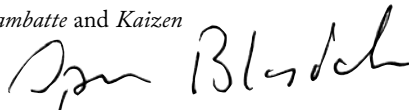
Thank you for your interest in *Supporting Students to Reach High Standards*. I hope that you are inspired to join us in a journey of continual improvement of schools. The first book we wrote in collaboration with PSI, entitled *Building Character*, not only helped us to improve but it also connected us to a wider community of public schools. This second effort has served to reinvigorate our school and we look forward to the ensuing collaboration with others.

The big challenge for any school is to reach the goal of having all children succeed, or by contrast, no children left behind. At APR we embrace this challenge and continually strive to ensure that all of our students are prepared for post-secondary education. There are no shortcuts in this work, and the success that we have found requires a commitment to high standards, extended time, systems of support for students and teachers, and the creation of a school culture that motivates all students. Our school culture integrates many values and rituals from Eastern cultures that emphasize respect and hard work; you will no doubt encounter them in the pages that follow.

Teachers are at the core of this work, and it is the fruit of their daily efforts that you will read about in this book. Our teachers are working hard each and every day, practicing our value of the Japanese principles “*gambatte*” – persistence – and “*kaizen*” – continual improvement of the community. This process is facilitated by the fact that teachers are physically together in a common planning area when they are not teaching. APR’s community faculty room and indeed all the practices that the teachers have described in this book stem from years of small conversations, task forces, and pilot studies. In other words, they have been tried and tested and revised with one goal in mind: to support students to reach high standards. The result is a set of consistent practices that work for students.

As I re-read this work I hear two equally compelling themes – process and practice. Our teachers have provided examples of both how to create certain tools, systems, and structures as well as examples of what these systems and structures should look and feel like in practice. I hope that these tools, tips, and examples are helpful to you and your school, and we always encourage visitors and collaboration with other schools.

Gambatte and Kaizen



Spencer Blasdale
Executive Director

Introduction: *Supporting Students While Helping Them To Reach High Standards*

One Westinghouse Plaza, a formidable brick building in a 24-acre industrial complex, once served as the headquarters for the largest industrial fan manufacturer in the world. However, today when you follow the brick walkway to the door at the side of the main building and climb up the wooden staircase, you encounter quite a different sight: that of a vibrant and dynamic school where students dressed in uniforms say “Good Morning” as they open the door for you and a teacher standing in the hallway shakes students’ hands to greet them.

While bustling with energy, the school housed here, Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School (APR), also exudes a palpable feeling of productivity and professionalism. Like the business that was its predecessor, APR is renowned as a model of excellence, a standout nationwide for its students’ academic performance. It does not take long to recognize that the school’s effectiveness is due to the enduring efforts of educators to cultivate and support students to reach the highest possible academic standards.

As a charter public school, APR is open and free to all students in Boston’s diverse municipality on the basis of a lottery. Embarking on its tenth year and at full capacity with 350 students and with an average of over 300 on the waiting list, APR creates a uniquely professional and challenging environment for its students.

APR’s success is due in no small part to the fact that it considers itself a work in progress. Educators model the belief that the road to excellence does not terminate at a single destination.

There is always farther to go, and the vehicle that propels you forward is *gambatte*, a Japanese word meaning “to persist” or “to persevere.”

A stranger needs only to sit in on a faculty meeting in which teachers are openly discussing how they might improve the tutoring system to know that educators here have great expectations for all students and for themselves and that they are constantly working towards achieving them. Regardless of a student’s academic challenges when he or she enrolls at the school, the question here is never “Can this student succeed?” but rather: “How can we support this student to succeed?”

“My son gets to see that it’s not about the color of your skin or how much pocket money you have; it’s about whether you want to be educated, and how motivated you are to get that education.”

—Margarita Poles, parent

A Multifaceted, Research-Based Approach

When you spend a day at APR, it is impossible to miss three core qualities: the structured academic supports evident, for instance, when a high school student stops a teacher in the hallway after school to show her his bi-weekly progress report and ask how he can improve his project grade; the culture of achievement that leads a seventh grader to shake hands with his humanities teacher upon entering class and say “Thank you” at the end of the period; and the faculty collaboration that inspires a first-year math teacher to casually seek the advice of a veteran colleague whose lesson plans she had read between periods.

At first glance, these examples might seem unrelated. In reality, they comprise a deliberate multifaceted approach to cultivating high academic standards for students. Together these aspects create a foundation that supports students so that they can strive for success without being paralyzed by the fear of failing. By reviewing her predecessor's lesson plans, a new teacher gleans practical ideas of how to help more students grasp the material; the eye contact a teacher makes when shaking a student's hand at the beginning of class grounds that student and enables him to focus; a student's bi-weekly progress report becomes the regular feedback that helps him know how he can improve.

APR's structured academic supports, strong school culture, and emphasis on faculty collaboration are grounded in research. Specific practices have evolved over time, based on experience and best practice. There is a significant body of research supporting these practices, but for the purposes of this introduction, we will highlight three resources which have strongly influenced the school's development: *The Learning Gap* by Howard Stevenson and James Stigler, *The Teaching Gap* by Stigler and James Hiebert, and *The Disciplined Mind* by Howard Gardner.

Stevenson, Stigler, and Hiebert's work clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the Asian approach of a longer school day and year, the goal of high standards for all students, and an effort versus an ability paradigm. Their study of the profession of teaching in Asia, specifically the idea that great teachers are made not born, supports APR's commitment to faculty collaboration and professional growth. The school is designed to emulate the "systematic effort to pass on the accumulated wisdom of teaching practice...of teachers and to keep perfecting that kind of practice by providing for the continuing

professional interaction of teachers" (p. 159, *The Learning Gap*).

Equally important to these elements of APR is our strong school culture. APR has spent countless hours shaping the non-academic pieces of its school culture. The school has been relentless and repetitive about creating school-wide, consistent rituals and routines. Whether students are cleaning their classroom or teachers are opening a lesson, there is a common practice that is prescribed. The school is always looking to maximize the time that students spend "on task" and to provide intentional learning opportunities outside of the classroom. While it is difficult to choose just one resource that examines how a unique, focused culture is fundamental to a healthy organization, APR's leaders cite Howard Gardner's belief that the most important aspect of school culture is coherence and common vision as the most compelling (p. 246, *The Disciplined Mind*). Thus, APR strives for all aspects of its program, from greetings and handshakes to high academic and behavioral expectations, to be a part of a larger, purposeful school culture.

What Does Success Look Like?

What does success look like at APR? One way to answer this question is quantitatively. At this inner-city public school, every student in the 2005 graduating class earned at least one college acceptance, and the average was four per student. One hundred percent of tenth graders passed the state's Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in both English and math, with between 80 and 90 percent of students scoring at the Advanced and Proficient levels, well above the state and city average. Draw a graph of students' MCAS

scores from the year they first enrolled at APR and you see that they rise noticeably the longer they are at the school.

But success is not only witnessed in numbers. Success in supporting students to reach high standards also looks like a student stopping a teacher in the hallway to ask a question or students beginning their Do Now assignment soon after entering the class without having to wait for directions or external motivation. It sounds like tenth-grade students discussing where they want to go to college or a Learning Specialist helping a History teacher to improve a lesson plan. It feels like the pride and determination of a student who receives an 89 after revising a paper for the third time and reflects on what she'll do next time for the 90.

Following are the three primary positive outcomes educators at APR have seen from their approach. They will appear as unifying themes throughout this book.

1. Students see themselves as professional learners.

When educators are successful in supporting students to reach high academic standards, students become self-motivated to take on academic challenges and to articulate specific needs when seeking help. They recognize the connection between positive behavior and effort and their ability to progress academically, and view themselves as individuals able to exhibit such behavior. As this awareness grows, they approach formidable intellectual challenges with self-confidence.

2. Students can set academic goals.

When students believe, from both encouragement and experience, that with enough focus and effort they can succeed at goals that they once thought were impossible, they begin to set their own rigorous standards, whether it is getting an A on a test or focusing more in a subject that hadn't interested them. As cultivating high standards is a journey, not an end goal, students grow comfortable with the process of revision and reflection. This enables them to recognize their own unique challenges and to set out to improve, albeit with the knowledge that improvement takes effort and time.

3. Teachers have more time and energy to focus on teaching.

As a school creates a culture of high expectations and support, teachers have to spend less time getting students settled down or motivated. At the same time, as the school becomes a more unified learning community focused on supporting all students to reach high academic standards, teachers work together more effectively towards a shared and consistent vision. This stability and collaboration among teachers allow them to spend more minutes of teaching every day and significantly more hours of teaching every year. Furthermore, as teachers spend less time worrying about classroom management or struggling to create a positive learning environment on their own, they have more energy to intellectually stimulate and support students.

About this Book

During the spring of 2005/6, six APR faculty members engaged in facilitated discussions to explore their approach to cultivating academic achievement in students and better understand the specific practices and systems that give each student the support he or she needs to strive for and reach rigorous academic goals.

This book documents effective practices identified in that research process. It is divided into three chapters:

- *Creating Systems of Academic Support:*
How to create or alter assessments, revise work, and employ tutoring to improve the quality of student work without compromising standards.
- *Building a Culture of Achievement:*
How to establish school-wide practices to create a culture of achievement in which students can focus on learning and teachers can focus on teaching.
- *Establishing Faculty Structures:*
How to support teaching faculty so they can work together to support students and improve their own teaching.

References

- Gardner, Howard (1999), *The Disciplined Mind: Beyond Facts and Standardized Tests, the K-12 Education That Every Child Deserves*. Penguin Putnam.
- Hiebert, James and Stigler, James (1999), *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom*. The Free Press.
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Prerequisites for Supporting Students to Reach High Standards

Notes from APR's faculty

At APR, everything we do is designed to support students to reach high standards. Many of our supportive, effective practices for teachers and principals are detailed in this book. Yet three practices in particular – which we consider prerequisites to the success of any school – have been central in creating a culture of achievement and supporting students to reach high standards.

Rigorous Academic Standards for All Students

Your commitment to upholding rigorous academic standards must be more than an abstract belief – it must be the fundamental pillar of your school's mission, one you will prioritize with every decision, large and small.

High Standards for Staff

For students to embark on a quest for academic excellence, they need to see that same quest reflected in the words and deeds of their educators.

Transparent School Policy

The work of supporting students to reach high standards is a dynamic, collaborative process rather than a linear road to a static destination.

Rigorous Academic Standards for All Students

At APR, our commitment to upholding rigorous academic standards is more than an abstract belief – it is the fundamental pillar of our school's mission, one we will prioritize with every decision, large and small. Whether revising an assignment or organizing an assembly, our first question to ask is, "How will this affect student achievement?" Following are three examples of how we uphold rigorous academic standards for all students at APR:

- **College Prep Curriculum:** All students at APR take a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum. We offer untracked heterogeneous classes, so expect and support all students to

pursue challenging coursework and master high level content in English, mathematics, science, history, and Mandarin.

- **Higher Passing Standard and Promotion Policy:** At APR, we set our standard of passing to at least a 70% in each class, and students must pass each class to be promoted to the next grade. These standards are intentionally higher than the state minimum; it reflects the value we place on hard work, prepares our students for the rigors of college, and pushes our teachers to implement support structures to help students meet the higher standard.
- **Longer Day & Year:** We offer an extended school day to accommodate tutoring and the rigorous curriculum that our students pursue.

In addition, students attend school for 10-50 days longer than traditional schools; this time allows students to explore their coursework in greater depth.

High Standards for Staff

For students to embark on a quest for academic excellence, they need to see that same quest reflected in the words and deeds of their educators. Fostering high standards for staff entails not only articulating clear expectations, but creating an environment in which teachers can reflect upon their practices in order to improve upon them. This needs to be done when hiring, training, and establishing expectations for faculty.

- **Faculty Hiring:** Hire teachers who are highly professional, who already believe in the school's vision and come with the desire to work hard towards its fruition.
- **Faculty Induction:** Maintain a clear and consistent system for helping new teachers to understand your school culture and form positive relationships with other teachers and administrators. This should include: an orientation for new teachers, weekly one-on-one meetings between the principal and new teachers to discuss lesson plans, and pairings of new teachers with more experienced "mentors" who meet with them weekly.
- **Faculty Expectations:** We recommend that teachers: attend all staff meetings, call assigned parents to check in three times a trimester, administer six assessments (from homework to exams) every two weeks, and be observed by peers at least four times per year. We also encourage teachers to be available to students before and after school, and during specified school times.

Transparent School Policy

The work of supporting students to reach high standards is a dynamic, collaborative process rather than a linear road to a static destination. In the midst of this dynamism, transparent school policies are a necessary anchor. Teachers, staff, administrators, and families should fully understand school policies, and, whenever possible, play a role in their development. To encourage communication and maximize transparency, all school policies should be:

- **Discussed Thoroughly:** When a policy is first being considered, convene a small faculty group (and parents / community members if applicable) to design and develop that policy. One group member should spearhead the initiative, and seek input from the entire faculty (or school community) on the new policy, including any questions or suggestions.
- **Explained Fully:** A new policy should be explained fully to faculty and other members of the school community, both orally and in writing. Opportunities for explanation include staff meetings, the faculty handbook, letters home to families, and orientation meetings with both families and students. At all points of contact, solicit feedback and questions, which both improve developing policies, and encourage teachers and families to buy in to new practices.
- **Implemented Consistently:** The consistency of a policy makes it effective. All staff members should be expected to enact school policies throughout the year, and administrators should follow up regularly with staff through observations and check-ins to promote consistency, and to provide the support that staff members need to implement policies well. Consistency is also crucial to communicating school policies to families through phone calls, visits, or letters home – especially those policies relating to discipline.