

The Lake Wales High School Keystone Project

[PT psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inside-out-outside-in/201512/the-lake-wales-high-school-keystone-project](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inside-out-outside-in/201512/the-lake-wales-high-school-keystone-project)

The Lake Wales High School Keystone Project:

A New Student-Faculty Design For A School Community



Source: Lake Wales High Schools logo

In the spring of 2013, I (Gene) had the good fortune of meeting Donna Dunson, principal at Lake Wales High School in Lake Wales, Florida; two of her faculty members; and Serita Winthrop, an avid supporter. It was Serita who reached out to me, as she knew that The Clay Center team would be excited to hear of the innovations Principal Dunson had initiated at the school.

The synergy was perfect.

Lake Wales High School is a charter school about 45 minutes inland from Orlando. The community of Lake Wales is extremely underserved from almost every economic indicator. Additionally, of the 1,500 students who comprise the student body, 51% come from minority populations, and at least 100 are homeless, residing with families in the neighborhood through careful organization by a number of local churches.

Serving such a diverse population can, at first, seem daunting to any educator. After all, how can one possibly shape a curriculum to fit the unique needs of all those in the community?

When Donna Dunson took over as principal of LWHS, she brought with her a long history of public, private, and international school administration. However, Lake Wales' status as a charter school would allow her to work with a public school population without the constraints of a large bureaucracy. Furthermore, it would enable radical changes to be made to the school curriculum and mindset. A redesign was desperately needed, and that is ultimately what evolved—a complete redesign of Lake Wales High School.

article continues after advertisement

Principal Dunson named her new approach the Keystone Design, referencing an architectural metaphor to encapsulate how the students would become the designers of their own education. In fact, Principal Dunson envisioned the model reaching beyond a curricular design; she hoped it would also serve as a vehicle to demonstrate how students could become the architects of their lives.

The Keystone framework was also the organizing structure applied to the school's operation. Every administrative decision made took into account the vocabulary and principles of design. In many ways, the school administrators and teachers would thus become architects as well—adopting a new way of looking at their lives both in and outside of the school environment.

Principal Dunson's model, once put into practice, proved transformative for the entire community.

The framework is not a contrived or superficial educational trend; instead, it's meant to engage each student in an authentic manner. For every subject area—math, science, social studies, English—educational components create a common thread of design that spirals through the curriculum. Students are challenged to consider the principles of architecture, and apply them within the academic discipline. The curricular elements require that students learn a new design vocabulary and conceptual model, including “foundation,” “patterns,” “balance,” “symmetry,” “unity,” “harmony,” “scale,” “proportion,” “rhythm,” “contrast,” “structure,” “coherence,” and “perspective.” And, above all, they are to incorporate elements from their personal life experiences—awareness of social forces, relationships, art, and culture—into the mix.

Sounds complicated, right?

But consider an example: let's say a student is studying a historical event. He or she will be taught and expected to find underlying patterns in the problem or situation involved; to describe the principles of his/her investigation; to appreciate the event's place in the fabric of social structures; to understand the construction of the problems at hand; to look for parallels in other events; and to consider the relative scale, proportion, and perspectives of the event

compared to others. Perhaps most important, students are expected to understand how the subject matter relates to experiences in their own lives. They are taught to look for parallels within their personal conflicts and triumphs.

article continues after advertisement

This model, of course, does not eliminate the requirement for basic mathematical principles, scientific facts, or core elements of literacy. Students still need the “three Rs.” However, Principal Dunson understood that students will only master academics if they are interested and invested in the educational process. The process of engagement in the Keystone Design presumes that students will be drawn to academic material if presented in an innovative, creative, and personal way that captures their unique interests, draws upon their imagination, requires intensive social interactions, and is applicable to their lives.

The Keystone Design also takes into account self-rule and self-regulation. That is, first and foremost, it appreciates that students are living in an environment and culture that has a huge impact on their ability to function. Therefore, the culture of the school must foster safety, respect, cooperation, and well-being, and the school community must empower students to take responsibility for their attitudes and behavior. Group acceptance of rules and expectations is critical.

Upon her arrival, Principal Dunson thus established a President’s Council of students, elected by the student body, that would meet with her and senior faculty members to review all of the school’s elements requiring immediate attention, and to craft a core set of values for students to operate by. In addition to the students elected by their peers, she added to this council those with disciplinary issues, and those whom she thought might otherwise be overlooked in such conversations. This diverse group provided her critical insight into how the different segments of the school were feeling about the changes being implemented.

The school’s motto, developed by the President’s Council, became “You Are Your Brother’s Keeper,” and set forth 10 expectations for every student:

- Be productive and positive in everything you do. Fully engagement with the process of learning.
- The respect for this staff is non-negotiable; they are here to help you shape your future.
- Be open-minded and respect the ideas of others. Dig deeper for truth and knowledge.
- Respect the space and demonstrate that respect through your attitude, actions, and appearance.
- Be honest and always do what is right. Seek to understand who you are and find your place in this world.
- You should not expect rewards for things that you are expected to do. Strive to be satisfied with a job well-done (intrinsic satisfaction).

- Hold yourself and your peers to a high standard. Strive to use a high level of discourse in all of your conversations.
- Success is proportional to effort. Albert Einstein: “Genius is 1% talent and 99% hard work.”
- Find ways to give back to this community and the community of Lake Wales. Pay it forward.
- Fully engage with each moment; throw yourself into the task at hand—the results will be there. It is about the process!

article continues after advertisement

This code of ethics and behavior is posted everywhere in the school—in each and every hallway. The students take ownership for it and live by it.

In the year prior to Principal Dunson’s transition, the statistics at Lake Wales High School were mediocre at best. In the past four years, however, those related to grades, college acceptance rates, rude behavior, and physical fights have drastically improved—and, the levels of student/student and student/staff respect have increased tremendously.

Over the course of about five years, more than half of the school’s teachers have been replaced (based on student evaluations); tardiness, absenteeism, and badmouthing have dropped precipitously; and the graduation and college acceptance rates have risen into the high 80% range.

This demonstrates just how far we can progress through incorporating creativity into our educational models, and collaborating with our students to promote shared governance and behavioral changes.

Lake Wales High School Student Film On Bullying & Sexting

I came to Lake Wales by invitation in 2014 to speak with the student body. Principal Dunson and I had decided that a talk on bullying and sexting was terribly important—so, I spent about 20 minutes reviewing with them the data on use and misuse of digital media, and then facilitated an open forum in which the students could weigh in on how they and their peers should safely navigate the digital world. I was absolutely astounded by the students’ honesty, integrity, and willingness to share their personal experiences.

I concluded my presentation with a final challenge: for the students to create an educational product—a video, a song, a story, a work of art—that would teach other kids about the problems relating to bullying and sexting. After all, their peers are far more likely to listen to them than to any adult.

I am delighted to share with you their answer to my challenge—a video produced in the film class led by Laura Jarrett:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukvoKMGisW8>

As you can see, the students at Lake Wales do not regard their roles as educators and citizens as corny or unimportant. They understand, indeed they know, that they can truly make a difference. This is the most important lesson that anyone can learn, and the students at Lake Wales are lucky to have been shown their own potential in such a unique and constructive way. What a perfect model for the future of education.

article continues after advertisement

To view more films produced by the students at Lake Wales High School, check out their YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/LWHSIBFILM>

This blog was initially posted by The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital. See additional material relevant to school-based issues and problems at www.mghclaycenter.org.