



*On the other side of frustration is often
hunger for a new vision of school*

SPN | Successful Practices Network

About the Innovative Successful Practices Project

Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association, have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

Introduction

Frustration never happens in a vacuum. It is always a clue. Even in schools with strong academics, this uneasiness signals there's more that can be done. It signals people are hungry for change, ready for growth, and wanting to roll up their sleeves and get to work. In the wrong hands, frustration can be left to fester and exacerbate. In the right hands, it can be taken for the clue and spark of hope it is. Its root cause can be unearthed, and the appropriate path forward can be lit. Four years ago, when a new principal took the helm at Upper St. Clair High School in Pennsylvania, the school's frustration found its way into the right hands. By first working with the staff to get to the core of the problem and then by getting out of the way, the principal and his administrative team walked beside Upper St. Clair's teachers—and students—as they led the changes they believed were needed to realize a reimagined high school experience.

The Challenge

Upper St. Clair High School (USCHS) in suburban Pittsburgh is home to 1,400 students, 105 staff, and 12 support aides. For years, USCHS has been known for its strong and rigorous academics. Student achievement rates were consistently high, and there was a general contentment in and about the school.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education as well as the district's board of directors requires each school within the district to build a five-year strategic plan. Around the time that USCHS was due to devise their plan—just over four years ago—a new principal joined USCHS. And with him he brought an empowering, transformational leadership style to the school.

The new principal joined a staff whose frustrations had been building. In a school with a solid academic record, it can be easy to feel content; yet, that wasn't necessarily the case for the teachers and administrators. The administrative team recognized the signs of frustration and knew they had to figure out its roots so that together, the teachers and administrators could build a strategic plan that would specifically address concerns while inspiring staff and students. The goal was to empower teachers to not only identify primary issues; but to develop solutions.

The principal and his team were driven by core beliefs. First, his team was fully grounded in the district's policy about continuous improvement. The district's motto is *Qui non proficit deficit*,

or *He who does not progress regresses*, and the district literally maintains a policy formalizing the belief. In turn, USCHS's administrative team operates according to the belief. Recognizing the teachers' frustrations, the principal and his team suspected that teachers were hungry for the opportunity to evolve their practices and adapt to the changing circumstances around the school to better meet their students' needs.

Second, the principal did not view the school as *his*. To the principal, the school belonged to the students and the educators who served them. From the outset, he saw his role as promoting distributed leadership among everyone on campus—including students. He did not join USCHS to lead outright, but to empower others, to ride “sidecar,” and offer support as everyone else in the school led the growth and change they wanted to see.

Early in his tenure, the principal and his team facilitated an in-service day to unpack with staff what was behind their frustrations. In summary, staff held the view that there were impediments preventing them from supporting students as effectively as possible. In turn, there was a desire to make some real changes and improve the experience for the students and adults. There was also an administrative team in place that was interested in empowering teachers and students to do just that.

The Innovation

In the four plus years that USCHS has been undertaking changes and empowering staff and students to reimagine the high school experience, five key ideas have driven the school, kept everyone focused and motivated, and spurred a series of innovations.

Those Who Must Live Change Deserve to Lead Change

One of the first things the principal did upon his appointment was to engage his administrative team and get to the root of the teachers' concerns. The administrative team organized a “Fix Your Frustrations” in-service day. The teaching staff came together to share what they viewed as problems or road blocks to supporting students to the best of their abilities. The administrative team took care to make everyone feel safe and aware that sharing frustrations was a necessary and valued step on the path to improvement. The various issues were organized into twenty-one themes and ranged from instructional strategies and common planning, to the use of student spaces. The teachers then selected the committee they wished to serve upon to address the issue. As teams, teachers conducted surface level research about

each theme and possible solutions. Teachers then conducted a gallery crawl to present the frustration, research, and possible solution.

In facilitating the “Fix Your Frustrations” exercise, the administrative team had three primary goals. First, they intended to cull from this day the focal points of the strategic plan, such that the plan would advance causes that were important not only to student success but also to USCHS’s entire staff. How would the USCHS staff remain motivated and optimistic, after all, throughout the impending change efforts if they were being asked to make changes they didn’t believe in or didn’t care about?

The administrative team analyzed the twenty-one frustrations and found that they all fit into one of four categories. These categories then became the focus of the school’s strategic plan and laid the groundwork to empower staff and students to reimagine the high school experience. The four categories are:

- 1) Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): Establish a systematic process for teachers to collaborate, plan, and deliver instruction that is responsive to the unique needs of all learners.
- 2) Time and Schedule: Customize structures and learning opportunities to meet the academic and developmental needs of each learner by creatively using time, schedules, and resources.
- 3) Social Emotional Learning (SEL): Provide a comprehensive school experience in which students feel healthy, safe, engaged, supported, challenged, and empowered.
- 4) Technology: Leverage technology to create learning opportunities that empower students to become active learners in a dynamic and interconnected world.

Second, the administrative team intentionally set out to show the entire USCHS staff that they—not them—were going to be the leaders of change across the school. In starting the strategic planning process with educator voices, the principal purposefully aimed to get the entire team to see themselves as drivers—not recipients—of change. They were the ones who were going to have to live the change; therefore, the principal believed they were entitled to drive it, too.

Throughout this process, the principal saw his role as the facilitator, not a director handing down orders from high. Once the strategic plan was completed, it was a priority of the principal to communicate the information to all key stakeholder groups. Since the 2015-16 school year,

he has spent time communicating and explaining the forthcoming changes through letters and meetings with staff and parents. Importantly, early in the process, time was spent explaining—and at times reminding—*why* each change was being made in an effort to earn and maintain everyone's buy-in. Additionally, the administrative team regularly provided the teachers with an implementation timeline to increase understanding about where the school was headed.

Third, in response to the teachers' yearning for increased shared planning time, the principal and his team sought to set the stage for a practice and habit of collaborative team learning to foster a culture of professional learning.

A School Is a Professional Learning Community

A key realization at USCHS is that schools are not made up of professional learning communities; a school *is* a professional learning community. At USCHS, PLC refers first and foremost to the culture. A culture of professional learning is one rooted in the belief that ongoing learning is an imperative to meeting the always changing needs of students. A culture of professional learning is one that naturally promotes continual improvement. It trains educators always to look for opportunities for improvement, do the learning necessary to make improvements, and then take the initiative in leading change towards improvement. It is a culture that is inquisitive, curious, and relentlessly dedicated to doing what it takes to be better for students.

At USCHS, the culture of professional learning rests on the use of collaborative teams. Where PLC refers to the culture of the school, "collaborative teams" refer to the groups of teachers working together to learn, grow, and solve problems (i.e. "collaborative teams" is used the way most educators use PLC). The idea of the collaborative team is that the collective expertise of a team is greater than that of an individual. The teams are meant to function as places where its members are honest about frustrations and concerns related to students or content. The collaborative team makes clear that no single educator will have to go it alone; they have a built-in support network to discuss issues they're having, gain insights and ideas, and work with peers towards a solution. The team naturally lends itself to more knowledge, more ideas, and more growth—what is known as team learning, or exponential learning.

Leadership favors collaborative learning for an additional reason. It will always bring to the surface what matters most to educators. And leadership must always know what matters to the school's staff or else they could become disconnected. The rollout of collaborative teams proved this rule. As collaborative teams were initiated, a guiding coalition made up of teachers

and administrators was created to inform implementation plans. As collaborative teams met throughout the year, many teachers voiced issues they saw with the initial structure of the teams. These concerns were raised to the administrative team, who in turn empowered the guiding coalition to reflect upon the problem and devise solutions. Ultimately, collaborative team meetings were restructured in a manner that USCHS's educators said worked better for them and enabled them to make a greater impact.

Teams are divided into teams of content-area-based educators and teams of grade-level groups who share a particular student. Each team meets four times a month; two meetings are focused on curriculum, and two meetings are focused on student needs. The teams were designed to be flexible, adaptable, and responsive. For example, a group of empowered USCHS educators came up with a way that teams could be most responsive to students as swiftly as possible. Each collaborative team has access to a shared spreadsheet. In advance of each student-centered team meeting, teachers may refer a student and then all teachers of that student input into the spreadsheet their experience with that learner. Team members are expected to read the spreadsheet prior to each meeting so that they have time to think and come up with suggested ideas for team members about specific student concerns.

All collaborative teams at USCHS use this process because it has been so powerful in helping teams come up with thoughtful solutions for teachers and students. The spreadsheet prevents the stymied thinking that so often happens when people are put on the spot and not given reflection time to generate ideas. Ultimately, it allows teams to function like a team of doctors; where teams might not all share the same "patient," so to speak, but they all have expertise worthy of consideration in coming up with the best protocol to support individual students.

Collaborative teams promote a culture of professional learning by always reminding staff that they are in this together. They are better, stronger, more knowledgeable, more influential, and more capable when they pool resources, pool knowledge, pool research, and pool experience to think, learn, and grow together.

The World Doesn't Stand Still; Nor Can Curriculum

If a school is committed to continual improvement to better meet student needs, then a static and unchanging curriculum will never suffice. It cannot when the world around the curriculum is in constant flux. To find a way to bring flexibility and ongoing improvement to curriculum, the school uses a truly unique innovation.

The school has had a decades-long practice of always seeking ways to design curriculum that is more flexible and responsive. An innovation to stem from this practice, with the express intention of contributing to the reimagined high school, was the formation of the Curriculum Recommendation process. It involves a committee of educators charged with evaluating and approving curriculum recommendations. The committee will hear recommendations on two occasions in the school year. The first is in January, which is the “fast track” approval process, where accepted ideas will be implemented in the next school year and must be approved in time for the High School *Program of Studies* to be published. The second is in the spring, where approved ideas will not necessarily be implemented in the next school year.

Teachers and administrators are always on the lookout for possible changes to curriculum that can bring greater twenty-first century relevance to students. When educators have recommendations, they begin the process of pitching their ideas to the Curriculum Committee. The process follows a set series of steps:

- 1) Educators present their curriculum change recommendations to a preliminary panel, which includes the Curriculum Committee, department chairs, and members of the central office, who all give feedback and suggestions for improvement to presenters. Depending on the number of recommendations, this process can take a full day.
- 2) Presenting educators then have time to adapt their recommendations based on feedback from the preliminary panel. They then re-present their recommendations to a final panel, which includes at least one building administrator, one central office staff, and the superintendent. This panel gives feedback to each presenter.
- 3) Presenters incorporate the latest feedback and then present their recommendations to a community feedback group, which includes six to 12 parents and one central office administrator.
- 4) For the last time, the presenter incorporates feedback and aims to get the recommendation in its strongest form yet. The presenter then presents the recommendation for the final time in front of the school board. Presenters have up to two hours to fully explain and pitch their idea.
- 5) The board then meets to determine which recommendations to approve.

The Curriculum Committee and its process has given way to several, educator-driven curriculum changes. Examples include:

- **Bioinformatics Course:** In this course, students play the role of researchers in areas related to human biology and computer science. As a problem-based learning class, students are asked to research topics related to, for example, DNA, disease, human

health, etc. Students access resources and use technologies that real-world researchers do.

- **Multimedia Journalism:** Students meet only once with the teacher and then take the class fully online. The class centers on multimedia journalistic projects so that students can learn the fundamentals of journalism through a range of journalistic tools and technologies. To date, this is the only online class offered at USCHS. It has been very successful and participating students report deep engagement. The school is currently evaluating how far they can push online learning without sacrificing the relationship building that is so vital to school culture.
- **Personalized Pathways in Computer Science:** In this class, students use real-world issues and topics to grapple with mathematical concepts. Students progress through the course based upon their areas of interest.
- **The STEAM FAB Lab:** The lab's teacher solicits participation from local businesses who are willing to outsource a technical problem in need of a solution to students. In this highly engaging and relevant class, students work in teams to problem solve and ultimately present their solution ideas to businesses.
- **Performance/Problem-Based Assessments:** While curriculum changes often come in the form of new courses, they can also come in the form of broader changes in curricular processes and procedures. Of note, the school has implemented performance-based assessments (PBAs). Students still have traditional final exams at the end of the first semester. However, at the end of the second semester, they no longer do. Instead, teachers oversee PBAs. The thinking behind this process change was to use authentic and relevant assessments to bring balance to how students show learning. Authentic assessments much more closely reflect how students will be evaluated in post-secondary education and careers. They also far more readily lend themselves to a demonstration of mastery than do tests. Teachers learned quickly that PBAs provide more opportunities to observe students showing their learning, which gives teachers more insights into where students might still be struggling. In turn, teachers can better and more precisely target learner needs and ensure that students are prepared to advance to the next grade level.
- **Project Based Learning (PBL):** At the school level, teachers are incorporating more and more PBL in all classes. It is the belief of leadership that PBL offers the most effective opportunity for social emotional learning. As part of their strategic plan, the school is committed to improving, expanding, and enhancing how they teach and promote SEL. However, USCHS is intentionally not transitioning to a wholly PBL learning model. Since college remains an academic environment, leadership believes that while a full PBL learning model would promote career ready, it would fail to promote college ready.

Using a balanced approach for assessments and learning gives students the greatest levels of preparation.

SEL Doesn't Have to Happen Only in the Classroom

On the aforementioned point, USCHS has learned that student clubs can be a powerful supplement to SEL. Clubs are totally student run at USCHS. If a student wants to start a club, he or she presents the idea in front of the student council. The student is expected to provide a club name, a description, the mission of the club, and its service angle.

Early in each school year, students organize and put on a kind of club “rush,” which takes place during lunch periods. Each club has a station to provide information, answer questions, and encourage students to join. Initially, this day was open only to freshmen. However, students have been so enthusiastic about starting clubs, it is now open to all students so that everyone has the opportunity to learn about new—and old—clubs.

The student council has developed certain parameters for all clubs. Clubs must meet a certain meeting frequency threshold; someone must take meeting minutes and turn them into the student council; and each club must have a president and one faculty sponsor. These student-driven parameters help ensure the seriousness of each club and create accountability for its leadership and members. Presently, there are 67 clubs at USCHS.

In addition to after school clubs, a variety of extra- and co-curricular activities embed SEL competencies in meaningful ways. A brief selection of their impressive SEL programming follows:

- **Partners Programming:** The Partnership Program connects “regular ed” students with “special ed” students in various ways. In Partners Wellness, one of the club offerings, regular ed kids take gym with life skills students. Everyone is expected to participate in all activities and support each other as needed. Another club in the Partners Program is SHOP@USC, where SHOP stands for “showing how opportunities pay.” In this club, regular ed students and life skills students collaborate to create and design products. Ultimately, they are to sell the products, which requires working together to devise ideas to market, price, and sell each product. They must track inventory, sales revenues, and profits. All told, the club creates a friendly and engaging opportunity in particular for life skills students to learn career-relevant skills that can prepare them for life after high school. (SHOP@USC won the MAGNA Award in 2017.)

- **Mentors:** This club's members are upperclassmen who help freshmen transition from eighth grade into the more self-directed world of high school. These upperclassmen genuinely care for the freshmen they are matched with and operate as always available resources and friends to them.
- **Section Leaders:** The objective of this club is to bring more enjoyment and spirit to school activities and sports games. The genesis of this club was a solution to a problem; its founders witnessed a general lack of engagement and enthusiasm at school events and games, and they wanted to do something about it. They pitched a club where its members would attend events and games specifically to cheer loudly, support fellow students, and boost morale. The club has made an undeniable impact, with evidence of increased school spirit all around. One such indicator is the fact that students not only attend sports games, but they also stay for their entirety, which was not the case just a few years ago.
- **SMART Desk Students:** Members of this club function as a tech help desk. Students and staff can bring their technology issues and questions to Smart Desk Students and get solutions and answers. These are a group of tech-savvy and highly dedicated students, working at the "desk" anywhere from eight to 15 hours a week. For many of this club's members, they are discovering the existence or breadth of their career-relevant skills. They are also learning what it feels like to be valuable resources to others, which delivers a confidence boost that will only serve them well in their education and, eventually, careers.

Thanks to each club's service orientation, their parameters, the ability for students to wholly run and evolve the program, and the collaboration and camaraderie clubs naturally foster, USCHS has learned first-hand what rich opportunities clubs are for powerful SEL. The clubs program has also been integral in reimagining what high school can look like and evolve into when students are empowered to let their interests and passions drive change and action.

Empower Students—and Inspire Adults Along the Way

USCHS's principal is "obsessed" with the idea of leadership. He does not believe that everyone has leadership potential; he believes that everyone *is* a leader. While some will take on explicit and named leadership roles in life, we are all born with the singular task of leading our own lives. The principal—and all educators at USCHS—are committed to creating an environment where every student feels empowered to lead his or her own learning experience and where every student feels USCHS is a safe environment to experiment with leadership in its many forms. USCHS's administrative team commonly reminds students that USCHS belongs to them;

it is their school and the adults on campus are there to help them realize their vision of the school they wish to attend.

While the principal wants and expects students to drive their experiences at USCHS, he did establish one formal leadership learning opportunity. With a social studies teacher, the principal launched The Leadership Academy to develop students' leadership skills. The academy is a weeklong summer program open to all students, and attendance is voluntary. About two-thirds of entering freshmen attend the academy. The number does drop off as students advance through the grades, but there are students who attend the academy all four times that they can.

Since its inception, the academy has expanded to include one-week summer workshop opportunities for 400 Upper St. Clair School District students in grades 4 - 12 annually. While at the academy, students are asked to really look at themselves, who they are as people, what they value, and what their principles are. Students identify their leadership strengths and learn how these skills can be used to make them successful in all stages of life. Through experiential learning strategies, group projects, and hands-on activities, students practice the application of leadership skills, which builds confidence in their abilities and enhances their capacity to serve in leadership roles. Students leave the week with a Personalized Leadership Plan to assist with future development of their leadership skills.

The high school programming has also continued to expand. Today, it has four phases of leadership training, culminating in a challenging leadership experience in Belize, or Leadership Academy Belize (LAB). Students who reach the fourth phase are charged with creating a Leadership Academy, for grades 4 - 8 students attending a private school in Belize, from scratch, using the knowledge gained over the prior three phases of training. Creating the academy is one challenge, but *executing* the academy is a leadership learning experience unlike any other. Phase IV operates from the theme *Leave your legacy*, and the motto is *Figure it out*. Students are constantly placed at the center of all decision making and expected to lead the effort. Ownership over the success or failure of LAB belongs ultimately to the Phase IV students.

As demand to participate in LAB grew but spaces remained limited, USCHS expanded Phase IV, which now offers a local and regional experience in addition to the opportunity in Belize. The local experience enlists students to co-facilitate with the teachers during Phases I and II. To prepare, students and teachers take a retreat for team building and lesson planning. The teachers work hard to empower students to take active roles as facilitators. Ultimately, the

Phase IV students become well prepared to facilitate Phase I and II experiences and operate as leaders in the classroom.

The regional experience invites students to work at Camp Soles, a local summer YMCA camp. Similar to LAB, Phase IV students create and facilitate leadership experiences with Camp Soles attendees. Phase IV students are also provided the opportunity to co-facilitate with Camp Soles leaders during the week. Through the Phase IV design, USCHS students create a positive impact on the local, regional, and international levels.

In the principal's early days, he and his team made a specific and concerted effort to develop student leadership in the building. One of the ways they did this was to help guide the student council to becoming an engaged and productive group of students. Leadership spent a lot of time talking to student council members about ways to take initiative and lead change in their school. They repeatedly made it clear that they were there to support their vision. They made it known that they wanted the student council and other student leadership groups to take on tasks in the building and see them through from start to finish.

Initially, students were a bit trepidatious. They were not used to being asked to take so much initiative over school-wide matters. Nor were they accustomed to being asked to "sit at the table" with adults in a near equal leadership role. To help students feel more comfortable, leadership simply maintained open dialogue with them to show their seriousness in student empowerment and their seriousness in remaining available to them as a resource at all times.

Slowly, students grew less intimidated and more confident. The student council steadily began asserting itself more. More students were starting clubs. And more students were spontaneously organizing little programs here and there entirely on their own.

Today, USCHS students are an empowered and confident bunch. With no prompting from leadership, the student council created the school's first "mini-thon," a fundraiser to support cancer research. More than 50 students contributed to the planning and running of the mini-thon, and more than 250 students attended and supported the event.

In 2018, Pittsburgh endured the tragic shooting at a synagogue local to USCHS—an event that shook the community to its core. USCHS's students felt empowered to create a remembrance ceremony a week after the shootings. Leadership guided the students to create an inclusive

program, and the students handled everything else, helping to bring a bit of healing to the school. Students responded to the Parkland tragedy in the same fashion. Students led the creation and execution of an inclusive remembrance program designed to commemorate lost lives while appealing to the student body to be part of improving the positive school environment.

On a far lighter note, students wanted to change the location of prom, so a group of students organized three separate meetings where they invited parents to hear their rationale as to why prom should be held elsewhere. Without adult assistance, the students articulated their reasoning, listened to parent concerns, and made any necessary adjustments. Parents approved of the idea, and the administration approved the change. During the entire process, not once did the administration speak with parents. The students entirely managed the process.

When the principal assumed the role in 2015, many of USCHS's staff, like students, were apprehensive to sit at the table with him also as leaders. The principal led the vision to empower students and teachers simultaneously. In many ways, he reports, students were first to assume more leadership and act with more empowerment. Many educators witnessed as students grew in their confidence, claimed their voices, and asserted themselves in evolving USCHS into the reimagined school they wanted it to be. In turn, more and more teachers began doing the same.

While he can only theorize, the principal wholeheartedly believes that witnessing empowered students is inspiring. It's hopeful and rousing. It's educational to be reminded that children and students still maintain a healthy fearlessness, which can make it easier to put yourself out there and that so often gets chipped away at as we age. Ultimately, the principal has wondered to what degree empowering students is a powerful and effective way also to empower adults.

The Impact

USCHS is a strong academic school that has continued to get stronger as they've undergone an impressive culture shift in recent years. For three consecutive years, their state test scores are the highest of all high schools in Western Pennsylvania. Their school rating is consistently over 100, and they own the highest average ACT and SAT scores, as well.

Yet given the school's recent efforts to let staff and students reimagine the high school experience and the strong commitment to SEL and student empowerment, perhaps one of the strongest indicators of the impact of change efforts is an anecdote.

In the 2017-18 school year, the homecoming king and queen were both life skills students. When their names were announced, the student section rose to their feet from front to back, and then the adults followed. The stadium filled with applause and great joy, and many were brought to tears.

This moment was a proud culmination of several student-driven initiatives and exemplified the positive influence students have on adults. Through several clubs, life skills students had been given multiple new opportunities to engage with classmates. The result went so far beyond what, for example, these students built and sold together in SHOP@USC. Real friendships had been formed. Where so often life skills students are siloed, sometimes even disenfranchised, at USCHS they are right there, just as integral a part of the school as everyone else. USCHS students genuinely care for their life skills classmates and are committed to reminding them of this whenever possible. The 2017-18 Section Leaders also played a role. In their dedication to bringing school spirit to all events and games, they had encouraged the entire student body to cheer, clap, and support each other at every turn. While new habits had been formed amongst all students, the reflex to rise to their feet and cheer for the new prom king and queen was all from their heart.

Thanks to empowered student initiatives—and everything and everyone who made it possible and a prominent feature of school culture—USCHS is a place of positivity, mutual respect, strong relationships, spirit, and support. It's also a place where students will lovingly and enthusiastically anoint life skills students as prom king and queen. It has and continues to become a reimaged vision of what high school can do and be.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Is there frustration, perhaps even to a small degree, amongst our staff or students? Have we dismissed it as the problem of those feeling frustrated instead of getting to its roots to discover what staff or students are actually hungry for?
- 2) Do we empower staff and students, or do we simply say we do? What is evidence, if any, that people in the building feel empowered to take action and lead change? What is evidence, if any, that people believe they cannot take initiative, and why?
- 3) Is our curriculum too rigid? If so, why? What can we do to bring flexibility to it while still meeting standards and without sacrificing test scores?
- 4) Are we using student clubs and organizations to their maximal SEL potential? How can we evolve our student clubs/organizations program to hand over more responsibility to students to lead it?

