

The Student-Centered School



National Institute for
Student-Centered Education

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Engage. Inspire. Learn.

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In our white paper, *Putting Student-Centered Education in Context*, we identified the importance of **student-centered education** as a concept that brings together significant attitudes, beliefs, and practices that characterize quality educators in a wide variety of settings. The concept of student-centered education highlights many critical aspects of learning and teaching that are not given adequate attention in the current wave of education reform. We also maintain that while some environments may be more conducive to a student-centered focus than others, individual educators may bring a student-centered instructional approach into any learning environment.

The frontline of implementation for any educational system is the interaction between teacher and student. But while this interaction is rarely given the attention it deserves, it is also critical to note that all such interactions take place in an educational context that affects both the teacher and the student. Just as there are student-centered teachers, there are student-centered schools, where student-centered education is intentionally made the norm. What, then, are the elements of a student-centered school and what are the qualities and activities of such environments that encourage teachers to adopt a student-centered focus.



Positive School Culture

Walk into any school in the country and within a few minutes you will begin to experience the culture of that school. It will be evident in the physical surroundings, the absence or presence of adult supervision of students, the quality of interaction among students, and most of all the quality of interaction between students and staff.

Culture is a highly complex and somewhat mysterious phenomenon whether considered by anthropologists studying the variety of ways that humans come together in society, by business and management consultants describing the differences among companies and work environments, or educators trying to put into words the qualities that make a school unique. School culture “is pervasive, obvious, omnipresent, and at the same time invisible, ephemeral, and terribly complex.”¹ Culture is both deliberate and circumstantial, conscious and unconscious, written and unwritten.

There is extensive literature on the subject of school culture, what it is and how to change it. Best known in this area is the work of Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson, who have studied school culture in many settings. They identify that there are negative and positive aspects to school culture, and that some cultures can be labeled as generally positive or generally toxic. According to Peterson, “What we found in the research on effective schools, is that if it doesn’t have a positive, collegial, professional community and strong culture, productivity is just going to flounder. I’ve had the opportunity—kind of a sad opportunity—to visit schools with truly toxic cultures. These are

cultures where productivity is damaged by a negative approach to teaching, learning and relationships. If you don’t have a positive, professional culture, you are not going to have a productive school.”²

School culture, as discussed by Kent and Peterson, is manifest in values, rituals, beliefs, traditions and in both written and unwritten rules of behavior. Their studies shed light on what we can look for in evaluating the health of a school culture and also on what can be done to move from a toxic culture

to a more positive one. Among the positive aspects of school culture is a staff with “a sense of responsibility for student learning...we always assume that the staff really believes and feel responsible for student learning. But, in some schools they blame the students for not being successful. In a positive school culture, staff really feel a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students.”³

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Intentional Relationships

More than anything else, it is the deliberate attention to supporting positive relationships between staff and students that characterizes a student-centered school. There are amazing and inspirational educators in all types of educational settings, but what distinguishes a truly student-centered school is that the values of a student-centered focus are validated, supported, articulated, and celebrated by everyone. They are not left to chance.

Student-centered education is a set of attitudes, skills, and considerations that affect the way an educator or school approaches learners. It recognizes the individuality of each student and, by extension, the primary importance of the relationship between

learners and teachers. The very nature of learning is deeply affected by relationship at the fundamental level of brain development. As reported by Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz in their book *Born For Love*,⁴ the ability of a child to access higher level problem solving, executive functioning, and thinking skills ultimately depends on the learned ability to self-regulate, and these capacities are developed through consistent and reliable connection with safe and caring adults. In simple terms, it is the care and protection of adults that allows infants and children to develop neural pathways in the frontal lobe that transcend the more primitive flight/fight/freeze mechanisms of the limbic system.

Our ability to learn independently relies on the normal and healthy development of our brains and bodies, which in turn rely on the support of caring and trustworthy adults in our most vulnerable and formative years. The importance of relationship is so fundamental, in fact, that it could be said that the ability to form positive and nurturing relationships with students is the sine qua non of a student-centered approach. “Possibly the most critical element to success within a school environment is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone whom they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them.”⁵

At the core of effectiveness in any student-centered model, then, is the willingness and ability of educators to form positive relationships with students. Given educators with this awareness and capacity, many educational environments that are not otherwise designed to be student-centered may take on a significant student-centered quality and may address the child’s fundamental learning needs at a deep level.

Outstanding Leadership

The deliberate nature of a strong student-centered school suggests the pivotal role of leadership. Formal leadership from principals and other administrators is the most effective way to insure a positive student-centered culture. In the absence of strong leadership from the top, it may be possible for pockets of positive culture to develop around strong peer leaders. But without support all the way up the organizational hierarchy, it is unlikely to become the normative, pervading atmosphere of the school. Staff training, modeling, goal setting, and the establishment of expectations that have a student-centered focus are all activities that impact school culture and are in the hands of administrators and department heads.

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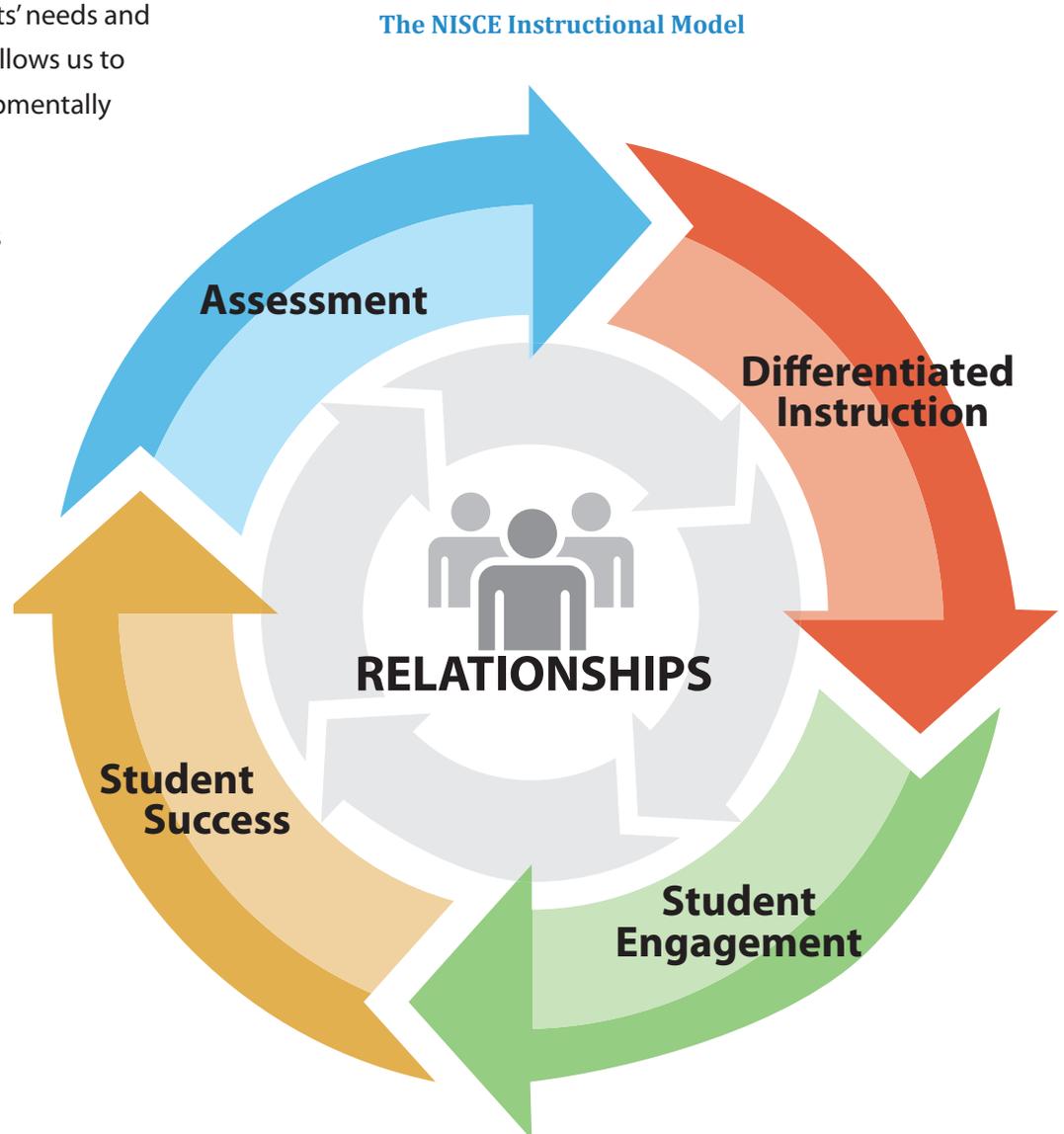
Laura Pappano, author of *Inside School Turnarounds*,⁶ tells the story of principal Anthony Smith, under whose leadership a high school in Cincinnati went from a graduation rate of 25% to 95%, and from a state

designation of “academic emergency,” the lowest state rating, to “excellent,” the state’s highest. Such a turnaround involved a number of initiatives, of course, but what seems to have had the greatest impact is the changing of the culture from toxic to positive through a deliberate emphasis on productive relationships. “Too many education success stories celebrate chance relationships: a struggling kid connects with a mentor, finds a passion, and works hard because—suddenly—effort has purpose. Why break down in excruciating detail academic-content strands, yet leave the acquisition of adult mentoring and guidance to happenstance when it has become so critical for success?”⁷

The NISCE Instructional Model

Central to delivering student-centered education on a school-wide basis is an instructional model that supports a shared approach to learning. At NISCE, we developed an instructional model as a way of describing the student-centered educational process. The model is a continuous feedback loop, in which positive and supportive school relationships permeate and sustain each element.

In our model, thoughtful and balanced assessment leads to a better understanding of each student and allows educators to be better attuned to students' needs and strengths. Better attunement allows us to design and implement developmentally appropriate differentiated instruction. Appropriately designed instruction promotes student engagement. Engagement, in turn, leads to success, as defined for each individual student. The experience of success in learning is innately satisfying and encourages students to reach out for further development. This reaching out to engage is fundamental to learning and fuels further growth.

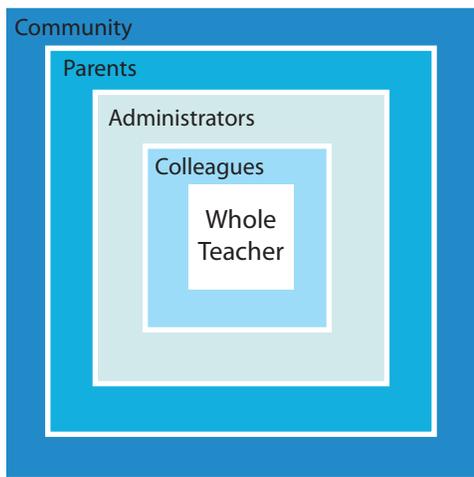


Relationships

Supporting the Whole Teacher

Teachers, like students, need encouragement and success in order to maintain energy and a positive attitude. Teaching is intense work and few can maintain productive relationships with their students without the support of other adults and the broader community. They say it takes a

Supporting the Whole Teacher



village, but it is not only the child who needs the village; any teacher will be more effective if he is also part of a supportive community. One's colleagues and the environment in which one teaches are elements that cannot be ignored.

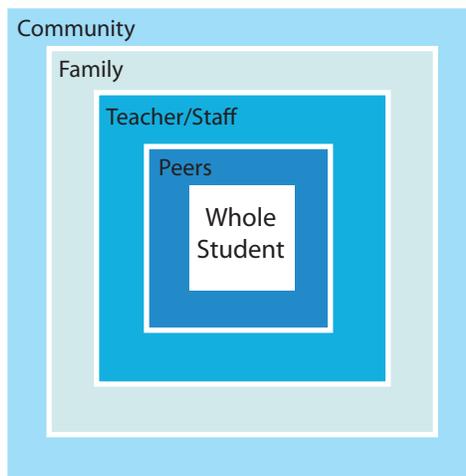
Support for teachers depends on the development of shared vision, positive school culture, and a commitment to growth for all members of the learning community. In such an environment teachers are naturally respected and provided with the resources and support they need to create positive learning experiences for their students. Support may include formal or informal mentoring and supervision of new teachers by veterans who can transmit and perpetuate the school's mission and approach. Teachers, administrators, and staff with other specializations collaborate to develop the best understanding of what each student needs and how the school as a whole can contribute to the lives of its students. Ideally, respect and collaboration are modeled and supported by administration.

Without the support of leadership, meaningful collegiality happens only on a limited scale and cannot pervade the school and inform its culture. When collaboration is clearly valued among professionals within the school, it also tends to extend outward to include collaboration with parents and with other agencies within the community at large. Ultimately, it is all about relationship at every level. The more we develop strong professional relationships among staff, the better we model and nurture positive relationships with and among students.

Teaching the Whole Student

A critical element of a student-centered approach is a keen sense of student context and boundaries. There is more to a child than her identity as a student. The whole of what is learned is much greater than what is taught, what is tested, what is addressed in curriculum, and what may be in any teacher's plan book. Notably, the Whole Child Initiative (ASCD)⁸ takes this notion seriously and recommends to schools that education should be about nurturing the growth of the learner as a complete individual, not just as a vessel for curriculum.

Supporting the Whole Student



This aligns well with our beliefs about what it means to be student-centered. It does, however, raise an important question: as educators are we responsible for the development of the "whole learner?" Are we not limited in the scope of our teaching by the inevitable

and appropriate boundaries of our role in the lives of our students? The realization that our context is circumscribed is critical to our understanding of our students and the nature of what we offer them. As educators we each have a role to play in our students' education, and we

do our best work when we understand these roles. We recognize our students as whole beyond our classrooms while appreciating both the value of the knowledge we offer them, and its limitations. Among other things, this means collaborating effectively with colleagues and, most importantly, with our students' parents.

Without reference to a framework that recognizes the complexity and challenges of our students' lives outside the classroom, our understanding and appreciation for students is limited. While our attention is focused on the demands of academic curriculum and the pressure to meet national and state standards, we may miss the signs of a student who is being bullied, the student who is too pressured to produce her best work, or the student who may be struggling to measure up to an older sibling. As educators, we cannot be responsible for all that goes on in a student's life, but the more we are aware, the deeper and more useful is our assessment of students' needs.

Balanced Assessment

An essential part of building a relationship with any student is having a practical assessment of that student's learning profile. Assessment includes any activity specifically designed to gain a better understanding of the student's needs, learning style, and areas of strength. Assessment, including observation, formal testing, and evaluation of performance, is ongoing and informs the teacher not only of how the student is doing but of how the teacher's methods are working for this student. Assessment may also include cognitive and psychological testing performed by specialists. A student-centered educator will comprehend the uses of all forms of assessment as he or she seeks the best information available to design learning experiences for students.

Developmentally Appropriate Differentiated Instruction

Each student is unique and brings unique skills and challenges to the learning environment. Instruction must be differentiated in order to meet the needs of a range

of students. The range and types of differentiation will depend on the educational setting, with best practice being highly dependent on context. In contexts with a more homogenous population, many students may be well served by a relatively narrow range of methods. In other settings where the individual needs of students are more divergent, individualization is critical. Not only how to teach, but priorities of what should be covered may be affected by our knowledge of students' needs. Knowing the developmental, cognitive, and learning styles of our students and insuring that instruction is well matched to each is essential to a student-centered approach.

Fostering Student Engagement

Learning is a wondrous and natural process. Students will engage in learning with or without our guidance. However, as adults there are certain things we want students to learn, as well as things we may prefer they not learn. If we create the circumstances for students to learn safely, energetically, and in ways that suit their needs and abilities, students will become meaningfully engaged in their education.

Supporting Student Success

Engagement pays off in increasing success, which in turn reinforces the satisfaction of learning. Learning can also be hard work, requiring concentration, attention, and delayed gratification. If the labor of learning outweighs the satisfaction derived from success, interest will diminish rapidly. The primary goal of a student-centered approach to education is to engage students deeply in their own learning process. When this is accomplished the purpose of the teacher/student relationship is fulfilled and the experience of both is enriched.

Implementing a Student-Centered School Model

What, then, are the core elements of a student-centered school model and how is it supported by school leadership? Reviewing the characteristics of a student-centered educator as outlined in our white paper, *Putting Student-Centered Education in Context*, we find that the following school-wide initiatives support our list of requisite attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors:

1 **A student-centered educator appreciates, through intuition or knowledge gained from study, the singularity and importance of each child.**

In a student-centered school, teachers are encouraged to treat each child as an individual. Instruction is appropriately differentiated and attention is given to understanding and respecting individual needs and differences. This is not a casual matter, but involves a distinct set of communications and practices. It is in overt and covert messages that school leaders communicate and professional peers convey to each other. It is not taken for granted that because a teacher knows her subject matter, she is well prepared to know how to relate to students. Understanding students is not automatic and is not the same as understanding curriculum. In a student-centered school there will be trainings, discussions, and perhaps mentoring that expands each educator's knowledge of the range of student profiles and needs within the population of students served.

2 **A student-centered educator comprehends the vital importance of his relationship with children, while keeping in perspective the nature of his role and its limitations.**

In a student-centered school positive relationships between staff and students are encouraged and celebrated. Staff are encouraged to treat students with respect. If there is a conflict in a relationship between a teacher and a student, it is taken seriously and treated as an obstacle that should be addressed. This is in contrast with a common perspective that it is primarily the student's job to figure out how to get along with the teacher. Students need a voice. Even though this voice may be misguided, there are times when it must be heard so that it can develop towards a more mature perspective.

3 **A student-centered educator has an understanding of developmental issues and recognizes that any educational approach must be well matched to the capabilities of her students.**

In a student-centered school, developmental and cognitive issues are part of the professional dialogue. There are many methods of assessment, from the most formal cognitive testing to the least formal, but sometimes most important, daily observations of the teacher. In a student-centered school, all valid tools for understanding what works for each student will be utilized. In this quest, recent developments in brain research will not be ignored. While a grasp of scientific knowledge about learning and the brain does not inevitably lead to better teaching methods, it only makes sense to bring this knowledge to bear on our understanding of students and how they learn. Not to do so may lead to a haphazard and thoughtless application of curriculum standards and goals set from a great political distance, with little room made for individual learning styles. Therefore, in a student-centered school, brain science and developmental issues will be included in professional development and training. As a result, teachers can be expected to have a well-grounded understanding of learning and learning differences, and to apply these in their evaluation of what is best for their students.

4 A student-centered educator values the areas of strength in each child and seeks to nurture them.

Looking for and encouraging the “islands of competence”⁹ in a child are things many teachers and parents will do instinctively. In fact, there are obvious evolutionary reasons why this must be so. But in a reliably student-centered school, educators and staff will do this systematically and deliberately. In staff discussions and meetings one will hear conversations that specifically address the strengths of each child, and not just the problems they bring. Carrying this into action, among the range of activities and rituals routinely comprising a child’s day, there will be opportunities for the expression of a wide array of skills and talents.

5 A student-centered educator has an understanding of the context in which his teaching occurs and within that context has something of value to contribute to his students.

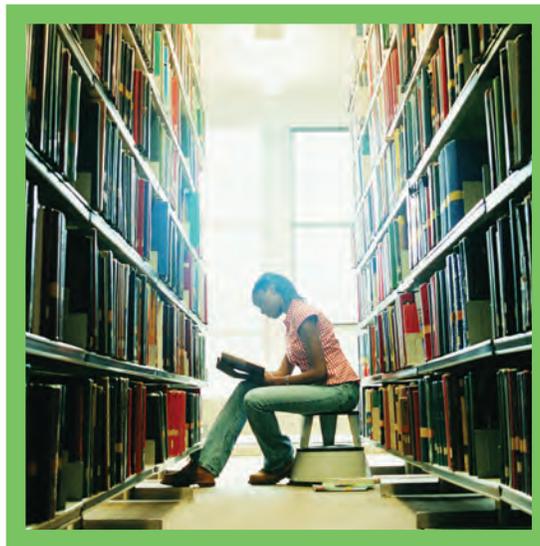
It is well and good to talk about the importance of relationship in education, but this cannot take the place of good curriculum, well-designed lessons, and thoughtful teaching methods. In a student-centered school, there are clear academic standards and strong collaboration among educators resulting in a shared vision. Shared vision is an important aspect of school culture and part of what makes the learning environment coherent. Teachers must know their stuff, and present it in a way that makes room for the individuality of learners. Recognizing and embracing their responsibility for student learning, teachers in a student-centered school seek continual improvement of their own skills and abilities as teachers. Where learning is highly valued and seen as lifelong—a process not only for students but for teachers—a positive school culture with student-centered values is likely to take root.

6 A student-centered educator has a deep sense of the joys and responsibilities of being a caring adult in the life of a child.

The most important job of leadership is to hire and develop fine teachers and other staff who have a sound grasp of what it takes to be an effective educator. In a student-centered school, good teachers are highly valued and carefully selected, the hiring process is thorough, and the development of a strong team of educators is given careful attention. There are many aspects of being an educator that can be taught. There are also extremely critical capacities that must be built into the educator’s psyche. Chief among these is the deep sense of purpose involved in being part of the life of a young person. Where this quality is not found, either in the school or in the individual teacher, education will wallow in a messy and confused state. Students will lose interest and their attention will turn toward other things. It is therefore incumbent upon teachers to be solid in their commitment to the educational process and to maintain a sense of wonder about all aspects of learning. And the most reliable way to insure this is for the leaders of the school, as educators themselves, to have the same commitment to learning so they can model it, encourage it, and recognize it in others.

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Whitepaper was written with the assistance of **Mark Dix**. Mark is currently the director of the High School Program at Dearborn Academy, a program of Schools for Children, Inc.

ABOUT NISCE

Founded in 2012 by the Massachusetts nonprofit Schools for Children, Inc., The National Institute for Student-Centered Education (NISCE) seeks to catalyze grassroots support for a vision of education where students—not politics, not tests, not expediency—are at the center of learning, and where all students have the opportunities and resources they need to succeed.

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