October Staff Development

A newsletter for the staff by Dr. Dominy

The Power of Moments

Greetings Staff!

At the beginning of the year Dr. Fields shared with us the theme for our school year and the theme was the Power of Moments. Chip Heath and Dan Heath are prolific writers in the area of business and education and they have recently written the book, *The Power of Moments*. I have provided you an excerpt from a newsletter they recently wrote that helps demonstrate how the power of moments can impact education.

What makes certain brief experiences in our lives so memorable and meaningful? Let's call them "peak moments": A wedding day. A successful public presentation. An award received for work well done. Peak moments share similar elements—such as elevation and connection—and armed with this knowledge, all of us can create richer experiences for the people we care about.

But there's one critical period in life that is missing these powerful moments: The time students spend in the classroom.

Think about it: What do you remember from your experience as a student? Senior musical. Swim meets. Science fairs. Football games. Debate tournaments. Choir concerts. Notice the pattern?

They're all peak moments, representing the culmination of students' work. They're social, often performed in front of an audience, and involve an element of competition or pressure. There's a sense of pomp and circumstance about them—notice how often we actually wear distinctive clothes to them.

Unfortunately, all those memorable moments happen outside the classroom, even though students spend the vast majority of their time inside the classroom.

What school systems need is a massive infusion of peak moments. This is a rare case when we can motivate students and teachers and improve academic outcomes all at once. To see what peak moments can do, consider the work of two teachers at Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, Calif.

In 1989, social studies teacher Greg Jouriles and English teacher Susan Bedford had grown frustrated with the grind of teaching. They resolved to create something dramatic—an academic moment as

memorable as the prom. They called it the “Trial of Human Nature,” and it continues at Hillsdale to this day, some three decades later.

Here’s how it works: One day in class, a discussion of Lord of the Flies is interrupted. A visitor distributes an official-looking legal document, announcing that the book’s author, William Golding, has been charged with “libeling human nature.” The students are told that they will conduct Golding’s trial. They will act as the lawyers and the witnesses and the judge.

The trial addresses fundamental questions of literature and history: Are people good or evil? Is civilization just a thin veneer over violent instincts? The students prepare for months, and when the day comes, they take school buses to a real court room. The lawyers dress in suits, and the witnesses come in costume, ready to testify as historical or literary figures such as Stalin, Gandhi, Atticus Finch, and even Darth Vader. A jury of administrators and alumni delivers a verdict. Some years, Golding is convicted; other years, he goes free.

The day of the trial is a powerful peak moment: a culmination of preparation and practice, delivered in front of an audience, with real stakes and immediate feedback. Every year, the student speaker at graduation mentions the trial. The prom? It’s mentioned sometimes.

Many peak moments fall under the umbrella of “deeper learning,” a term that encompasses project-based learning, portfolios, and student exhibitions. At High Tech High, a network of charter schools in San Diego, students don’t take exams at all; they present their work at exhibitions open to the public. Their work ranges from theater performances to robotics to self-published books.

If that sounds crazy—replacing exams with exhibitions—ask yourself what more closely resembles work in the real world: the intense collaboration of an exhibition requiring students to frame and deliver a project under deadline pressure so that an audience can view and critique it? Or an exam with 10 multiple-choice and three short-answer questions?

Worse, the knowledge measured by exams seems to have a short shelf life. Consider a study cited by Ted Dintersmith and Tony Wagner in their book *Most Likely to Succeed*. Teachers at an elite private high school in New Jersey found that when students were asked to retake in September the same final exam they’d just completed in June, their average grades plummeted from a B-plus to an F. The students’ hard work didn’t culminate—it evaporated.

Meanwhile, an American Institutes of Research study found promising results for schools embracing deeper learning, including better student-collaboration skills, higher levels of motivation and self-efficacy, and higher on-time graduation and enrollment rates. Better yet, it wasn’t just the most academically accomplished students, or those in one racial or ethnic subgroup, who benefited from deeper learning. Students benefited across the board.

So how can we feel satisfied delivering the usual academic experience—one that students, on the whole, can barely remember? If your family took a weeklong vacation that didn’t deliver a few long-lasting memories, you’d feel shortchanged. Meanwhile, middle and high school take up at least seven years of our lives. In how many of those years do you have even one fond academic memory, a peak moment that elevated you above the everyday?

These moments are worth fighting for.

From the Teacher Evaluation Model: Types of Lessons

Staff,

As I stated in my last newsletter, I want to focus on the indicators found in the teacher evaluation system so that we can build a common vocabulary and expectation for what each indicator involves and the evidence surrounding each indicator. This month, I want to focus on the three types of lessons- our definition for this indicator states that "The teacher has a command of all three types of lessons: Direct instruction, Practicing and Deepening, and Knowledge Application and can identify and deliver the appropriate type of lesson."

Here is a little more description involving the three types of lessons:

Direct Instruction Lessons

- Chunking Content
- Processing Content
- Recording and Representing Content

Practicing and Deepening Lessons

- Using Structures Practice Lessons
- Examining Similarities and differences
- Examining errors in reasoning

Knowledge Application Lessons

- Engaging students in cognitively complex tasks
- Providing resources and guidance
- Generating and defending claims

Below you will find the student and teacher evidence that the Seward Staff created regarding this indicator:

Teacher Evidence

- Teachers are modeling problem solving skills.
- Teachers effectively use direct instruction lessons and strategies.
- Teachers effectively use practicing and deepening lesson and strategies.
- Teachers effectively use knowledge application lessons and strategies.

Student Evidence

- Students identify key content areas and make relevant connections, through summaries and visual representations.
- Students are using problem solving skills to analyze previously taught content.
- Students are working on cognitively complex tasks.
- Students are applying what they have learned to novel situations.
- Students work with some independence on knowledge application tasks supported by the teacher.
- Students have opportunities to generate new conclusions and provide evidence for their conclusion.