Tapestry Charter School

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Vision:
A vibrant community of learners and leaders.

Mission:
Tapestry Charter School is a K-12 public school for children, parents and teachers who believe in weaving together the essential elements that inspire a lifelong passion for learning.

Statement of Successful Practice:
Tapestry Charter School partners with Expeditionary Learning (EL) to offer a K-12 school utilizing project-based learning and arts integration. A key aspect of Tapestry High School's success is the "Crew Advisory" structure wherein all students are part of a small group who meet with their Crew leader, a teacher in the school, for 30 minutes every weekday. Deceivingly simple, the advisory structure serves as the key means to communicate and reinforce behavioral and academic expectations, build student affiliation, and foster student commitment and success in high school. Tapestry High School credits Crew with maximizing student engagement and subsequently, minimizing high school dropouts all-too-common in urban high schools.

Tapestry Charter High School

Tapestry Charter School is an arts-integrated, K-12 Expeditionary Learning (www.elschools.org), charter school in the city of Buffalo. Tapestry received approval from the State University of New York Board of Trustees to open in September 2001. Originally a K-4 school, Tapestry expanded its charter and enrolled its first freshman class in 2006. Enrollment in 2010 was 545 and will be 670 for the 2011-2012 academic year; 375 of these students attend the high school. Just over 50% of the high school students qualify for free or reduced priced meals and 20% receive special education services.

Tapestry provides a challenging and rigorous educational environment that emphasizes the values of appreciation, integrity, compassion, service, quality, responsibility, perseverance and respect. Key aspects of the Tapestry Charter High School program are:

- EL program that emphasizes active learning, character growth and teamwork,
- School culture of caring,
- Physical and emotional fitness,
- Knowledge and understanding of arts,
- Social responsibility,
- Family and community engagement, and
- Ongoing professional development.

Tapestry consistently out performs the Buffalo school district on standardized tests and exceeds state standards for learning. The first cohort of high school students graduated in June of 2010, boasting a 98% graduation and 100% college acceptance rate. Of note, in spring 2010, the passing rate of the first cohort of seniors on the Regents exam was 92% in English and 88% in mathematics compared to 61% and 57% respectively for the local district. Yet, success is broader than outcomes on a test; Tapestry personnel define success as high student retention and graduation rate, students' commitment to the school culture, and the waitlist to attend the school. And, a year after graduation, 70% of the inaugural Tapestry graduates remain enrolled in post-secondary education. Tapestry provides an inclusive academic program to meet the educational needs of all students and sees schools and families as partners in learning; forming a collaborative partnership to help students prepare for post-secondary success.

"Accountability with Care"

High school dropout rates are a national epidemic; only 69% of students earn their high school diplomas nationwide and among minority students, the rates are even lower (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Reducing dropout rates is an explicit goal of the federal School Improvement Grant program that in the last two years has directed $545 billion to turning around the lowest performing schools across the nation. As states and districts strive to reduce their dropout rates, practices identified as contributing to high school persistence deserve careful attention. In line with the goal to meaningfully engage high school students and support them to complete high school and be prepared for college and career success, Tapestry Charter High School's practice of grade level "Crews" reflect "accountability with care" and are credited with successfully engaging high school students in their education.

Thoughtfully challenging adolescents' natural desire to be independent, Crew provides an intentional opportunity for students to be engaged by an adult other than their parent or a subject-matter teacher in a traditional academic environment. Based on the assumption that just when adolescents want independence the most is when they need the most guidance, Tapestry High School Crews provide a positive affiliation to engage students and reinforce positive expectations. Crew is most essential because it taps into the need for kids to have accountability with encouragement that pushes them to work harder. Students care about the people they are connected to and with the help of Crew, not only do students persist in high school, they have fun along the way as they actively participate in their Crews.

Crew: Nuts and Bolts

Crew provides students with a structured grade-level group that serves to both support and encourage Tapestry High School students. Each Crew is comprised of 10-12 students and a Crew leader, a grade level teacher or staff member responsible for leading the Crew. Crews meet every school day for 30 minutes. Crew always starts in circle with all members included, hands empty and members looking at one another. Each Crew also begins with an intentional greeting extended to make certain that every student feels welcomed, valued and connected. Similar to academic classes, Crew leaders are expected to prepare for Crew and arrive with explicit learning targets accomplished through a planned initiative or activity and debrief.

Designed for the explicit purpose of providing students with a structure to build connections and student buy-in to the long-term value of school, in Crew students discuss school behavioral and academic expectations and engage in a variety of activities that build camaraderie among the members. The process begins freshman year with an orientation and a camping trip and culminates in students graduating by Crew and proudly wearing their distinct Crew colors.

The substance of Crew is framed by the EL design principles focusing on the development of character, conscience and appreciation for service. The Crew structure integrates the academic and

social aspects of the EL design principles and forges a strong connection both to the specific Crew and the school as a whole.

Crew is also central to Tapestry High School's representative student government that supports the school's democratic school model in which students have an explicit and real voice in substantive decisions. Each Crew elects a representative to serve on the student government. By ensuring that each Crew is represented, all students can have a voice and no one is overwhelmed or anonymous.

Reflecting its commitment to serve students from across the city, Tapestry enrolls a diverse population approximating the Buffalo community. Crew is credited with bringing students from diverse backgrounds together in a supportive and caring environment that encourages positive and productive behavioral and academic expectations**.** While conflicts do arise, the school uses the restorative justice approach to build relationships and interdependence. If a student does something offensive to an individual or the broader community, they are expected to apologize to those harmed. This process ensures that victims have a voice. Tapestry staff intentionally work to diffuse cliques and social groups that impede the broader community goal of establishing a positive school culture reflecting respect and appreciation for all members.

In line with the school's broader commitment to ongoing, substantive and differentiated professional development, Tapestry provides teachers with professional development related to engaging students through their Crews and making certain that kids feel connected or motivated.

Extended Crew: Fostering Parent Involvement

In addition to engaging students, Crew also intentionally engages families. Crew leaders reach out to parents and create an explicit channel for communication between the school and families. Student Led Conferences (SLC) –Tapestry's version of Parent-teacher conferences—occur at least twice a year and are led by students with Crew leaders actively participating to ensure that parents understand and feel a part of their child's educational experience.

In preparation for SLCs, students develop academic portfolios and reflect on their work. During the conference, the student presents their progress to their parents with the Crew leader. Having the student present their portfolio not only gives them full responsibility for their progress but also communicates the value the school sees in the student as a responsible and engaged learner who is accountable for their own progress. While many schools articulate a commitment to parental involvement, at Tapestry SLCs provide an intentional structure to engage parents in a meaningful manner. The Crew leader takes responsibility for making certain that every family can attend; this includes accommodating parents' schedules to ensure that all parents can participate. Tapestry boasts near universal parent attendance at the conferences.

Crew Assignment

Crews are designed with care when students first enter the high school. They are intentionally designed to be as heterogeneous as possible by race, gender and academic skill. Incoming freshmen join their designated Crew for orientation and the traditional freshman camping trip.

While the grade-level teacher leaders generally change as students progress through the school, students remain in the same Crew until they graduate.

Tapestry personnel have contemplated whether the Crew leader should rise with the students but reflecting a commitment to Crew leaders having first-hand knowledge of the grade specific program, leaders change each year. At graduation, Crew leaders announce their students and share personal descriptions of each student as they receive their diploma.

Replication Conditions

- Establish a clear and coherent vision and mission
- Leverage flexibility provided by New York charter school law (e.g., distinct curriculum and extended school day and school year)
- Create intentional structures that provide all students with an opportunity to develop ties with adults and students in the school
- Limit size of high schools to intentionally create a caring community in which students feel a strong sense of affiliation and accountability for positive behavior and rigorous academic pursuits. Tapestry personnel estimate ideal high school size is around 350 students.
- Hire well: A strong school leader and exemplary teachers who are committed to the school mission are the foundation of a successful school
- Integrate respect of teachers, students, and parents into every aspect of school culture to build a positive community of caring
- Leverage positive expectations and peer pressure cultivated in Crews or similar advisory structures to engage students, encourage students ambitions, and reduce high school drop-out rates
- Provide ongoing professional development to personnel regarding how to lead effective advisory groups designed to engage and support high school students.

References/Resources

- **Alliance for Excellent Education** http://www.all4ed.org/
- **Expeditionary Learning School**: http://elschools.org/
- **National High School Center**: Dropout Prevention: http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/
- **Tapestry Charter School**: http://www.tapestryschool.org
- **New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting**: http://www.nystart.gov
- **New York State Board of Regents**, Charter Schools Office: http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc
- **New York State Charter Schools Institute**: (2010, May). Subsequent Renewal Report Tapestry Charter School: http://www.newyorkcharters.org/pdf/RenewalReports/2009-10/TapestryFINALrenrpt.pdf
- **Restorative Justice**: Partners in Restorative Justice: http://www.pirirochester.org/about/history.htm