Education Plan: A.1 Educational Philosophy

Overview: The Model Community Learning Center (MCLC) will be a demonstration site for best educational practices serving a diverse, urban population historically known for underperformance.The MCLC will house the StrengthBuilding® Training and Coaching Center, a pre-K through college education program and a number of community partners such as the Southwest Conservation Corps, aTechnical Education Component, a Community Health Center, an Early Childhood Center, and Postsecondary Education Institutions.The goal is for students to graduate college, career and community ready. The initial school will begin with grades 6 – 9, and grow out to 6 – 12 over the following three years. MCLC may decide, if a need exists, to add elementary grade levels to its campus in the future.

Mission: The mission of the MCLC is to establish a model professional learning community targeting underserved populations in which all students are 1) college ready, 2) successful in their postsecondary endeavors, 3) contributing members of the community, and 4) able to use strength building concepts throughout their lives. The MCLC serves as a model for school transformation across Arizona.

Selected Target Group

The target group selected represents the challenge and promise of urban school districts. Half the nation's dropouts and more than two-thirds of its minority dropouts are produced by two thousand high schools across the country including those in the immediate area of the proposed learning center location in Tucson. The demographics of this area include a high percentage of economically disadvantaged, largely Hispanic and Native American, youth facing the issues of large inner city schools.

Research on middle schools[i] confirms the importance of the "transition" years, including the shift from elementary to middle in grade six and the shift from middle to high school in grade nine.While it is, of course, essential to begin academic intervention much earlier, it was determined that this middle level population is most in need of a transformational model of education. Therefore, grades 6 – 9 are targeted for the initial school year in 2013-2014. The high school would then be "grown" out one year at a time with the first high school graduating class in 2017.

In order for students to be successful in high school, educators must use a unified approach to teach students in grades 6 through 9. Middle grades students thrive in a learning environment that offers the following elements:

- Highly engaging electives with short term success opportunities
- An environment that honors the desire for adventure and camaraderie
- Belief that hard work will pay off through self-motivation
- Organizational and self-management skills
- Recognition at both the individual and group level for positive behavior
- Focus on effective intervention, not just identification

- Recognition of and encouragement to build on student strengths

Implementing the leadership and effective teaching practices of high poverty and high performing schools[ii] in a strengthbuilding climate which integrates on-site community support will result in the academic success of all students attending the MCLC. The characteristics of these performing schools include:

- focus on academic achievement
- clear curriculum choices
- frequent assessment of student progress
- multiple opportunities for improvement
- emphasis on nonfiction writing
- collaborative scoring of student work

Core Concepts Guiding the School

In order to address the targets of the school mission the core elements for the MCLC include:

1) A rigorous and relevant college preparatory curriculum and instructional program.
2) A college-going school culture that prepares students for the academic, social and cultural expectations for postsecondary education.
3) A community school model that supports and enhances the professional learning community.
4) StrengthBuilding© as the foundation of the school community for students, staff, families and partners.

1) A Rigorous and Relevant College Preparatory Curriculum and Instructional Program

The MCLC intends to use the models and processes from the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE)[iii] to promote a rigorous and relevant educational program that is rooted in relationships. Additionally, the interdisciplinary teacher design teams will further develop a project based (PBL) curriculum across all grade levels that is planned backward from the Common Core Standards as well as college preparatory standards.

The ICLE model builds from a Rigor-Relevance Framework based on two dimensions of higher standards and student achievement. The goal is to move toward the higher end of the Knowledge Continuum based on Bloom's Taxonomy in which there is a focus on engaging learners in higher-order thinking skills along with higher levels of the Application Model in which students apply learning to real-world unpredictable situations.The model is operationalized by providing focus on Common Core Standards in a single track curriculum. The curriculum will emphasize Project Based Learning supplemented by Inquiry Based teaching and learning with emphasis on differentiation to address remediation and enrichment in a structured fashion.

The Buck Institute for Education (BIE) has been selected as the primary resource for standards-focused Project Based Learning defined as "a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks."[iv] It is critical that the projects fit well with the era of accountability and performance to include high standards, rigorous challenges, and valid assessment methods. In standards-based PBL, students are pulled through the curriculumby a Driving Question or authentic problem that creates a need to know the material. The Driving Question is tied to content standards in the curriculum, and assessment is explicitly designed to evaluate the students' knowledge of the content.

Effective projects may run from a few weeks to a yearlong, interdisciplinary project that involves community participation and adults outside the school. Outstanding projects will be expected to:

- Recognize students' inherent *drive to learn,* their capability to do important work, and their need to be taken seriously by putting them at the center of the learning process.
- Engage students in the central concepts and principles of a discipline. The project work is *central* rather than peripheral to the curriculum.
- Highlight provocative issues or questions that lead students to *in-depth exploration of authentic and important topics.*
- Require the use of essential *tools and skills*, including technology, for learning, self-management, and project management.
- Specify *products* that solve problems, explain dilemmas, or present information generated through investigation, research, or reasoning.
- Include *multiple products* that permit frequent feedback and consistent opportunities for students to learn from experience.
- Use *performance-based individualassessments* that communicate high expectations, present rigorous challenges, and require a range of skills and knowledge.
- Encourage *collaboration* in some form, either through small groups, student led presentations, or whole-class evaluations of project results.

Teachers report that PBL also:

- Overcomes the dichotomy between knowledge and thinking, helping students to both "know" and "do."
- Supports students in learning and practicing skills in problem solving, communication, and self-management.
- Encourages the development of habits of mind associated with lifelong learning, civic responsibility, and personal or career success.
- Integrates curriculum areas, thematic instruction, and community issues.
- Assessesindividual performance on content and skills using criteria similar to those in the work world, thus encouraging accountability, goal setting, and improved performance.

- Creates positive communication and collaborative relationships among diverse groups of students.
- Meets the needs of learners with varying skill levels and learning styles.
- Engages and motivates bored or indifferent students.

It is important to note that PBL is not appropriate as the sole method for teaching certain basic skills such as reading or computation; however, it does provide an environment for motivation and the application of those skills. Teachers will be using "Gold Seal" lessons[v] to focus on higher level skills and to assure that there is a consistent pattern of highly engaged student learning. The structure of teaching and learning will be assessment driven to include the project rubrics as well as a system of formative assessments aligned with the common power standards. All students will participate in initial assessments prior to enrollment so that teachers will be able to provide appropriate differentiation strategies. The school calendar includes regular formative assessment at three week intervals with immediate design team meetings to determine any instructional intervention as well as progress reports for student and parent reports. This feedback will guide the selection of academic elective options, tutorial schedules and other interventions to support the ongoing success for all students.

The curriculum design teams will include teachers in partnership with business and community resources and families so there is a direct connection with real-world experiences. This is supported by research in neuroscience and psychology that knowledge, thinking, doing and the contexts for learning are inextricably tied. Learning is partly a social activity that takes place within the context of culture, community, and past experiences. Learners actively use what they know to explore, negotiate, interpret, and create. They *construct* solutions, thus shifting the emphasis toward the process of learning.

The emphasis at the MCLC will be on what is learned rather than just what is taught. The Arizona Standards as measured by AIMS will serve as the base for all students. However[vi], it is expected that students will demonstrate knowledge and skills well beyond these basic standards. The expectation is to "stretch" the learning so that students are pushed to higher levels. Given the rapidly changing job market schools today must help students prepare for careers that do not currently exist. Therefore, in addition to a solid academic foundation, it is imperative that young people be collaborative, creative decision-makers who can problem find and problem solve.

"To predict whether a student will thrive in our interconnected world, we need to look at what is valued when nothing is certain, in a rapidly changing global community. The more unpredictable the path, the more creativity is valued; the more interconnected we are, the more we value teamwork and collaboration; and the more diversity we encounter, the more personal skillfulness and self-evaluation we need to succeed in work, family, and community endeavors."Activelearning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn.

2) A College Going School Culture

It is no longer adequate to expect that obtaining a high school diploma will lead to a job that covers family expenses in today's economy. The evolution of technology in our world requires that applicants be able to apply high level skills. Additionally, employers consistently report that youth are ill-prepared in basic skills and work ethic. Further, the need to incorporate "21st century skills" is evident across numerous business and education groups. The MCLC will incorporate a curriculum framework that integrates 21st century skills in the education program. Frameworks such as enGauge 21st Century Skills and Partnership for 21st Century Skills are integrated in the philosophy and instructional approach. The goal is to assure that all students are adequately prepared for admission and successful completion of postsecondary courses. While it is expected that students may select from a two-year college, four-year college, industry certificate or apprenticeship program, the college readiness goal for MCLC demands that every student have the skills and disposition to choose from these options. Therefore, college readiness will be expected for all students.

In a policy report prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Conley[vii] defines college readiness as what is necessary to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in credit-bearing general education classes at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfers credit to a baccalaureate program. This includes having the right content knowledge, understanding the culture and structure of college and the norms of the academic and social environment as well as the mindset necessary to have this happen.

Conley further points out how college is different from high school, that "college is the first place where we expect young people to be adults, not large children." The pupil-teacher relationship, expectations for engagement, independent work and motivation all change in college and occur at the same time that many young people are experiencing their first major independence from their families. This makes the transition to college even more challenging. Essentially college differs in important ways that include:

- More emphasis on key thinking skills such as analysis, problem solving for complex issues, conclusions fully supported by explanation and research, and deep thinking. (National Research Council, 2002)
- Courses may require students to read 8 – 10 books in the same timeframe as they read two in high school. (Standards for Success, 2003)
- Write multiple papers in short periods of time that are well organized, reasoned and documented. (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006)
- Actively engage in small groups in and outside of class on complex problems and projects and make presentations explaining what they have learned.
- Extra credit request is not a workable strategy in college

Jeannie Oakes has addressed equity in public schools, colleges and universities for many years. The UC ACCORD research at UCLA[viii] points to seven conditions for equity in achievement and college going:

1. Safe and adequate school facilities
2. A college-going school culture
3. Rigorous academic curriculum
4. Qualified teachers
5. Intensive academic and social supports
6. Opportunities to develop a multi-cultural, college-going identity
7. Family-neighborhood-school connections

These conditions are evident in the structure and culture of the MCLC.

In the college-going culture, students, teachers, staff, community partners and families expect students to achieve at high levels, encourage them to exert the necessary effort and persistence, and provide intervention and information emphasizing that college preparation is a normal part of their education and not reserved for an exceptional few.

Addressing the "mindset" of students, teachers and families will also be a critical element of the MCLC because the belief that you are naturally smart or not can lead to college readiness issues. Carol Dweck[ix] addresses this issue and provides a computer based option, Brainology, which will be implemented at the MCLC across grades 6-9. Dweck believes that the mindset/belief that people are born with fixed intelligence leads to issues for all learners. Those who believe they are naturally intelligent often do not think they have to work hard to succeed. Those who believe they are not naturally intelligent often give up and fall into the "fear of failure" routine, i.e.: they choose to not try the work rather than looking stupid by trying and failing. This mindset is often nurtured by comments like "you are so smart" which may limit the effort that person will make. Instead, the MCLC will encourage language that says, "you really worked hard on that", or" I can see the effort you made and how it paid off", or even, "that looks good, now what can you do to improve it."

An important element of student success also lies in support the parents and families. Many students will be the first in their family to attend college thus requiring that parents understand what they can do to support this accomplishment. The traditional concept of parent engagement has been questioned by researchers and advocates who argue that Title I, No Child Left Behind requirement for parent engagement has not been successful. Information from the National Network of Partnership Schools points out the importance of supporting parents so they can help their children with academic work at home, support better attendance and higher graduation rates. MCLC proposes to address this through a comprehensive Family Mentoring Program through which families will both lend and gain support from one another through organized system led by the Community StrengthBuilding Leader. The system will evolve based upon direct input from our families.

In order to assure that students are meeting the requirements for college readiness, the MCLC will include a range of assessments to evaluate progress in core standards as well as the 21st Century skills. In addition to the Arizona required assessments the students will participate in PSAT beginning in grade 10 and the College Work and Readiness Assessment (CWRA) in grade 9. The CWRA is a tool for school improvement that assesses higher level skills such as Create, Evaluate, and Analysis on the Bloom's Taxonomy. The MCLC staff will also apply to the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST) at the University of California to participate in the Powersource system. This tool for middle school students measures advanced skills in the context of measuring content proficiency for Pre-Algebra.

3) Community School Model

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. The use of an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. The Community Schools Logic Model [x] tells us that:

- Communities and schools are fundamentally and positively interconnected.
- Schools can make a difference in the lives of ALL children
- Children do better when their families do better
- The development of the whole child is a critical factor for student success
- Community schools initiative blend funding streams and partnerships to build on existing efforts.

Community schools at their core, work to provide the services, supports and opportunities necessary for communities to further support student achievement and learning as well as provide a host of activities and efforts that contribute to building healthier communities.[xi] One example of partnership support is the contribution of Master and Bachelor Level Social Work Interns from Arizona State University. These interns will be able to offer both case management and counseling services for youth and families under the direct supervision of Pamela Clark-Raines (the Community StrengthBuilding Leader).

Community schools contribute to student learning and development because they are places where:

- Human development is fostered through high-quality, comprehensive programs that nurture learning and development
- a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students is provided
- students are motivated and engaged in learning—both in school and in community settings, during and after school
- the basic physical, social, emotional, and economic needs of young people and their families are met
- mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents and school staff is the norm

- the community is connected with the school, thus promoting a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful while connecting students to a broader learning community[xii]

The school becomes a hub bringing together many stakeholders who offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities to achieve positive academic results. These stakeholders are responsive to the unique conditions and circumstances facing the students, families, school and community. The community the MCLC is targeting is in desperate need of services, supports and opportunities. Creating a community school and the impact it has on the population it serves demonstrates the "why" for this core element being chosen to play a key role in the design of the MCLC.

Current and proposed initial partners for the Model Community Learning Center include:

1. StrengthBuilding Partners
2. Joint Technical Education District
3. A Community Health Center
4. Southwest Conservation Corps
5. National Association for the Education of Young Children
6. Pima Community College
7. University of Arizona
8. Arizona State University School of Social Work
9. Financial literacy group
10. Neighborhood Association

4) A StrengthBuilding® Foundation

Researchers investigating what is needed to turn failing schools around have found that incorporating specific elements into the academic environment are critical and are often ignored in attempts at school transformation. These elements include: the need to focus on students' strengths and interests; capacity-building of school staff; school staffs' ability to work as a team; embedding the new three R's: Rigor, Relevance and Relationship into the fabric of the school community; and full community investment (including family engagement).

There are schools/organizations that have implemented one or more of these core strategies with some measurable success in improving the academic achievement of students in the general population. However, the process of creating a successful school climate lies in structuring and culturing the school community into a StrengthBuilding® environment where students can and do achieve. "In essence, strengths-based education involves educators discovering their own talents and developing and applying strengths as they help students do the same in learning and completing academic tasks to optimal levels of personal excellence."[xiii]

The foundation of the MCLC will be StrengthBuilding. It will become embedded in all of its systems. StrengthBuilding Training and Coaching (SBTC), authored by the school's Community StrengthBuilding Leader, Pamela Clark-Raines, is an innovative practice that

builds and sustains a firm foundation and strategy for success in which the entire school community (teachers, administrators, governing board staff, students, families, community partners) is trained and from which they develop their education practices, i.e: identifying the unique strengths of the students and families and building on those strengths; fully engaging families in the school community; providing for individual learning styles within a framework of expectation for success; fostering an environment that encourages non-traditional career paths for all students that are aligned with their interests and strengths; and challenging societal expectations with regard to underperforming schools and minority student capabilities.

StrengthBuilding incorporates the concept of the individual's systems or "funds of knowledge." Moll and Gonzalez[xiv] define "funds of knowledge" as historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being. Learning the students' funds of knowledge or systems, serves to increase teachers and staff's understanding of their students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As teachers and staff increase their knowledge of students and their families, they become better equipped to design a professional learning community with curriculum and systems which responds to the needs of all students, particularly the disabled and limited English proficient student.

StrengthBuilding is a potent, fluid and adaptable process for working with educators to create a climate of support, mutual respect, expectation, and building upon strengths as the key to engaging students. This process, StrengthBuilding Training and Coaching (SBTC), is based on research concepts (Multiple Intelligences, Emotional Intelligence, Social Intelligence, Resiliency, Framework of Poverty, Gallup International, Developmental Assets and more) that are crucial for creating a school environment in which everyone can succeed. In SBTC, the concept of strengths is examined and, through active and meaningful interactions, school staff learns to recognize and own their strengths as powerful components in their role in creating this environment. Staff becomes valued and active partners in this process, invested in the environment they are seeking to create. Job embedded training and coaching is the most effective professional development for educators. It is through this process that educators see and begin to apply their individual strengths to the development of a plan of action for their students.

StrengthBuilding Partners (SBP) has contracted with independent evaluators from University of Arizona-Southwest Institute for Research On Women (UA-SIROW) since 1999, to evaluate the effectiveness of StrengthBuilding in various settings including business entities, K-8 student mentoring programs, middle and high school leadership programs, and K-12 teacher-staff-administrator trainings. Data has been collected at 11 schools, many of which have been designated as "underperforming" or "failing." The majority of students are Mexican-origin Hispanics and Native American from low income families.

Examples of a larger set of encouraging data from UA-SIROW reports show the promise of StrengthBuilding in schools include the following:

- Participation in StrengthBuilding Leadership classes increased the percentage of students who reported: commitment to school; recognition of their own strengths; and experiencing a positive difference in their life (Hohokam, 2008)
- Participation in the K-8 SBP mentoring program resulted in: reduced absences; reduced behavior problems; and positive changes in the child as observed by family (Ruiz, Stevens & Bernal, 2008)
- Participation of school personnel in StrengthBuilding Training and Coaching (SBTC) resulted in an increased commitment to job and confidence in making positive change with students
- Qualitative interviews with K-12 principals with implemented SBP programs indicate excellent satisfaction with SBTC, and an articulation of the mechanisms for why this process was viewed as being successful (Stevens, 2004).

Moreover, at STAR Academic Center in Sunnyside Unified School District with similar demographics as the proposed population of MCLC, the implementation of SBTC with staff and students resulted in a marked increase in parental engagement, and in the school moving from underperforming to "exemplary" status awarded by the Arizona Department of Education.[xv] The data strongly supports the efficacy of creating a StrengthBuilding environment in a school which targets the population the MCLC has identified. The significant improvement in test scores documents the success and the changes in students who have been exposed to StrengthBuilding and illustrates behaviorally the powerful impact StrengthBuilding has on these youth that are similar to the target population of the MCLC.

SUMMARY

Thus, targeting middle school youth and ninth grade students who have traditionally underperformed; and, as research has documented, have already become disillusioned with education, the MCLC has a promising potential to re-engage these youth and propel them towards being college, career and community ready.

The ICLE model of Rigor and Relevance along with standards based Project Based Learning in a vibrant Community School that is grounded in StrengthBuilding will meet all of these elements and will serve as the platform for growing out an equally challenging high school.

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