

Building Positive School Culture from the Ground Up

**Martina C. Lucas, Assistant Principal
Central High School
1250 W. 17th St. Suite A
Panama City, FL 32405
(850) 866-4148**

martina.lucas@baycentralhs.org

***Key words:* Promoting Positive School Culture through Building Genuine Relationships**

Funding Sources:

Our regular annual student FTE state funding plus a 2-year school startup grant (totaling \$425,000) awarded from the State of Florida DOE during our 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

During our first year of existence as a school, we operated on a shoestring budget and had very little money to purchase student incentives. To our amazement, the most effective strategies for building the positive relationships between staff and students that, over time, promoted an overall culture of kindness at our school were completely cost free (but sometimes time-intensive). For example, it cost nothing to say, “Good Morning” and to greet students by name, but it went a long way toward making students feel noticed and welcomed. It cost nothing but time to post the weekly Apex “Top 5” (which later evolved into the “Top 10” for each session as our enrollment increased), but students *loved* being publicly recognized for their academic achievements. We could be good listeners without spending a dime. High school students can recognize fake concern a mile away, so we intentionally started out telling our students the truth and have never varied from that commitment. Our students learned to trust what we promised because we were intentional about following through and keeping our word.

We also employed several low budget strategies that made a positive impact. I purchased a yellow poster for fifty cents and started posting the names of students as they finished each semester length class. Students soon had the marker in their hands as soon as they handed in their final exams, so they could write their own names on that poster! We purchased reasonably priced board games, card games, and puzzles for students to use during break times. Two or three times a year, we purchased ingredients to prepare homemade breakfast for the students, and they were so appreciative. Sometimes our principal, Mr. Knapp, would bring in crates of tacos from Taco Bell® to surprise our afternoon session students. We quickly learned that food is always a great incentive for teens and young adults. We purchased ice cream sundae fixings, and our principal Mr. Knapp made everybody laugh by downloading ice cream truck music and blaring it on his phone.

At Christmas time, we went all out with a schoolwide catered dinner. In Year One, Mr. Knapp went to the Dollar Tree store and hand selected “gag gifts” for both students and staff members. Then he dressed up as “Knapp-kin the Elf” and personally distributed them as he explained the meaning behind each gift. It was wonderful to see students who had initially come to us so skeptical of our educational process laughing and joking around and just being themselves. When our enrollment increased in Years Two and Three, we modified our holiday gift giving process. Students were given prize tickets to place inside numbered Christmas stockings hanging all over the school. After our Christmas dinner, “Knapp-kin the Elf” randomly selected a ticket from each stocking to award predetermined prizes ranging in value from the \$1 gag gifts to \$10 and \$25 restaurant gift cards and \$25 - \$50 Visa gift cards. (We also provided alternative fun activities for students who did not wish to celebrate Christmas.)

In summary, we spent less than \$2,500 in Year One on items specifically related to building positive school culture. In Years Two and Three (during which we had school startup grant funding to spend on large ticket items like school furnishings and student computers), we had more general budget funds available to use for staff/student team building, so we doubled our positive culture budget to \$5,000.

Project Description:

Central High School is a nonprofit, dropout prevention, public charter high school in Panama City, Florida that offers a fully-accredited high school diploma program to students in the 16 to 21 years age range. Because we are an “alternative school”, some erroneously assume that we have a rough and tough environment, but quite the opposite is true. In our three years of existence, we have developed a genuine culture of kindness that has become Central High’s most compelling and distinguishing trademark. We built this positive culture from the ground up by hiring caring, knowledgeable, and fully-committed staff members and by providing our students with truthful information, kind treatment, and a strong, proven online curricula offered in conjunction with one-on-one teacher support.

We opened Central High School on August 18, 2015 as a new startup school, so we have only existed for a total of three school years at this writing. From inception, our firm desire and commitment was to consistently put students’ best interests first in our daily operations and to create a sweet, cooperative learning environment. As previously stated in question two, this field project explains how we built our positive school culture from the ground up by hiring caring, knowledgeable, and fully-committed staff members and by providing our students with truthful information, kind treatment, and a strong, proven online curricula offered in conjunction with one-on-one teacher support.

We have operated Central High School in a total of three different physical settings, all in Panama City, Florida. Our original school location was a 500 square foot single classroom (and later a second classroom right next door) rented from Northstar Church. Since the church used this classroom as a toddler Sunday School room on weekends, CHS staff and students had to set up our high school classroom every Monday morning and break it down every Friday afternoon—which we learned to do quite efficiently. Our school was housed in this first location for just six months, between August 18, 2015 and February 19, 2016.

Our second school location was a 1,500 square foot former video store right on a busy road that connected two major streets. There we enjoyed some much-needed elbow room along with increased visibility and enrollment! This location was home to Central High School from February 23, 2016 through the end of our second school year on June 21, 2017. While there, we painted and installed all new flooring, and we were all very proud of how far we had come from our humble beginnings. Surprisingly, we outgrew this space more quickly than we anticipated.

Over the summer of 2017, we moved into our existing 16,000 square foot location. We signed an eight-year lease for this wonderful space that many of our students say looks like a “real” school. We also have first option if we ever want to rent additional (already connected) space. For the foreseeable future, we view this current space as Central High School’s permanent location because it is accessible, and we have plenty of room to grow.

Staffing Pattern:

During our first year of existence, Central High School had a bare bones staff of three full-time staff members and one part-time teaching assistant, and each staff member wore multiple “hats”. Because our school was so small, we all worked together helping students in the same classroom, and we became a very harmonious, close-knit staff in a short amount of time. We had a second teaching assistant during the month of February 2016, but he was not a good fit for our program

and soon moved on. The biggest criticism our staff received from both parents and students that first year was that we didn't have a certified math teacher on staff. We had the job posted most of the year but were unable to find the right person to fill the position.

After such a physically exhausting first year, we were absolutely thrilled when we were able to add four additional teachers (one per subject area), a part-time ESE (special education) teacher, and a part-time custodian at the beginning of our second year. In just one year's time, our staff had doubled! Since we now had two classrooms instead of one, we made sure that we assigned both veteran and new Central teachers to each room, which worked out beautifully in terms of preserving the pleasant and cooperative school culture we had already established. Sadly, our wonderful and experienced math teacher became critically ill in October of 2016 and was unable to return due to an extensive hospitalization and subsequent lengthy recovery. Not wanting a repeat of our first year "no math teacher" situation, we immediately hired a pre-med student to help our students with math several hours per week. In January 2017, we hired another full-time math teacher and a part-time math/science teacher. At the end of Year Two, all our existing staff members expressed a desire to stay employed at Central, and we were so grateful that we could maintain continuity in our staff to better serve our students. Near the end of our second year, we successfully completed an Advanced accreditation process and became a nationally accredited high school!

At the beginning of our third year in August of 2017, we added a second full-time social studies teacher, a second full-time math/science teacher, another teaching assistant, a front desk receptionist, and a full-time custodian to our CHS staff. We bonded together quite nicely in our new large facility. However, due to unexpected delays in the release of the second-year funding from the two-year startup grant the State of Florida DOE awarded us, we soon had to delay new student enrollments and go on a waiting list (for first session only) because we ran out of computers! Since we were already using all the student computers we had on hand for existing students, we couldn't enroll new first session students into our online curricula program until we could order more computers. We were dependent upon our grant funding for ordering those much-needed computers, and no one on the local or state level could give us accurate information about when those funds would be released. Since we had based our most recent staff hires on our projected "FTE count week" student enrollment, we had to make the tough decision to lay off our receptionist as well as our newest teaching assistant at the end of October of 2017. Not long afterward, a math teacher left our staff very unexpectedly. We asked our part-time math/science teacher to move to full-time, and she agreed. However, that still left us very short staffed. We shifted some of our teacher teams to absorb the loss of staff and kept moving forward. However, all staff members agreed that Year Three ended up being much harder than Year Two (in terms of the amount of energy expended to serve our students and do our jobs well) because of being short-staffed.

In our short three years of existence, our staff has done an excellent job serving the students physically present at our school, but we have struggled in the critical area of absence follow up. Fortunately, we were able to end Year Three on a staffing high note! In March of 2018, we were able to hire a full-time family advocate/social worker for the express purpose of following up on student absences and helping students deal with some of the home life and personal life "barriers" that often contribute to absenteeism and habitual truancy. We realize now that we should have created this position much sooner because, in just the remaining three months of the

2017-18 school year, our family advocate has made such a positive impact on our student attendance! Because of this, we anticipate much better attendance when school resumes this fall.

As far as staffing for our upcoming Year Four, thankfully all our existing staff members are returning, and we are adding a third full-time social studies teacher whom we believe will be another excellent role model for our students. We also plan to hire another full-time math teacher this fall and to hire additional teachers at the end of first semester if our enrollment grows as anticipated.

Population Served:

All staff and all actively enrolled students were involved in this project of creating a positive school culture by focusing on building strong teacher/student relationships in our new startup high school. As a nonprofit, dropout prevention, public charter high school offering students ages 16 to 21 an opportunity to earn their high school diplomas (not a GED), we could accept any student capable of doing mainstream curricula who could feasibly finish their State of Florida graduation requirements prior to turning age 22. Because we serve a very transient population, most of our students had attended at least two other high schools prior to enrolling with us and had experienced varying levels of academic success. Most were at least two grade levels behind in both reading and math skills, and many were very skeptical of teachers and the educational process. Most of our students were from low-income families, and several were living with grandparents or non-relatives. Three students were in the state foster care system, and some adult students were already living on their own and working either full- or part-time jobs. A few of our students were already parents of young children and/or expecting babies.

In Year One (2015-16) we served a total of 133 students. Due to truancy and transience issues, not many of them were enrolled with us the entire year. We started the year with 22 students and ended the year with 87 active students. Demographically, we served 58 females, 75 males, 1 Asian student, 5 Hispanic students, 20 multiracial students, 30 black students, 77 white students, 25 ESE (special education students), 108 general education students, 0 ESOL (English language learners), 48 ninth graders, 43 tenth graders, 26 eleventh graders, and 16 twelfth graders (6 of whom graduated, but none within their original four-year cohort).

In Year Two (2016-17) we served a total of 254 students. We started the year with 87 rollover students and ended the year with 118 active students. Demographically, we served 124 females, 130 males, 1 American Indian student, 3 Asian students, 8 Hispanic students, 16 multiracial students, 55 black students, 171 white students, 52 ESE students, 202 general education students, 0 ESOL students, 50 ninth graders, 71 tenth graders, 78 eleventh graders, and 55 twelfth graders (13 of whom graduated, 5 of which were within their original 4-year cohort).

In Year Three (2017-2018), we served a total of 299 students. We began the year with 118 rollover students and ended the year with 177 active students. Demographically, we served 159 females, 140 males, 2 American Indian students, 2 Asian students, 14 Hispanic students, 16 multiracial students, 49 black students, 216 white students, 68 ESE students, 231 general education students, 1 ESOL student, 50 ninth graders, 85 tenth graders, 81 eleventh graders, and 83 twelfth graders (31 of whom graduated, 16 of which were within their original 4-year cohort).

Project Origination:

I believe the best way to answer this question is by giving a detailed narrative of how our school was birthed and developed during our first year of existence:

As Lee Roberson, founder of Tennessee Temple University and the more contemporary leadership guru John Maxwell have both so succinctly stated, “Everything rises and falls on leadership” [<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/362047257514067701/>]. Central High’s first foundational principle for building positive school culture is our ongoing commitment to hire competent, servant-hearted staff members who genuinely care about our students and desire to operate in the best interests of students all day, every day.

I first learned of the Central High School startup idea when I asked the school management company I worked for in Ohio if there were any lateral job transfer opportunities in Panama City, Florida. Although it is highly unusual to hire an assistant principal prior to hiring a school principal, that’s exactly what happened. One of the first things I told my boss and principal Jeremy Knapp during our initial meeting on June 1, 2015 is: “I don’t make a good top dog, but I’m a good second dog.” He laughed, and our incredible partnership was forged. We always say that for two strangers brought together for the sole purpose of starting a school, we have done very well. We have complimenting skill sets, neither of us cares who gets the credit, and we are both extremely hard workers who firmly believe that failure is not an option! We both set out to lead Central High well by serving Central High well, and that is still our philosophy. Jeremy once introduced himself as the school’s maintenance man, which was technically true at that time. He was pretty much the principal, enrollment specialist, fix it guy, and visionary leader extraordinaire, and I was the assistant principal, lead teacher, data clerk, and test coordinator.

Starting a school from scratch is not for the faint of heart! Jeremy and I certainly had our share of unexpected dilemmas and setbacks, especially early on. To help get our name out, we made in-person visits to some of the local community agencies during the first two weeks of June. They welcomed us with open arms and introduced us to other concerned civic leaders and groups. A statement we began to hear over and over was: “*We really need* a school like this in Bay County!” In between various community meetings and events, Jeremy and I met at local apartment complexes to distribute Central High School information door hangers.

Then, the unthinkable: Just six weeks before we were scheduled to open, we received word that the school management company that had transferred me to Florida and hired Jeremy was pulling out of our Central High venture. We were left with a stack of CHS flyers printed with the wrong address/contact information, a deep regret that the local community agencies would think we had lied to them about starting a school, and the very real fear that we would both be unemployed as of July 1 unless we could figure something out.

Fortunately, we were blessed with dedicated administrators who decided it was better to start small instead of not at all. The nonprofit Palm Bay Education Group, Inc. was founded to sponsor/provide governance to both Palm Bay Prep Academy (an existing sister charter school also unexpectedly dropped by the same management company) and Central High School. We knew we had a fighting chance when Centennial Bank believed in our future success enough to provide the financial backing we needed to get started.

What a whirlwind! Jeremy and I borrowed office space at Palm Bay Prep Academy (which was then housed in space rented from a local church). We set up enrollment meetings with potential students and their parents and worked to procure used tables, chairs, and computers to set up the classroom nearest the church's rear entrance that would soon become Central High School. In early August, we hired Chrissy Ward (who came highly recommended because she had been a teaching assistant at Palm Bay Prep prior to earning her bachelor's degree) to teach five hours at Central High each day and work an additional three hours in Palm Bay Prep's student aftercare program.

On August 18, 2015, Central High School officially came into existence in a single rented classroom (with a one-seater student restroom next door). Three "all-in" staff members and a total of 22 students (who attended either our morning or afternoon session) took a chance on our promise to be a school that puts students' best interests first. Again, the unexpected happened: The internet that had been working just fine during our final set up the evening before wasn't operational on our first day of school, which meant we were unable to access our online curricula.

I had brought my "just in case" teacher bag, so we quickly went into Plan B mode. We read and analyzed a suspenseful short story together, played icebreaker games, and bonded. We also shared the story of how Central High almost didn't open and told students how happy we were that they had decided to enroll with us.

The next day, something wonderful happened: Our students returned for Day Two and said they had told some of their friends about Central! By the end of the week, we were using hotspots for internet (while our new service was being installed), our CHS students were working diligently in their online Apex classes, and we were on our way to becoming a "school family" in our modern one-room schoolhouse. During mid-session break times, students played card games or Apples to Apples®, then it was back to Apex Learning®. When we posted the names of our very first Apex "Top 5", students *loved* being recognized for their hard work and instantly started a healthy competition to see who would be on the next "Top 5" list. A weekly tradition was born that has continued and grown into separate "Top 10" lists for both our morning and afternoon sessions.

Although our school started small out of necessity, we soon realized it was a blessing in disguise. Students became close to one another quickly, and we just didn't have any room for extra drama or acting out. Students who probably wouldn't hang out together outside of our Central High classroom had to learn to accept one another's diversity and idiosyncrasies, and several genuine friendships developed between unlikely individuals. Central High staff members became a close-knit group who leaned heavily on one another's loyalty, integrity, and dependability, and shared tremendous mutual respect. We also developed close bonds with our students (who often felt comfortable sharing details about their home situations they may not have shared with us in a larger setting).

In a relatively short amount of time, Central High became a place where staff members loved working and students enjoyed attending. Our small staff (which now included wonderful teaching assistant Fred Mosley) used to joke that we didn't have much to offer our students except kind treatment, truthful information, good online curricula, and our winning personalities!

To our amazement, new students kept enrolling, we soon had a waiting list, and Jeremy started looking for a larger space. By February of 2016, we had tripled our enrollment to 66 students! We temporarily rented a second classroom next door to our first and started anticipating our upcoming move to 1,500 square feet of much-needed elbow room in a more accessible location.

Just before we relocated, something happened that tested the mettle of the collective identity we had developed as Central High School: We enrolled a transgender student (about a month before transgender issues garnered national attention). In deference to the student's wishes, we treated her as female in every respect and referred to her with feminine pronouns. However, once she felt comfortable at Central and befriended some of the students, she shared with some of them privately as well as on her Facebook page that she was transgender. Very upset and feeling "tricked", some of our male students came to Mr. Knapp privately. "What happened to telling us the truth?" one of them demanded. "You've always said that you would tell us the truth, and in this case you didn't!" Once Jeremy patiently explained that we are duty bound as well as honor bound to uphold student privacy laws for every single one of our students, they began to settle down. Then one of them dared to verbalize another question that was troubling him: "Does this mean I'm gay because I felt attracted to someone I thought was a girl who's really a guy?"

By the time transgender sensitivity issues made national headlines, our Central High School family was feeling quite progressive and very proud of our inclusive, accepting environment. Now when we told our students that we loved them (as has always been our regular, ongoing practice), they genuinely believed us.

We moved into our larger space in the third week of February 2016 after an all-hands-on-deck student workday and pizza party, and we were all so excited! We really thought we had arrived! We shared "The Story of Central" with some of our newly-enrolled students and marveled at how far we had come in such a brief amount of time. Both students and staff members expressed that they felt proud to be a part of "pioneering" a new school. We talked about what it means to leave a legacy and to be a part of something bigger than oneself.

Of course, we had a few growing pains in our new location. Instead of being tucked away in a classroom nearest the rear entrance, we now had floor to ceiling front windows and no foyer. Anyone who walked into our school was practically already in our student areas. Although we had triple the amount of space and now two gender neutral restrooms, we still didn't have many bells and whistles. The flooring was worn and stained, and the whole place needed fresh paint and upgraded fixtures.

Despite our low budget look, the culture we had first established in our original location was soon re-established in our new space. Next, we turned our attention to applying for a two-year state-sponsored startup grant, which also had to be approved by Bay County's local school board for Bay District Schools. Once the paperwork was ready, several parents and students volunteered to speak on Central High School's behalf at the Bay District School Board meeting. Our student speakers were a little nervous, but they each did a great job explaining the intangible things that made Central High School a school they were proud to attend and wanted to improve. We staff members all had tears in our eyes as we listened to our students' sincere affirmation of our tireless endeavors. Central High School team spirit was palpable in that board room!

Although the elected superintendent of Bay District Schools does not personally favor charter schools and did not endorse our petition, the Bay District School Board members unanimously voted to recommend that the State of Florida award our two-year startup grant on the condition that Bay District Schools would watchdog the funds and we would funnel our purchase orders through them. Even with that technicality, it was a major victory for Central High School!

As our first 2015-2016 school year neared completion, we told our students to expect a renovated building and additional staff members when they returned in August. Jeremy spent all summer turning our improved building promises into reality and hiring just the right people to bring on staff.

When students returned for Year Two, they quickly realized our new staff members had fully embraced our “put students first” philosophy. The same held true in Year Three. Now when a newly-enrolled student lets a curse word fly or behaves in a disrespectful way, it is not uncommon to overhear a student nearby say, “We don’t act like that here!”

Midway through Year Three, our students submitted ideas for a school mascot. The top contenders were placed on a ballot, and students overwhelmingly voted for “Knights”. What a fitting description of the sweet, companionable loyalty our staff and students have worked so hard to build! “Being Central” now refers to much more than just existing as a school. It is a phrase we often use to remind ourselves to be patient and servant-hearted, to speak kindly and to look out for one another. That’s just what Central High Knights do.

Issues Addressed:

As a new startup school entirely dependent on state FTE funding based on student enrollment, we desired to create a school that students would enjoy attending. We committed to put students’ best interests first, and we determined to intentionally promote a culture of kindness.

We are the first (and at this writing the only) dropout prevention charter school in our county, so we focused on serving predominantly disenfranchised students who had either already dropped out of high school and needed a second chance to earn their diplomas or who were at-risk for dropping out of school. We knew these students would need extra care and concern from our staff members as well as good curricula to help them remediate and overcome their learning gaps.

All human beings deserve kind treatment and truthful information, and that’s what we offered each of our students. Parents who came to inquire about enrollment often commented about how nice we were and how easy we were to work with. Word of mouth soon became our most effective advertising tool! We often tell our students that we consider it a great compliment when they tell their friends about Central.

We also focused on being consistent and fair and on recognizing students for the good things they were doing both academically and in overall school citizenship. Not only did they notice; they loved the positive attention and worked even harder! By no means do we have a perfect school because there are no perfect humans. But we do have a genuine school seeking to decrease the number of high school dropouts in Bay County, Florida and to increase the number of high school graduates!

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

We desired to create a viable and sustainable non-profit school that would serve the educational needs of students who had not experienced educational success in the traditional classroom setting. We wanted to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance where students could engage with high quality online curricula with the added benefit of one-on-one teacher assistance. If we could succeed in creating such a school, we expected that our number of active student enrollments would increase, our number of earned credits would increase, and our number of graduates would increase year by year, all of which has happened.

At the end of our first year, we received a “Failing” rating, primarily because we did not administer required state testing to enough students. At the end of our second year, we received a “Maintaining” rating. At the end of our third year, we again received a “Maintaining” rating but were only one percentage point away from a “Commendable” rating!

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

I often take drop-in visitors or perspective students and their parents on impromptu, unannounced tours of our school. Occasionally, we will encounter a student with a hall pass, but usually not. Most often, as we peak into some classrooms and then walk through our senior classroom, we see exactly what I have come to expect: students and teachers working together quietly and cooperatively. It is never completely quiet because our teachers and students regularly engage in both educational and philosophical discussions, but our visitors can clearly see that active learning is taking place.

In Year One, we created a Central High positive school culture that we have successfully maintained through two additional school years, sustained in the adjustment period following our two school relocations, and perpetuated with each additional staff member and new student enrollment. Now “Central High School” is more than just our name. We have coined the phrase “Being Central” and use it regularly to remind our staff and students that we are in the business of genuinely caring about and serving one another. Do we do it perfectly? No, and we never will. But year by year, we are reaching more students, those students are earning more credits, and our number of graduates is increasing. We fully expect these trends to continue.

Strategies and/or Interventions:

Honestly, our main strategy was just to follow the “Golden Rule” of treating our students as we ourselves would wish to be treated. We also tried to really listen to our students and to give them opportunities to provide feedback and suggestions. We intentionally made ourselves available to students not only during school hours but also via email and/or text messaging to keep appropriate lines of communication open. For example, one night just before bedtime, I received a “My throat hurts” text message from a young student who was already living on her own. I responded that I was sorry she felt so bad and told her I hoped she felt up to attending school soon. At that moment, she just needed another human being to show concern, and I had the privilege of being that person.

When we experienced unanticipated problems or delays, we told our students truthfully what we knew so far and where we were in the process of resolving the situation. Often, we brainstormed together for possible solutions. For example, when the internet wasn’t working on the first day of school, we told them truthfully that it was working fine the night before when we did our final

set up and trial run. The next day when it still wasn't working, and we began to realize we needed to install an entire internet upgrade, someone suggested that Mr. Knapp purchase temporary internet hotspots so our students could access their coursework, and that's exactly what he did.

Project Timeline:

This field report covers a three-year period that includes Central High School's first three school years of existence: (1) The 2015-16 school year, (2) the 2016-17 school year, and (3) our most recently completed 2017-18 school year.

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project:

Our principal, Jeremy Knapp, had previously served in the educator roles of English teacher, high school assistant principal, and later principal at both large, urban, and racially diverse high schools in other states as well as in a highly politicized school district in another county in Florida. His visionary leadership and true heart for serving students is the absolute backbone of Central High School! I was able to bring nine years of dropout prevention experience (one year as an English teacher and eight years as assistant principal) as well as nine years of Apex Learning® experience to Central. Both Jeremy and I (and our entire Central High staff) have tremendously strong work ethics, and none of us are too proud to scrub the toilets. We are big believers in cross training, and early on we committed to ensuring that our staff members each have regular opportunities to attend dropout prevention training conferences.

We are also committed to hiring staff members who are not just knowledgeable in their credentialed subject areas but who practice servant leadership and genuinely care about teenagers and young adults.

Educating students requires patience and perseverance. Some of our students aren't ready for academics when they first come to us because they don't even believe they can learn and have forgotten the wonder of discovering new things. We must take time to help them recapture their love of learning. We have some students who want to graduate more than anything and who refuse to let anything, nor anyone stop them from earning their diplomas, but we have many other students who don't yet believe a diploma is an attainable goal. We must cast that vision for these students until they are able to believe it for themselves.

In the fall of our first school year, I attended a Bay District sponsored viewing of the documentary "Paper Tigers" and listened to the planned discussion panel that followed. This was my first exposure to the terms "Trauma Informed Care" and "Compassion Fatigue" and to the ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) long-term case study. Although I had often commented to my husband that dropout prevention education is a combination of social work and education and that sometimes the social work part must come first, the "Paper Tigers" documentary truly reinforced that analogy. Central High soon purchased our own copy of the documentary, and it is a mandatory part of our new staff training. We also showed the film to our Year One students, and they were very moved by the student stories which closely mirrored so many of their own experiences.

One great idea that we took from "Paper Tigers" and turned into a Central High School tradition is our practice of having various staff members personally introduce each graduate as he or she

takes the stage to receive his or her diploma. Students absolutely love this, and we have gotten nothing but positive feedback from parents and community members.

In summary, this project required all staff members to intentionally and consistently interact with students in engaging, kind, inspiring, and truthful ways for the express purpose of building and nurturing positive, trusting, and cooperative teacher/student relationships.

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

Answered above. In our three years of existence, we have graduated 50 students (some within their original 4-year cohort and others already past it) who likely would not have graduated at any other school. Although we still struggle with student absenteeism and truancy, most of the students who attend school regularly and give us a chance to get to know them end up staying enrolled with us. We have also re-enrolled several students who previously dropped out of Central but later realized they wanted to return.

Current Status of Project:

Now that we have completed three full school years of existence as a school, we can honestly say that the positive school culture we originally desired to create has been established and now just needs to be maintained and strengthened.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

In Year One, I was the lead teacher and the only staff member who spent the entire school day in our classroom, so I believe I played a significant role in helping to establish a positive daily environment. In Year Two, after we hired four additional full-time classroom teachers and a part-time ESE teacher, I transitioned into the assistant principal administrative role I was originally hired to do. However, I was still very hands on and available to students. My principal and I shared an office that was literally right by the front door and had an opening that allowed us to call our friendly greetings to every student who entered. As the school testing coordinator for all three years, I was also responsible for helping students see the correlation between doing well in our regular curricula and being adequately prepared for required state testing and end of course assessments. In Year Three, I continued to serve in my administrative role and to maintain my open-door policy with both students and staff.

As one of our older staff members (age 54 at this writing), I view myself as the school mama, and I am fiercely protective of my “school babies”. I often tell students that I want them to graduate more than they want it for themselves, and then I ask them to trust our process. “We know how to get you to the graduation finish line, but you’ve got to be willing to attend school, study hard, and do your part.” I give this student pep talk and others like it on a regular basis because I never know if this will be the day that the student in front of me will begin to believe that graduation is indeed possible—not just for other people, but for him or her. Helping students succeed both personally and academically is both my passion and my calling. I feel incredibly blessed to be a part of the good things going on at Central High, and I am already excited about next school year!

Lessons Learned:

From the beginning, we tried to focus on simple, inexpensive things we could do that would have maximum impact on building positive school culture. At first, with only 22 students, it was easy

to know and use everyone's name. But then we had to get more intentional as our enrollment increased and our limited classroom space felt smaller. I used to joke that I was the old woman who lived in the shoe and had so many students I didn't know what to do!

Instead of regretting our limitations, we continually focused on the things that were actually in our control. We smiled; we were kind; we were helpful; we were consistent. We celebrated monthly birthdays. We apologized when we were wrong. We were always willing to try new strategies. Most of all, we just cared and continued caring and tried and continued trying. We didn't give up even when we were told there was no way we could even open Central. We opened anyway because we were willing to start small. We didn't take no for an answer. We decided to invest in the legacy of Central High School and to get students personally invested. Once that happened, we knew we had staying power.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

Even if you think you can't afford it, hire a full-time social worker for absence follow-up as soon as possible. Fewer students will fall through the cracks, and the FTE dollars saved will more than cover a social worker salary. Also, hire staff members carefully. Wait for the right person for each position, and only hire those who genuinely care about students. This vital practice not only builds staff unity but also gives students peace of mind and dramatically increases the likelihood of building positive teacher/student relationships. Lastly, commit funds to ensure that each staff member has regular opportunities to attend dropout prevention conferences for professional growth.