

Challenging the Status Quo: Campus Community School

Allen Zipke

Campus Community School
Dover, DE

Marcy Zipke

CUNY Graduate Center
New York, NY

Abstract

Campus Community School is a 300-student charter school in Dover, DE, which serves children in grades 1 through 8. As a new charter school the founders have had the opportunity to build our ideal school, from designing a constructivist project-based curriculum, to implementing site based management, and focusing heavily on parent participation. This essay illustrates how well the charter school model can work. As the administrator and one of the founding members of CCS, I describe our challenges and hurdles as well as successes.

Imagine a group of fourth- and fifth-graders with their chairs pushed close together intently studying the screen in an elementary school computer lab. The teacher is busy assisting a student on another computer. An administrator strolls in and approaches the small group. What would you imagine they are doing? If you guessed that they are designing a PowerPoint presentation on various types of Native American shelters and how shelter is related to the ecosystem, you might already be familiar with Campus Community School. I was that administrator, and here I must confess that those kids have a much better understanding of the capabilities of PowerPoint than I do.

In the fall of 1998 the Campus Community School took up residence on the grounds of Wesley College in Dover, Delaware. Conceived of and organized by a team of parents and professors (Patterson, Lawton, & Liptak, 1997), it is one of Delaware's first charter schools. It is unique in its connection to Wesley College. Designed to be a collaborative community, an agreement was reached with the Wesley education department whereby Wesley students would intern at CCS, bringing energy and new ideas from the research, while also learning from the kids and their teachers. In addition to providing a building for classes, CCS students would also have access to the Wesley facilities, eat in the cafeteria, use the school library, and swim in the college pool. CCS teachers would take graduate courses at Wesley College and Wesley professors would instruct them in curriculum development and constructivist teaching approaches (Zipke &

Patterson, 2005). Rather than modeling themselves after a typical lab school, the CCS originators were determined to connect with the community: site-based management was established to allow teachers and parents a real say in important decisions, and a family contract was drawn up for parents of prospective students, encouraging their continuing participation in their child's learning.

I joined CCS six months prior the ribbon cutting. The challenges were intense: for the first time, I had to deal with such issues as determining bus and car pool routes, making computer deals (every classroom now has multiple computers, in addition to the ample computer lab), ordering furniture, renovating a building and ordering materials. I worked with parent committees on these tasks. My first task was to wade through the hundred of teacher resumes we received. After assembling a team of twenty enthusiastic teachers, we dedicated ourselves to fleshing out our philosophy. Training in curriculum development was provided over the summer by Wesley Education Professors. It was determined that CCS students would suffer as few classroom pull-outs as possible. Band and other clubs met after school to promote classroom learning time. Special Ed teachers were hired to work with special needs students in inclusion classrooms.

Among our first orders of business was to reject any and all offers from textbook publishers; we would use only authentic materials. Based on constructivist philosophy, students would work collaboratively to problem solve and build on their current knowledge. Rather than textbooks and worksheets and children in rows, the average classroom scene is likely to involve kids in clusters around the room, discovering answers to their own questions. This active-learning approach has proven successful for many reasons. Most importantly, this approach fosters internal motivation. Our students have responded enthusiastically to their "real world" lessons. One third-grade student enjoyed learning about ancient Greece by thinking about it as the birthplace of the Olympics. This child approached the unit by researching the Olympics on the World Wide Web and by speaking with a local athlete who participated in the Athens Olympics. He then took the concept a step further by comparing Greek culture with other cultures. As you can see from this example, what the children are learning first and foremost is critical thinking skills—to think creatively about how to approach problems and where to find answers (rather than memorizing specific facts). Another benefit is that in the course of learning about a particular subject, students discover the interconnections among disciplines—the importance of learning math to be a good scientist, of learning history to be a good leader. The use of authentic materials is also helpful in letting teachers differentiate instruction and coordinate learning across the disciplines. Some children learn best through observation, some through technological research, some through experimentation, and so on. At CCS, we firmly believe that students need to be allowed to be individuals, even while all of the students develop the same skills and similar bodies of knowledge. Each year we choose a broad topic for study at the school level and lesson planning proceeds from the concrete to the conceptual. This year the overall theme is Structure, Change and Balance. Whether it be the structure of a book, of a writing piece, of a math formula, of the solar system, or of a government, students can see how discipline-specific knowledge is interrelated. This big picture helps students to recognize the applications for their knowledge.

At Campus Community School teachers are empowered to take control of the curriculum. Like other states, students in Delaware are required to take tests each year. These tests are based on state standards, establishing what should be taught at each grade level. Our teachers have analyzed the standards and pulled out the declarative knowledge that students should know. They create "concept maps" of the knowledge that link essential concepts and cluster related ideas. (Please see figure 1 for a sample concept map.) Teachers then move from the maps to creating themes that cover the clusters. For example, under the theme of Structure, Change, and Balance, students have explored the concepts of energy and conflict, among others. Under the concept of energy, science classes looked at the behavior of molecules, math classes calculated the amount of gas necessary for a car that drives x miles per gallon, and physical education classes focused on the relationship between nutrition and athletic performance. As another example, social studies classes focusing on the Civil War not only learned the basic facts, but also studied the various ways in which war, as a conflict, affects people. The following conversation took place in a 4/5th grade classroom:

Student #1: "I think people just believe in different things."

Teacher: "So does that mean they can't work together?"

Student #1: "Sometimes. My friends don't always believe in the same things I do, but we don't always talk about them."

Teacher: "Are some beliefs so strong that they affect how you get along with others?"

Student #2: "I have a tough time when people tell me I shouldn't go hunting with my dad. We're careful with the guns, and we only kill what we can eat."

Teacher: "How do differing beliefs lead to war? Were differing beliefs part of the conflict that started the Civil War?"

Following the class discussion students created the following outline on the causes of conflict:

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

- 1) Differences regarding authority
 - authority figures lead us into conflict
 - keep us believing in our values
 - groups look for leaders
- 2) Competition over resources
 - groups need to share
 - eventually one group may want more
 - resources may become scarce
- 3) Goal differences
 - groups have different goals
 - both want to meet goals, often cause conflict
 - the routes the groups take to get to goals when only one can come out on top

- 4) Communication failure
 - misunderstanding
 - barriers
- 5) Value Differences
 - values individuals hold are reflected in their lives.

Students then worked in small groups to explore various aspects of the Civil War. Sitting at one table (there are no desks at CCS), one group examined the role of the Underground Railroad in Delaware. They used various books and the Internet to determine how the Underground Railroad operated. This included reading newspaper archives, diaries and more that depicted the slaves' escape. One day, the entire class boarded a school van and visited a house that had operated as a station. They explored the secret hiding places and imagined what it must have been like to pass through there. After two weeks, the students arranged a showcase for their parents and the rest of the students in the school. They dressed as children would have in the mid-1800s and presented a poster with information and reports that the students wrote. When I talked with students about the Underground Railroad, they were able to tell me in depth about its significance. All of the students were impatient to share what they had learned.

In addition to the declarative knowledge, teachers have examined the procedural knowledge common to the standards. This is very important in developing the skills that students need to be successful. At Campus Community School specific attention is focused on developing reflection, persistence, and self-direction in students. Students with these skills will be successful in producing quality work. Rubrics allow teachers to assess and guide student development. The proof for the success of this approach is in the student enthusiasm, their dynamic portfolios, and various performance assessments (including state test scores; despite not teaching to the test and de-emphasizing their administration, CCS kids have consistently scored high on the state mandated standardized testing). Grades are not emphasized at CCS. Students are taught to produce quality work and given back assignments to redo when they have not produced work that matches their capabilities. Figure 2 shows a grading rubric.

One reason students enjoy attending CCS is the positive atmosphere and the encouragement to build on their interests and abilities. Students who learn to accept responsibility for their own achievements and behaviors enjoy learning. Negative behaviors are not an issue. It is not unusual to have parents talk about their students coming home and going right to work on their projects because they enjoy the work. One parent with four students at CCS reported his amusement at seeing his girls come and go with such disparate household items as batteries, glue, and refrigerator magnets while working on a school project.

Campus Community School supports this constructivist curriculum with an emphasis on student responsibility, both for learning and behavior. An important element to CCS's success is Choice Theory, as taught by William Glasser (Glasser, 1992, 1993, 2000). In keeping with the school's philosophy, Choice Theory allows us to better understand our behavior and the behavior of our students by asserting that *all* behavior is

purposeful and that everyone can learn to produce behaviors that enable them to be successful. Once that the importance of relationships is understood (student-student, teacher-student, and teacher-teacher) everyone focuses on positive behaviors. Working through issues rather than automatically assigning negative consequences encourages a school full of overwhelmingly positive interactions.

In 2004, CCS proclaimed itself a "quality school" under the Glasser rubric (Glasser, 1992). This means that the teaching responsibilities at CCS are slightly different from other schools. Instructors at CCS are responsible not only for imparting academics, but also for teaching choice theory and thus developing student self-esteem. Students are taught to recognize that they are in control of their own behavior. Only the individual can choose how to behave. This basic philosophy is identical for children of all ages, from sharing materials to saying no to drugs. I recently witnessed a pair of first-graders working out their differences in the hallway. One child was on the brink of tears, until the other child impatiently admonished his friend not to cry until after they worked out their problem. This kind of problem solving is based on open communication and personal responsibility. When students see school as part of their quality world they work hard to maintain it.

Students demonstrate their ability to accept responsibility for their learning when they conduct student-led conferences with their parents. Twice a year students share portfolios of their work with their parents. Students explain their work and explain why it is of high quality or why they haven't done their best. They explain what they have studied and any plans they have to study differently. All of our students have become very good at developing vocabulary that is effective in talking about their work. First graders, as well as eighth graders, have proven themselves capable of leading conferences.

The site-based management of CCS allows for open and honest communication. While lively discussions take place at PTA meetings, they are always resolved through peaceful conflict resolution and compromise. Family participation is key to CCS's success (please see Zipke [2002] for more on this philosophy). The school doors are always open to parents. One mother organized a class fieldtrip to a living history museum, to which students and teachers participated in authentic colonial tasks. The father of a student from Africa came to school dressed in his native clothes and shared stories of life in his country. The key to parent involvement is not specific programs but the general welcoming attitude of everyone at CCS towards parents in the school.

CCS works because of its reliance on good communication and its innovative educational philosophy. Originally a grade 1-8 school, Campus Community School was expanded in 2001 to include a high school with a college-bound philosophy. Parents of the original CCS students simply could not bear the thought of sending their kids back to a traditional philosophy and so a charter was drawn up for grades 9-12 as well. Although Campus Community High School is not housed in the same building as the lower grades, students at the high school often participate in school-wide events, such as musical shows

or tutoring younger students. The upper grade students also, in lieu of an A.P. program, take classes at Wesley College and experience a true college experience.

I became an administrator at Campus Community School after 25 years in public school education because I have always strived to produce the philosophy that is found at CCS. CCS is small and has a common philosophy. Teacher training is expected and carried out in the curriculum area by Wesley professors and is common for all teachers (Patterson, 2005). Training on Glasser's choice theory (Glasser, 1998) is also a common factor for teachers. As a result, teachers are confident in their approach and abilities. High expectations, meaningful activities, and parent involvement are all key to our success. The popularity of CCS has gained exponentially since our opening—last year we had a record number of applicants and a large waiting list. We have also been the subject of local media attention focusing on exemplary schools.

The philosophies used at CCS produce high achievement and a desire to learn, while making school fun. It is enjoyable to be student, parent, or teacher at CCS. These approaches could be emulated elsewhere to similar success.

References

Glasser, W. (1992). *The quality school: Managing students without coercion*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Glasser, W. (1993). *The quality school teacher: Specific suggestions for teachers who are trying to implement the lead-management ideas of the quality school in their classrooms*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Glasser, W. (1998). *Choice theory: A new psychology of personal freedom*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Glasser, W. (2000). *Every student can succeed*. Chatsworth, CA: William Glasser, Inc.

Patterson, B.P, Lawton, M., and Liptak, K. (1997). *Campus Community School charter*. Dover, DE: Delaware Department of Education.

Patterson, B.P. (2005). *Constructivist-based professional development: A process for teacher empowerment*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Zipke, A. (2002). School-based decision-making teams: Increasing participation and parental involvement. *Journal of the New England League of Middle Schools*, XV(1).

Zipke, A. & Patterson, B.P. (2005, November) *Teacher empowerment through curriculum ownership*. Paper presented at the National Middle School Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

