

COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

“Fostering Student Leadership Using ABCD”

Community Radio Show Text

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Guest: Dan Condon (Dan)

Brought to you by The Leadership Practice, the Community Strengthening Training & Technical Assistance Provider for the Corporation for National & Community Service

TODD: Welcome to the October Community Radio Show, “Fostering Student Leadership Using ABCD.” My name is Todd Wellman and I am with Public Allies, the Community Strengthening Training & Technical Assistance provider of the Corporation for National Service. Today’s call is brought to you by The Leadership Practice, a partnership between Public Allies and the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University.

TODD: For the first 25 minutes or so, Dan Condon, current Associate Director of Professional Development at the nationally recognized Eagle Rock School & Professional Development Center, will guide us through how to foster student leadership using asset based community development. Now, we all know that the areas of student engagement, achievement, and school culture improve when students are given a voice. Oppressing, controlling and silencing students should be a thing of the past. Giving students voice in the classroom, a ‘say’ regarding school policies, and a role in reform initiatives together make schools more democratic, less autocratic and certainly more learner centered. But, how can we make sure that we recognize the most important part of this type of transformation? In other words, what does meaningful student voice look like?

A little background on Dan’s workplace: Eagle Rock is both a school for high school age students and a professional development center for adults, particularly educators. The school is a year-round, residential, and full-scholarship school that enrolls youth ages 15-17 from around the United States in an innovative learning program. The students share two characteristics: they do not expect to graduate from high school (and may have dropped out or been expelled) but they have a passion about making changes in their lives. The professional development center hosts educators from around the world who wish to study how to re-engage these students in learning, keep them in school, get them graduated, and help them go on to make a difference in the world. You can read more at <http://www.eaglerockschool.org>.

Katie Wiseman is 17 years old. She grew up in Windsor, CO with her mom and four dogs. She enjoys seeing the mountains everyday. She is now passionate about school and furthering her education after high school. She enjoys reading and has recently been published in a service learning journal.

Please welcome Dan and Katie to the show.

TODD: So Dan, what inspires you to do your education work?

DAN: I learn from every student at Eagle Rock. It’s important to show students that they have something to give—and that I’m willing to work on the same things that they are working on.

Education needs to look differently. High school dropout rates are alarming. Nearly 1/3 of students don’t

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graduate on time, and among students of color, it's nearly half. The Civic Enterprise 2006 Survey (found at Civic Enterprises' website—the link will be sent out to you after this show) found that most students don't drop out because they can't do the work. In fact, 90 percent had passing grades. They drop out because they do not feel valued or engaged. We have to do something with this information. A common characteristic of all the students at Eagle Rock is they were not on track to graduate. Our students found success elusive. Think of your most challenged students—we have them all here.

I also want to mention that the work we'll be talking about applies to people doing education work in a lot of settings like youth serving agencies, but we'll probably use the word "school" for simplicity sake.

TODD: Sounds good. Dan, can you tell us a little about how people across country today think about students and their role in their own educations?

DAN: Well, from an academic perspective, the educator Ted Sizer, who started the Coalition of Essential Schools, wrote the book *Horace's Compromise* based on a five year study of high schools. A team of investigators toured high schools of varying kinds with differing demographics (rural, urban, public, & parochial) and found something really frightening and true. Many high schools around the country have become factory-like and very un-individualized. Based on years of field research Sizer, through his composite teacher, describes how even the best intentioned teachers are handcuffed in trying to meet all their students needs in our current educational system. I think it really underscored why needs based models don't work well.

TODD: What would someone 'on the street' say about students?

DAN: That in many places students are disenfranchised because they are not give their own voice. That there's a power structure because students are vessels to be filled with knowledge and are not allowed to question teachers. Other people have more negative views of students. For example, adultism comes into play—elders having judgments about young people—their culture, their music, the way they speak.

TODD: How does this disenfranchisement work its way into education systems?

DAN: One way is that curriculum is dumbed-down based on perceptions of how well teachers think students can learn. We are not doing any favors by lowering the bar for our students, though. The only thing you're going to teach by spoon feeding is the shape of the spoon.

TODD: What would you say to those who are hard-pressed to believe that things could be better?

DAN: It's hard to get in habit of believing in a paradigm that empowers students, but let's look at one of our Eagle Rock students. One of our very first students had been kicked out of 10 high schools. We don't think of him that way, though. Instead, we think about relationship could have with student and what that person can offer. You can't think about him as a dropout. Or another student as a former drug user. Or someone else as a foster kid. Or someone else as a crack baby. Or someone else as ADD or ADHD. We want to honor their pasts, but we need to focus on what each person can do well and what they bring to the table.

TODD: But how can an educator find the time to really work on being so individualized?

DAN: Teachers are overworked. We don't have all the answers, but I think that there's a fear in giving students leadership, voice, and power within the school. But, in the end, it lessens the load. The pay off is greater. Part of the reason that teachers are overworked is because students are not given the

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opportunity to take ownership of their own education. We can give them a chance to help develop curriculum or assessment they feel more ownership and investment. They can't say, "This has nothing to do with me" if they helped plan it. We mentor many schools around the country in this work, so we know people are making this shift of switching from teachers holding all the knowledge to a more shared and lateral learning environment. The onus shifts from discipline to self accountability.

TODD: It sounds like you're talking about the Power Ladder concept—can you talk about this?

DAN: It's beyond student buy-in and more about level the playing field. Of course we have systems in place, but student help to run and govern the school. They sit in on staff meetings & help to decide policy. Our students are beyond the buy-in because they are responsible for different aspects of the school. They are more likely to make deep change if they have a safe place to do it and have a common language of mission, vision, and values that we create together. Students therefore keep people in traditional positions of authority accountable. Further, this is not just asking for feedback. While students aren't always going to get their way, they have a true voice because this is policy change being affected, not just planning the prom. We also work upon the assumption that Staff can learn from students. In the end, we are moving students from being just recipients of service or information sources to being active participants and those in control of their learning and broader educational experience.

TODD: What ways do students use their voice?

DAN: Some examples are: students have peer council (body of government to serve their interest); residential leadership roles; veteran students on duty in evenings; committees students can convene or be on; students sit on groups that make hiring decisions of our staff; and students are involved with speaking tours.

TODD: How do they find their voice to use these vehicles?

DAN: It's tough for the newest students, but the more practice that the student can get through informal conversations, the more involved he or she becomes. Also, students have been so disenfranchised that they have to regain the belief that their opinions will be used. It also starts with creating safe space. The comfort level shifts. Leaping forward to graduation, each student at Eagle Rock has one hour to express their time at the school in front of an audience, and this is where we often hear about the ways that students found their voices.

In the end, as educators we can't say that we want to have a culture of student voice and leadership when the staff isn't willing to look at the structure & space for that to occur. We have to honestly want this to happen and then actually create the systems. It's about creating a culture where it is expected and demanded that students participate. We say that you have no right to no opinion.

TODD: So, what does asset based community development, or ABCD, have to do with this? What does this have to do with community strengthening?

DAN: This school and other schools can be built upon the capacity and strengths of the staff and students in the school along with the resources in the local community. With our incoming teacher fellows that happen to always be part of our Public Allies program here at Eagle Rock, we have them do an asset inventory. We find out what they do well and what there interests are. They also figure navigate through the school by figuring out the assets of the students and staff. It's a great framework to start with.

We also ask ourselves: how can schools operate when you look at students as former gang members or

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former offenders or as addicted to something? Those biases affect our expectations of students. Instead, ABCD allows us to look at a larger vision of what's possible.

TODD: Considering this can be uncomfortable for educators, what tool, or actionable steps, can you share with us that someone can apply readily to his or her educational setting that I can Email out after the show?

DAN: Considering this is something that has to be introduced to peer educators & students, and that there are multiple methods:

(1) Introduce your next meeting with a Personal Assets inventory. What do people do well with their Heads, Hands, Hearts, & Human connections?

(2) Interview two of your colleagues and students using the gift survey that I'm sure Todd can Email to you after this show. Have your students interview you and each other as well. What are people's gifts, skills, & dreams?

(3) Invite a similar organization from your community to your office to present their work during a luncheon. What can your organization learn from its peers? Hypothetically, what collaborations can the two organizations create?

(4) Investigate a part of your neighborhood that you usually do not pay attention to or normally would not visit. Walk with your colleagues through this area. Pretend that you have an event to hold and that you have to hold it in this area. What space would you use? Who would you connect with to use the space? What service in that area would cater the event?

(5) Initiate conversations with your colleagues about how decisions are made when implementing a program for recipients of your service. What can your organization do to increase the amount of participation that your recipients of service have in planning an initiative?

(6) List with your students (& post in room) what it means to have a safe space in your classroom—living in respectful harmony with others

(7) Discuss with your students what service is. What does it mean to serve your own school and the outlying community?

(8) Expect students to have some sort of democratic voice—don't think on it as a special case.

(9) Transition some of your education work from being a teacher to being a coach. Instead of always giving information or telling the student the answer, what questions can you ask back to the student to get him or her to find the answers. In other words, put the ownership back on the student for learning.

TODD: Dan, can you share a story about witnessing a classroom transforming with what we are talking about today?

DAN: (shares story about Service Learning / woodshop class – Sacred Benches) (Katie shares AIDS Awareness in Africa example—The instructor came up to me and asked me to teach one day—put together the plan with my instructor—90 minute course.)

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TODD: Thank you Dan & Katie – we are going to open up to questions now from the audience. To maximize our time, remember that when you're asking Dan (or one of the students) a question, please limit yourself to questions regarding today's topic instead of sharing best practices or stories from your work.

This text serves as a reference for the Community Radio Show but it does not serve as a transcript of the recording.