



Developing Successful Schools

A Holistic Approach

Stephen P. Gordon

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This book is dedicated to my most valued professional colleague, my best friend, and my wife, Jovita Ross-Gordon

FOREWORD

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Stephen P. Gordon has a long history in the field of practice and scholarship—all centering on the development of people—school-level leaders and teachers working toward creating successful schools. Gordon chaired an interdisciplinary team that developed the Doctor of Philosophy in School Improvement at Texas State University 20 years ago, and his work as the former **director of the National Center for School Improvement positions him to bring forward this text**, *Developing Successful Schools: A Holistic Approach*. Gordon is a **distinguished professor emeritus** at Texas State University. These positions bring him credibility as does his rich history of working with school-level leaders and teachers.

Gordon’s engagement with countless doctoral students, almost all practicing school and system leaders, more profoundly makes him grounded in the real work of developing schools and their people. Because these experiences have shaped his thinking, this book brings coherence to the work needed for schools to be successful. As a bridge-builder between practice and research, Gordon brings forward concrete notions that focus efforts to see past the constraints schools have experienced due in large part to externally mandated accountability measures.

This book does not offer formulaic or absolute “do-this or that” checklists. Rather, in *Developing Successful Schools: A Holistic Approach*, Gordon leads the reader into ways of thinking about schools and what makes a school successful. Gordon’s words and ideas position him as a guide on the side, making the case that each of the ten dimensions of successful

schools along with the seven components of school life are worth the effort of every leader and teacher to embrace. Like a good mentor, Gordon unpacks the foundations of care, trust, equity, and social justice that must be embedded in and across the school and its leadership, environment, curriculum, and assessments to build a community rooted in democracy and inclusive of parents and external community members.

Throughout the book is a running theme—for schools to be successful, leaders and teachers must develop a holistic and multi-dimensional mindset to bring focus on the context and the culture in their buildings. However, this mindset must be mutually developed through its people and in turn leaders and teachers must work toward approaches that are realistic and doable in their schools and systems.

Gordon builds a blueprint to help anyone who cares about children create the conditions to support growth and development and to think through what it means to care. Gordon illustrates that a successful school cannot be reduced to a simple formula. There are many moving parts. The anchor to steady the school and its people are the relationships that leaders forge with teachers, students, and families and how these relationships bolster the school.

Developing Successful Schools: A Holistic Approach offers coherent approaches to build successful schools. I have known Steve Gordon for close to 30 years, and I believe this book is one that will become a seminal one. This book will not disappoint the reader.

Professor, University of Georgia,
Athens, GA, USA

Sally J. Zepeda, PhD

PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to propose a holistic approach toward improving our schools and the future of students who attend those schools. This book describes ten dimensions of the successful school that contribute to students' present and future: care, service, trust, democratic community, equity, justice and peace, symbols and ceremony, freedom and creativity, holistic development, and vision and mission.

Holism is all about interrelationship, and I can think of no more important interrelationship than the one between our children's present and future. In the successful school, adults care for students, teach students self-care, and teach students to care for each other. The school partners with families and the community in care giving and teaching about care. Students are taught to care for their community, humankind, and the planet. Those who are cared for and taught to care in school have a far better chance for a life characterized by emotional health, concern for others, and positive interpersonal relationships.

The successful school provides services to students beyond academics when such services are necessary to overcome barriers to learning. Such services include support for students with disabilities and for children from families living in poverty. The school partners with outside agencies and organizations to establish on-site supports like health centers, family centers, and after-school programs. Service learning is an important part of the school curriculum. Adults who were provided essential services and participated in service learning as students have a greater tendency to serve

others, engage with their community, and support government assistance to those in need.

Teachers in the successful school use trust-building strategies to develop students' self-trust and trust in one another. Students also develop critical analysis skills that help them determine whether information they receive is trustworthy. Adults who have developed self-trust are more self-directed and willing to learn new things. Given the massive amount of misinformation found in today's social media and other sources, the critical analysis skills learned in the successful school are especially useful to an adult in the modern era. When interacting with others in adult life, those who have learned to be trustworthy and to trust others are inclined to offer assistance, accept assistance, and cooperate with others.

Students in the successful school learn about democratic community by becoming part of a democratic community. Students are taught they have individual rights and responsibilities, need to consider the effects of their actions on others, and need to work with others for the common good. In the school serving as a democratic community, students are exposed to multiple ideas, experiences, and issues. They are encouraged to share and critique each other's views and engage in open inquiry aimed at solving meaningful problems. Given the conflict our society has experienced in recent years—over such issues as climate change, voting rights, and health care, to name a few—the need for “deep democracy” is greater than ever. Adults who have attended schools functioning as democratic communities are better prepared to engage in reflective inquiry and take informed stances on local and national issues. Adults properly educated in democracy support all citizens having an equal voice, and are more likely to vote for persons and laws that promote the common good.

Equity is a key priority of the successful school. This includes equity for students of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ students, those with disabilities, and students of different genders. The successful school helps students from historically marginalized cultures increase their cultural pride and self-esteem. Students from underserved groups are taught they can succeed in school and life, and educators assist them to achieve academic success. The school teaches students to be culturally responsive, and works to develop positive relationships among all cultural groups. Students from underrepresented groups carry the cultural pride, skills, and resilience developed as students in the successful school into their adult lives. Adults educated in equitable schools are inclined to support social justice and become involved in social action.

All students deserve to feel safe and experience the learning made possible by a safe school environment. The successful school has norms requiring mutual respect and peace among all members of the school community and enforces those norms through collective effort. When those norms are violated, the response is restorative justice rather than punishment. Restorative practices in the successful school build relationships, address conflict when it occurs, and restore damaged relationships. Those who develop attitudes and skills for promoting peace and justice in their school years are more likely to work for peace and justice as adults. These adults also will be inclined to become active in causes such as the reduction of poverty, prevention of violence, and reform of the criminal justice system.

In the successful school, symbols and ceremonies represent common school values, and convey those values to new members of the school community and the outside world. Symbols and ceremonies are integrated with curriculum and teaching to assist student learning and celebrate student progress. Specific benefits of positive symbols and ceremonies in the school include improved motivation, engagement, reflection, communication skills, and cultural awareness. Adults educated in schools with positive symbols and ceremonies have increased capacity to utilize symbols and ceremonies in formal and informal leadership roles in the workplace, groups they belong to, and the community. Communities manifesting affirmative values through symbols and ceremonies have an increased capacity for cultural understanding, civic engagement, and public service. On the local, state, and national levels, we find symbols and ceremonies that represent a vibrant democracy: freedom of expression, open and fair elections, the peaceful transition of power, and adequate representation of different cultural groups, to name a few. An education that develops awareness of democratic symbols and ceremonies prepares its citizens to interpret the current state of affairs and act to support democracy.

Successful schools understand that freedom is necessary for both learning and creative expression. Freedom and creativity allow students to explore new ideas, investigate interesting problems, and propose innovative solutions. Freedom enables students to explore diverse content and demonstrate their learning in creative ways. Those who have experienced positive freedom in school can be expected to display independent thinking and self-direction in adulthood. Adults who attended schools where creativity was emphasized are more likely to demonstrate creative problem-solving skills in their daily lives. Those educated in a free and creative

environment can be expected to seek new challenges as they journey through life, and face those challenges with self-confidence.

The successful school is committed to the development of the whole person: their intellectual-cognitive, social, emotional, physical, aesthetic-artistic, ethical-moral, and spiritual development. These areas of learning are integrated with each other and with external curriculum standards. Holistic development also integrates individual and collective learning, education inside and outside of the school, and action and reflection. Each area of holistic learning, if adequately addressed in PK-12 education, will contribute to adults' lifelong growth and development. Intellectual-cognitive development allows for reflective inquiry, problem finding, and problem solving. Social development relates to interpersonal skills, social consciousness, and civic engagement. Emotional development enables self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Physical well-being involves healthy habits which, in turn, enhance one's daily activities and improve the overall quality of life. Aesthetic-artistic development fosters imagination, creative thinking, and the ability to interpret meaning. Ethical-moral development leads to individuals and groups considering the interests of others, making moral choices, and working for social justice. Spiritual development encompasses the beliefs that each person's life is important, all persons are connected, and all life is interdependent.

Shared vision and mission, taken together, provide a framework for conceptualizing and actualizing the other nine dimensions of a successful school. The vision is the image of what the school wants to become, and the mission is the plan for moving toward the vision. A *shared* vision and mission mean, first, that representatives of various stakeholder groups participate in the development of vision and mission statements. Second, the vision and mission statements are disseminated and discussed throughout the school community so they are fully understood by that community.

This book includes separate chapters on each of the ten dimensions of a successful school. Across these chapters, the journey toward school success is organized by seven components of school life: school leadership, the school environment, curriculum, teachers and teaching, assessment, school-family relationships, and school-community relationships. The chapters in this text are intended to serve as a "hall of mirrors" reflecting school success.

One concern often expressed by educators is that the need to teach the academic curriculum, not to mention to prepare students for the high-stakes achievement test, does not allow time for holistic education. First,

it's important to understand that it is possible to integrate the various dimensions of a holistic education with an externally mandated curriculum. Another important point is that, in addition to all of the other positive outcomes reported in this book, *each* of the dimensions of the successful school described in Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 improves academic performance as measured by traditional means.

Although this book offers many examples of schools implementing different dimensions of the successful school, schools fully implementing all of these dimensions are in the minority. The challenge ahead is to reposition the holistic approach to developing successful schools from the margins to the center of our educational system. Hopefully, this text will encourage and help to map out that transition.

Austin, TX, USA

Stephen P. Gordon

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PART I

Introduction



CHAPTER 1

A Holistic Approach to School Success

This chapter provides an overview of the book. Each of the following chapters addresses one of the ten dimensions of a successful school: care, service, trust, democratic community, equity, justice and peace, symbols and ceremony, freedom and creativity, holistic development, and vision and mission. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 describe how each of the first nine dimensions is cultivated through seven components of school life: school leadership, the school environment, the curriculum, teachers and teaching, assessment, school-family relationships, and school-community relationships. Chapter 11 outlines how a school community can develop a vision of itself possessing the first nine dimensions of a successful school, and a mission that guides it toward that vision. The vision and mission, taken together, comprise the tenth dimension of the successful school. Previews of subsequent chapters are presented below.

Part II is focused on the heart of the successful school community: the relationships within that community. Chapter 2, “A Foundation of Care,” describes how caring for others and teaching others to care are the bedrock of the successful school. School leaders have a central role in developing care; they model care for adults and students and work to develop care among all members of the school community. A whole-school approach is needed to develop care, including adults and students embracing care as the core of interpersonal relationships.

The caring curriculum is based on the needs of students and connected to their in-school and out-of-school interests. Curriculum content

addresses caring for the self, those we know, our community, humankind, and the planet. Caring teachers both show and teach care to their students. Teachers treat all students with respect, individualize instruction, assist students throughout the learning process, and show concern for students' lives beyond their academic performance. Caring teachers teach others to care through modeling, dialogue, practice, reflection, and continuity (Noddings, 2005). Caring assessment is focused on the process of learning, student growth, and providing students with multiple ways of demonstrating their growth. Caring educators learn about their students' families, interact with families on a regular basis, and consult with families about student learning. Educators in caring schools learn about the community they serve and incorporate the community's cultures, activities, and assets into the educational process.

"The Service-Oriented School" described in Chap. 3 is about providing service to others and learning from such service. The model for leadership in a school committed to service is Greenleaf's (2008) servant leader. The servant leader is a servant first and a leader second. Indeed, the servant becomes a leader in order to better serve. The leader is empathetic, aware of others' needs, altruistic, authentic, and committed to empowering others. The service-oriented school provides integrated services that fulfill the needs of educators, students, families, and the community. The successful school provides emotional and physical health services and extended learning opportunities inside and outside of the school day.

The school committed to service integrates service learning with the school curriculum as students go through the process of investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration. Servant teachers make education relevant, helping students to link learning to their families and the community. The successful school provides services to families and enables families to serve the school in a variety of ways, including being change agents for school improvement. The school partners with the community in service projects and programs to improve both the community and the school.

Chapter 4, "The Bridge of Trust," is so titled because trust is the bridge that connects members of the school community. Trust involves confidence in others and a willingness to take risks for others. Trustworthiness of a school leader and other educators is based on their competence, concern, integrity, openness, respect, and reliability (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Trust across the school environment is based on a shared vision, regular interaction, collaborative decision making, and supportive leadership (Reeves et al., 2007). Teachers

trust a curriculum that they believe will meet the school's mission and goals. Teacher trust is related not only to the *what* of the curriculum but also to *why* some content is included and some is not (Drake & Sherin, 2009). Teachers are more likely to trust a curriculum that they are allowed to discuss, assess, and adapt.

Students trust teachers who promote a positive learning climate, join students in the learning process, and provide individual assistance when needed (Spiegel, 1996). Assessment should be *for* learning rather than *of* learning, providing students with opportunities for reflection and improvement. The most trustworthy assessments of student learning involve a combination of self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment.

Family trust in the school is based on educators who are inclusive of and committed to all students and their families. Families trust the school when educators communicate and collaborate with them for the purpose of improving student learning. A school can establish trust with the community by advocating for community goals, inviting the community into the school, and collaborating with the community for educational reforms.

Part III is about the culture of successful schools and addresses the topics democratic community, equity grounded in equality, justice and peace, and symbols and ceremony. In a "Democratic Community," described in Chap. 5, citizens value one another, identify common interests, engage in open inquiry, and share decision making. The democratic school community models democracy as it prepares students for democratic citizenship. The democratic school leader involves diverse groups and encourages diverse views. All members of a democratic school community have a voice in issues that concern them and are part of the decision-making process. The school community includes democratic structures like school councils and democratic activities like study groups and action research.

The curriculum allows students to experience democracy at the classroom and school levels. Teachers and students have roles in curriculum development. Students are encouraged both to become independent learners and to engage in collective action for the common good. The teacher in a democratic classroom community assumes the role of co-learner, allows students to make classroom decisions, and facilitates students' democratic inquiry. Students are involved in decisions about how their learning will be assessed. Teachers are involved in the development of the teacher assessment system, identifying their improvement needs and developing plans to meet those needs.

In a democratic school, families and educators share information about students and assume collective responsibility for student learning. Families

are involved in shared school governance through representation on a school-family council and other democratic structures, and are invited into the school to participate in joint efforts to improve student learning. Community members participate in democratic inquiry and shared decision making through structures like a school-community council or school-community partnerships designed to improve the community and school.

Chapter 6, “Equity Grounded in Equality,” calls for the school leader to demonstrate personal commitment to students from diverse cultures and to assist all members of the school community to be culturally responsive. In the successful school, equity audits identify issues with teaching, programs, and student achievement, and these issues are addressed by the school community. The curriculum connects to students’ cultures and provides for all students to develop both basic and higher-level skills.

Culturally responsive teachers engage in critical reflection to identify and correct their own biases, affirm the cultures of their students, and view cultural and linguistic diversity as assets for teaching and learning. Teachers teach to their students’ cultures and learning styles and do whatever is necessary to help all students learn. In successful schools, assessment of learning is differentiated in order to match students’ cultures and assist their learning. Assessment also measures students’ growth in their own cultural responsiveness.

Educators in successful schools engage in ongoing two-way communication with families. The school assists families in need, either directly or by connecting the families to appropriate service agencies or organizations. Families from different cultural groups are encouraged to support students’ learning in ways appropriate for them. Diverse cultures are represented on shared governance groups. The school collaborates with community members from different cultural groups to carry out community equity audits, and joins school-community partnerships to increase equity in the school and across the community.

“Justice and Peace” is the title of Chap. 7, which describes these two concepts as inextricably linked. The leader of the successful school engages in critical self-reflection, understands effective methods for promoting justice and peace, and works with different groups in the school and beyond to promote those ends (Miller & Abdou, 2018). Schoolwide policies on bullying and violence are essential, as are students clearly understanding those policies and adults enforcing them. When injustice takes place, restorative justice is the response, which includes determining who was

harmed, who was responsible, the causes of the harm, and what should be done to repair the harm. Restorative justice seeks to restore relationships that have been damaged.

Justice and peace are part of the curriculum in the successful school. Curriculum goals include developing peace and justice leaders for families, communities, and society. Faculty members teach justice and peace through modeling; community building; and direct instruction of communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, and mediation skills. Students are provided opportunities to apply what they have learned about justice and peace at the classroom, school, and community levels. Programs for justice and peace are assessed at the needs, readiness, process, and outcomes levels.

Family involvement for justice and peace can take the form of family education programs or school-family collaboration for justice and peace. Parents/guardians provide leadership for justice and peace education through participating in program development, leading or co-leading workshops or study groups, or mentoring students in need of assistance. School-community partnerships support justice and peace in the school and community. Community agencies and organizations in partnership with the school can provide training for students and adults on leadership for justice and peace. Community service learning can involve students in research, campaigns, projects, internships, and public events focused on justice and peace.

The title of Chap. 8, “Symbols and Ceremonies,” represents multiple manifestations of the school culture and its underlying values. *Symbols* are physical indicators of organizational life. *Ceremonies* socialize members of the school community and send messages about the school culture to the outside world. *Rituals* provide stability and clarity. *Metaphors* convert complex ideas into simple images. *Stories* are informational, emotional, simply expressed, and empathic. *Recognitions* are intended to observe courage, effort, learning, improvement, and success. *Celebrations* are gatherings to observe a beginning, milestone, achievement, or rite of passage. *Artifacts* are objects related to the school culture created or used by members of the school community. School leaders use symbols and ceremonies to convey meaning and support school values, and encourage other members of the school community to do the same. School flags and songs, assemblies to recognize and celebrate members of the school community, and stories about the accomplishments of school graduates all can assist understanding and support of school values.

Effective symbols and ceremonies within the curriculum assist student interaction, reflection, and understanding (Choppin et al., 2015). Teachers use symbols and ceremonies to help students understand and embrace school values, develop cross-cultural understanding, and assist one another toward learning goals. Some forms of student assessment combine multiple expressions of the school culture. For instance, assessment of project-based learning (PBL) can include artifacts, ritual, recognition, and celebration.

Symbols and ceremonies used in family involvement with the school include group meetings, home visits, stories told by family members, and celebrations to recognize families and students. Symbols and ceremonies connecting the school and community include stories written by students about their neighborhoods, recognitions of student accomplishments, and celebrations of diverse cultures.

Part IV is about growth and development of students and other members of the school community, with chapters addressing freedom and creativity, holistic development, and school vision and mission. Chapter 9 is entitled “Freedom and Creativity.” Freedom is necessary for creativity, and the successful school leader not only possesses both of these assets but also fosters freedom and creativity for other members of the school community. Freedom for creativity includes opportunities to make choices, imagine, inquire, associate with others, and express oneself.

A school that promotes freedom and creativity allows teachers to develop a curriculum congruent with students’ needs, interests, and modes of learning; and allows students individual choice and opportunities for creativity. Teachers in the successful school model creativity and provide the freedom necessary for creative learning by allowing students to choose learning goals and activities that interest them. Effective teachers extend learning beyond the classroom, reward risk-taking, and consider mistakes as part of the learning process. In the successful school, students are allowed freedom and creativity in demonstrating their learning. Students are taught how to self-assess their learning and provided structures to assist that self-assessment such as reflection folders, portfolios, and digital learning maps.

The successful school provides students’ families the freedom to choose how they will support student learning (Coleman, 2007), and treats families as partners rather than clients (Feriazzo, 2011). At the same time, the school uses creative strategies to engage families. Successful schools give teachers and students the freedom to connect learning inside and outside