School Communities Talk About Justice and Joy

Over the past six months each SFUSD school has been developing a specific plan for their school site with input from their school community. These plans are called “balanced scorecards” and will lay out the goals, activities and timeline that each school will follow to reach the district’s major goals under its new strategic plan.

The balanced scorecard is designed to create a shared culture of service and accountability throughout the district, ultimately improving outcomes for students.

As a first step in creating school site balanced scorecards, principals held in-depth conversations with teachers, parents and students around the district’s strategic plan goals making social justice a reality,

parents and students around the district’s strategic plan goals – promises to students and families.

Schools take first steps toward creating school scorecards.

Parents, teachers and students at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy gathered to begin creating a balanced scorecard for their school. Photos courtesy Svetap Agabay-Isik and Bala Busam.

Teaching Math with Real World Problems

by Kentaro Iwasaki
Math Department Chair
Mission High

As the universal language, math is the most powerful tool students can have in an increasingly global society. Sadly, in our country there seems to be a societal acceptance of poor math literacy. Adults often tell students, “Well, I don’t get math. I was never good at it.”

More than ever, cultivating math literacy among our students is critical to their future – and ours. Classes like algebra and calculus are gatekeepers to careers in engineering, science, technology and medical fields. And development in these fields are called “balanced scorecards” and will lay out the goals, activities and timeline that each school will follow to reach the district’s major goals under its new strategic plan.

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Chinese at School from page 1

Lilienthal. These families are all pretty much monolingual English speakers, none who had an existing connection to the languages and cultures their children are learning.

But so far – and we’re up to second grade now – so good. If you’d told me 20 years ago my kids would come home arguing about stroke order and tones, and making bad puns in Chinese, I wouldn’t have believed you. Today, it’s just another afternoon getting them to do their homework.

We made the leap for a couple of reasons.

First off, why not? Kids are little language learning machines anyway, so we figured picking up a second one when it was utterly painless was a good deal.

Secondly, what else are they going to do in grade school? They learn important stuff during those early years, but it’s not all language specific. You kind of need to know American history in English, because you need the vocabulary - Congress, Constitution, Gettysburg. But that’s not in first grade. Colors, numbers, addition and subtraction, all that, you might as well learn it in another language. These concepts are crucial but can be learned in any language.

Finally, what a gift to give them fluency in a second language. We go to birthday parties where, if you close your eyes, you can’t tell whose parents speak something other than English, because the kids’ accents sound pitch-perfect. These kids are going to grow up being able to switch back and forth between English and Cantonese (or Mandarin, Korean or Spanish) effortlessly. They may end up running companies or being potters, who knows? But they’ll have a kind of access to this whole other world that we don’t.

Tough Transitions, But Success in the End

Granted, there are differences. The first weeks of Kindergarten can be rough. Starting school is hard enough, having a teacher who doesn’t just tell you things, but acts them all out while she’s talking in an unintelligible language makes it a lot harder. But after a few months kids get along just fine. They may not understand every word that comes out of their teacher’s mouth (not that they understand everything their parents at home say, either) but they get the gist of it. Most importantly, they understand what they’re being taught.

For our younger daughter the transition was much smoother, because she’d seen her older sister go through it and, to her, that’s just how school is. Sometimes I wonder if that’s what it’s like in countries where going to school in a language you don’t speak at home is totally normal and expected.

Instructions, thankfully, come home in English, so usually we power through. Sometimes we fail.

Overall we’re still ecstatic that we were able to enroll our kids in an immersion program, and that we have public schools here in San Francisco that make immersion possible. To borrow a phrase from the business world, getting an immersion education for our kids feels like the biggest ‘added value’ we’ll ever know as parents.

Student Eleanor Murphy-Weise is a second-grader in the Mandarin Immersion program at Starr King Elementary.

Judy Chu Thurgood Marshall Academic High School, 12th grade

“I go online to check out the art a lot and think ‘How did they do this layout? What steps did they take? I look at the iPod advertisements and say ‘hey, I can do this someday.’”

Judy Chu is a visual artist currently helping to design a bench for her school through San Francisco State University’s iDo program. Last year she designed a t-shirt for SFMOMA’s Matches program.

Minh Tran
Philip & Sala Burton High, 12th grade

“I’m an immigrant. When I came here English was very difficult for me. Art was the only way I could express myself. Now, I’m like the school’s unofficial graphic artist. I love that I can use my skills to help my school.”

Minh Tran is a graphic design artist who has designed posters and other promotional materials for several cultural community organizations in the city. He hopes to get a Master of Fine Arts and open his own advertising agency someday.

Joshua Rauchweger
Clarendon Alternative Elementary School, 5th Grade

“In third grade, people from the (San Francisco) Ballet came to my school to teach us. They gave me a full scholarship, and I got to play Fritz in the Nutcracker. On opening night we were freaked out, but once we were on stage we had so much fun.”

In addition to dancing with the San Francisco Ballet, Joshua has performed with the Joe Goode Dance Company. Also an accomplished gymnast, he aspires to be a professional dancer.

Emi Nakamura
Downtown High School, 12th grade

“I love photography because, to me, photos emphasize someone’s perspective on life, on a certain event or on a certain idea. Just being able to snap a shot, show it to people and hear what they have to say is an amazing experience.”

Emi works closely with photography mentors at SF Cameraworks and has displayed her photos at the Rayko Gallery. Not limited to one creative medium, Emi is involved in several community arts programs including Writer’s Corp, YouthSpeaks and the Horizon’s DJ Project.

Nicolas Asfaha
Lowell High School, 12th grade

“I think art is just as important as English and Math. I have band as my first class of the day. When I’m done with band I feel good, and I’m ready for my next class. It’s like they say, ‘music makes you smarter.’”

First picking up the trumpet in band class as a 6th grader at A.P. Giannini, Nicolas has played classical music for over six years and is a member of Lowell’s prestigious Symphonic Band. He plans to continue with music in a college band next year.

Alicia Mana
James Lick Middle School, 8th grade

“In 6th grade I had the rock and roll class (at Lick). I did the five set drums. We had electric guitars and basses. We played for the 75th anniversary of James Lick and Carlos Santana came.”

Alicia dances and plays drums for the local Aztec dance group Danza Xitali. She recently had a lead role in school’s performance of the musical “Bye Bye Birdie.”

Hear more from these students at www.sfusd.edu

Kudos: Active in the Arts

SFUSD students share their passion for the arts.

By Mitzi Mock

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Board of Education
President Kim-Shree Maufus

Q: Why did you join the SF School Board?
Maufus I believed that a certain voice was missing from some choices made by the Board, a voice coming from a disproportionate number of inequities (over and over again) as well as a voice that could talk about all types of SFUSD schools in all of its neighborhoods.

Q: What do you think are the most urgent needs for SFUSD schools?
We need to 1) establish a diverse and equitable student assignment system that everyone can understand and not abuse, 2) prepare fiscally for the future of our school district to preserve jobs and programs, and address wasteful spending within our district's infrastructure, for example our antiquated busing system, and 3) promote schools that are doing amazing, amazing work with our children but aren't "brand name/popular" schools.

Q: How do you stay awake during School Board meetings?
I sit on a very large ball like the ones you see at the gym. It helps keep my energy up.

Q: Do you have any hobbies?
I'd like to start playing my cello again and speak Spanish on a regular basis (I need someone who can gently critique me). I've been wanting to learn Mandarin since 1992.

Superintendent
Carlos A. Garcia

I am proud to live in a country that has finally recognized that any bail out to our ailing economy needs to address one of the most essential strategies to charting a course for a better future: investing in children. The federal government’s economic stimulus package is going to be a great benefit to our schools, but it is not the long term solution we need. The funds are only for two years and only for very specific uses.

California public schools are bracing for another year of devastating funding cuts to education. Last year, we had to cut millions from our already lean budget and the city’s rainy day fund helped us avoid more cuts. While initial layoff notices will be necessary, I want to assure you that our priority is to retain all of our SFUSD teachers. But we will need the city of San Francisco to approve the rainy day funds once again.

We owe it to our children to give them the tools to create a better world. Even in these challenging times, we need to remain committed to the goals and priorities we have set forth in our strategic plan. Implementing this ambitious plan is going to take time and a lot of creativity with the dwindling resources at our disposal.

We are moving in the right direction. School communities have been creating their schools’ balanced scorecards, a new planning and accountability tool we are implementing as part of our strategic plan. The Board has adopted policies which will make it possible for more of our students to go to college. Teachers will be receiving more support than ever through voter-approved Proposition A parcel tax funds, which just became available.

I believe that in San Francisco, with all of our community working together, we can realize our vision: that every one of our students graduate college and career ready and equipped with the broad array of skills, capacities and dispositions required for successful world citizenship in the 21st century.
Teaching Math with Real World Problems

To engage my ninth grade algebra class, I ask students to develop group business plans. Like the real world, they have limitations: a fixed amount of materials and time for producing their product, as well as production costs. Their goal is to figure out how to maximize profit and express this solution in a graph. Once they develop their plan, they write math questions based on their model and take turns teaching their peers how to approach their exercises. Activities like this enhance students’ confidence in math and improve student buy-in because students listen to each other just as much (or more) than they do teachers.

High school math teachers can also learn from our elementary counterparts. They know that students learn best when they can use physical materials to make sense of an abstract concept. At Mission, we use physical models like algebra tiles whenever appropriate because we know that there are all sorts of learners.

Making math accessible to all students is a matter of social justice—and not simply because it opens professional doors. A math teacher at Mission leads a project in which students research the ethnic makeup, income and education levels of various zip codes in San Francisco. They make a map of the city, coloring in appropriate percentages of each zip code to visually illustrate the disparities within their own community. Through this exercise, students understand how powerfully math can help them interpret the world around them.

One of my colleagues jokes that mathematicians are essentially lazy people. They look for patterns and develop formulas as shortcuts for problem solving. As math teachers, if we can help students find these patterns on their own, see where formulas come from and understand what answers express, then math can be a much more worthwhile and empowering experience.

The Most Important Meal of the Day

with sausage, and waffles with 100% juice replaced the standard cold cereal-and-milk fare.

Since the hot breakfasts began at every school this year, the number of students eating breakfast at school has jumped 30 percent, meaning nearly 1,500 students more eat breakfast each day. Now approximately 6,000 students on average eat a nutritious meal at the beginning of their school day in San Francisco’s public schools.

Because breakfast is a part of the federal school meal program, any student who qualifies for a free or reduced price lunch also receives a free breakfast. All other students can receive a hot breakfast for $1.50.

Dana Woldow, co-chair of the student nutrition and physical activity committee, reports, “Making sure our students start the day with a healthy breakfast is one of the easiest things we can do to help our kids succeed in school.” She adds that students who eat breakfast regularly are less likely to become overweight as adolescents.

Nancy Waymack and Heidi Anderson contributed to this story

Schools Talk about Justice and Joy

How do all these conversations make our schools better?

Kevin Truitt, Executive Director of the Leadership and Equity Initiative, says that for staff it’s about taking time to reconnect to the core mission of schools.

“In the past we’ve rushed to our action plans before reaching a shared understanding of what we were actually talking about,” says Truitt. “This time we wanted people to talk about what equity and joyful learning truly means to them.”

Truitt adds that many people tell him they’ve taught with some of their colleagues for a number of years and this is the first time they’re having such a deep conversation.

The conversation itself can be different from school to school.

Teachers at Sanchez Elementary asked parents what they wanted to see from the school. Parents, after responding, then asked the staff in return, “What do the teachers expect of us?”

James Lick students were asked, “What have your teachers done to show they care for you? What project made you feel really excited about learning?”

Addressing a packed house of parents, students at McKinley Elementary presented responses to: “School is most exciting when…”

Harvey Milk Elementary organized nine meetings throughout the city in neighborhoods where their students live to talk with families in depth about social justice. Staff also interviewed former Harvey Milk students about how their time at Milk did and did not prepare them for middle school and high school.

School leaders used what they learned to create the beginning of their school’s balanced scorecards and on January 30, schools handed in their first balanced scorecard drafts.

Karin Little, Director of Strategic Planning, describes how the scorecards will be used. “The scorecards put school communities at the center of the district’s decision-making. Now central office departments will develop better targeted support for schools.”

For more information on how balanced scorecards work, and the strategic plan, visit www.beyondthetalk.org.