

PORTSMOUTH MIDDLE SCHOOL: ASPIRATIONS AND ACADEMICS

The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) works with schools throughout the world in various ways. The most focused and concentrated of QISA's efforts are three-year school partnerships known as Demonstration Sites. Portsmouth Middle School in Portsmouth, New Hampshire has completed its three-year partnership as a Demonstration Site. QISA maintains a relationship with its former sites because the changes initiated are long term. The effects of Aspirations work are ongoing and some do not reach fruition until after the end of the partnership.

One of the questions QISA is most frequently asked is whether improvements to the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference® and so to students' Aspirations help improve students' academic performance. The short answer is yes and no. Do students who feel like they Belong and have Heroes in school get better grades? Or do students who get better grades feel more like they Belong and have Heroes in school? There is a classic chicken and egg question which is difficult to resolve.

While challenging to sort out, when improvements occur to both students' perceptions of their school's culture and their academic performance, a positive correlation exists and can be celebrated. QISA's experience is that if a school is doing all the things a school ought to be doing to support students academically (the explicit curriculum) and undertakes to improve the conditions that support students socially and personally (the implicit curriculum), then positive changes to the academic occur. If a good school helps students have more fun and excitement in school, students learn more. If a good school helps students have a spirit of adventure, grades improve.

The primary focus of Portsmouth Middle School's efforts as a Demonstration Site were to improve its Advisory program. Like many middle schools with an Advisory period, the time meant for advisors and advisees to interact in helpful ways had slipped into study period or silent reading or chit-chat mode. The Aspirations Team spent much time studying why this had happened and what improvements could be made. With their colleagues, they wanted to be sure that every student in the building was connected to an adult in the building. In Aspirations terms, that every student had a Hero.

Improvements to students' sense of Belonging and Heroes were expected and recent *My Voice*® Survey results bear out the improvements. The table below shows changes to selected indicators from this year and three years ago.

| Survey Statements | Total in Agreement 04-05 | Total in Agreement 07-08 |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| School is a welcoming and friendly place. | 63% | 74% |
| I feel accepted for who I am at school. | 74% | 87% |
| Teachers care about my problems and feelings. | 57% | 63% |
| I am proud of my school. | 44% | 58% |
| Students respect teachers. | 44% | 58% |
| I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me. | 61% | 69% |
| Teachers care about me as an individual. | 52% | 61% |
| Teachers respect students. | 60% | 75% |

Clearly Portsmouth Middle School has much to be proud of in the area of improved relationships between staff and students. Those improved relationships, in turn seem to have supported students' academic sensibilities.

| Survey Statements | Total in Agreement 04-05 | Total in Agreement 07-08 |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Tests are an important part of my education. | 65% | 80% |
| I put forth my best effort at school. | 72% | 85% |
| Getting good grades is important to me. | 86% | 93% |
| I push myself to do better academically. | 72% | 83% |
| I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades. | 55% | 70% |

Now for the real question: Did these improvements to *My Voice*® indicators, clearly the result of improvements to the Advisory Program and better relationships with students, also translate into what John Stokel, principal of Portsmouth Middle School, called their "Best NECAP year ever"?

| Percent Scoring Proficient or Above | 05-06 | 06-07 | 07-08 |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Reading | 69% | 73% | 82% |
| Math | 66% | 73% | 73% |

We will leave that to you to decide.

School Profile

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|-------------------------|---|
| Principal: | John Stokel |
| Number of Students: | 532 |
| Free and Reduced Lunch: | % |
| Web-site: | http://www.cityofportsmouth.com/School/pms/index.htm |
| Aspirations Team: | |