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# Focused on Student Success: A Five-Year Research Study of Models, Networks, and Policies to Support and Sustain Rigor and Relevance for ALL Students

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## Raleigh Charter High School

In 1998, a board of directors made up of business professionals, experienced educators, and college professors established Raleigh Charter High School (RCHS). A nonprofit corporation established by 8<sup>th</sup> grade parents at the Magellan Charter School supported them in this effort. These parents wished to continue the secure, nurturing, academically enriched education that children experienced at the middle school, and they sought to expand this opportunity to include more Raleigh-area students. RCHS is a college preparatory school that combines a demanding honors-level curriculum with the enrichment of numerous field experiences. In 2001, RCHS became the first North Carolina high school to be named a School of Excellence. The school has been ranked as high as 9<sup>th</sup> in *Newsweek's* Challenge Index (2005) and as high as 20<sup>th</sup> in *U.S. News and World Report's America's Best High Schools* (2008).

Charter, as students and staff refer to it, is characterized by its small size, involved parents, highly qualified teaching staff, and students who are full partners of the staff in their education. The school currently enrolls 542 students in grades 9 through 12 and enjoys a student-to-faculty ratio of 19:1. In the absence of busing, parents drive and carpool students to the school. All students are encouraged to attain their own levels of excellence in academics and to discover how to make a contribution as citizens of the school and world. College scholarship awards to last year's graduating class of 125 students totaled \$4,696,000.

From the outset the researchers wish to acknowledge our bias that Charter is a school to which we would all eagerly send our children. In this we are not alone. For the past several years, only one in eight students who apply to RCHS as 8<sup>th</sup> graders are admitted. The only requirement for application is a recommendation from a student's 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher that he or she is ready for Algebra I. Applicants are placed in "The Fish Bowl" and chosen by lottery during a public meeting. As Principal Tom Humble explained, "I tell people that night, 'This is going to be a sad day for many of you. I apologize in advance for that.' Then I say, 'Please remember that you are here as observers only. This is not meant to be interactive.' It can be difficult." Many of the teachers at the school have children who are currently enrolled at RCHS or who have graduated. State law allows a lottery preference, along with the Algebra I requirement and a one time application for siblings and children of the principal, teachers, and teacher assistants. One teacher with three children all under age 7 said, "It's the ultimate perk."

The staff members of RCHS are very much aware they are a charter school and, as such, are open to criticism from those who wish to label the school as elitist. They stress that although they are a

college-bound school, they are not a school for *gifted students* as that term is used in education. They draw from over a hundred middle schools and, as one administrator told us, “Not every 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher has been accurate in their recommendation.” They are mindful of the self-selection that takes place as a result of parents who care enough to seek out a charter school and drive their children to and from school, the lack of a football program, and the ability to maintain smaller student enrollment. As word of mouth spreads and the applicant pool becomes more diverse, the staff of Charter believe the profile of each entering class will continue to approximate other schools in the area. They are actively working to improve diversity in the school.

No small disadvantage they bear is what Dr. Humble refers to as the “stiff economic headwind” of having to pay rent. The school is located in the historic and charming, if layout challenged, Pilot Mill. Although the owners of this building - listed in the National Register of Historic Places - are sympathetic, Raleigh does not reside there rent-free. RCHS receives the same amount of money from the state and county as public schools, yet those schools do not pay rent. At the time of the visit, the RCHS board of directors met and agreed to move forward with a plan to purchase a permanent home for the school so they would eventually own the building that housed their school. All who commented on this knew a mortgage would have no short-term benefit on their finances, but it remains an important undertaking if RCHS hopes to sustain itself in the long term. Students we talked with were fully aware of this pending change in location and the reasons for it.

These themes emerged as contributing to the success of Raleigh Charter High School:

- Citizens of the world
- “Active, social, and creative” learning
- Accepting adolescents as adolescents
- A highly qualified staff

### **Citizens of the World**

Raleigh’s mission statement reads as follows:

*Raleigh Charter High School challenges college-bound students in a creative and supportive atmosphere to become knowledgeable, thoughtful, contributing citizens.*

*We graduate citizens of the world by creating an interconnected learning environment that*

*combines a demanding college-preparatory education with a curriculum that teaches and models citizenship skills. We involve our students in many resources of downtown Raleigh — the government, performing arts, social services and the international community. RCHS will be a place of opportunity for highly motivated students and actively involved parents*

We found that the significance of this mission was not only in its lofty words — “citizens of the world” — but that *everyone* knew it and lived it. Raleigh Charter’s mission statement is active in both of its primary purposes: (1) developing contributing citizens of the world and (2) creating a challenging and interconnected learning environment. We found these two aspects of school life at Raleigh to be so much a part of the fabric of daily existence that it was challenging for staff and students to articulate how and why Raleigh is the way it is. Teachers who had been at the school since the beginning said, “It’s a bit mysterious to me.” When pressed, others said, “I really don’t know. It just sort of happens.”

One interesting factor, given the profound focus on citizenship, is that many staff members say, “We are still learning what citizenship means.” Dr. Humble shared, “One of the founding ideas of the charter was citizenship. We are still trying to understand what that means. It’s a work in progress. We know more now than we did when the charter was written. It is much more holistic and integrated now than it was then.” Recently Raleigh developed a “Citizenship Preamble and Principles,” which states, in part, “We believe that a foundation of knowledge and ethics must precede all intellectual inquiry” and concludes, “We shall become good citizens.”

In this effort, service is an integral part of the program at Raleigh. Yet there are no service “hours.” In other words, Raleigh has no service requirement. No one is keeping records. Students at Raleigh simply do service. They are told in orientation, “Your high school career at Raleigh is not going to be about taking or what you can get out of being here. It’s going to be about what you give, what you contribute and give back.” Service has two expressions at Raleigh: to the community in and around the school and the world and to the school in the form of leadership and co-curricular involvement.

Much service to the community is carried out on six Community Workdays, three in the fall and three in the spring. The design of the program includes teacher and student choice, multi-age groupings, one-year commitments, and experience and education in four service areas. Each RCHS teacher chooses an area of service to support. In the fall, students look at the service choices offered by teachers and select their top five areas of interest. One student captured the program by saying, “Service is just so Raleigh Charter. It’s not a task. There are no service hours.

It's not a chore. It's applying what I learn. Choosing what you are going to do is exciting. Plus my advisor is cool. I am really helping out." Another student in that session said, "Community service is an integral part of the school's mission to be citizens of the world. I like the ones where we do something physical — plant trees, clean up a park — that kind of stuff. It's vital to the core principles of the school."

The structure includes four one-hour gatherings for education and planning and two four-hour days of service work. One student discussing Community Work Days said, "They could never be eliminated. It's part of our school mission to graduate citizens." Many students are aware that friends in other schools do service as a requirement of graduation and are grateful their experience is very different even as many of them far exceed the hours required by public school programs. One student shared, "Students have gone back and helped on their own time after the workday."

An aspect of the service program that students seem to appreciate as much as the gratification of helping others is the opportunity to relate what they are learning to the real world. One student said, "Community Work Days are a great way to apply what we are learning. We can see what people do in the fields we are learning about. It defines us." Rather than an add-on to the curriculum, service comes out of the curriculum. Thus, courses are aligned to the mission of creating citizens of the world. Required courses include AP and advanced-level environmental science, as well as three levels of civics and economics. Citizenship is a major theme in U.S. and world history classes. English teachers invite writing assignments that reflect on service and citizenship experiences. Literature is chosen with those themes in mind.

As much as community service is "so Raleigh Charter," service to Raleigh Charter on the part of its citizenry is even more so. Every student we interviewed listed at least two or three and frequently more co-curricular activities. This, too, is understood as just something Raleigh Charter students do. A student told us, "There are an unbelievable amount of options that connect with what you are interested in. I have an opportunity to have a real-life application of what I enjoy and love. At Charter we are developing citizenship in the United States. You are a citizen; you have to be in it for the betterment of other people." Students routinely connect their participation in school co-curricular activities to the school's citizenship theme.

This effort to create citizens of the world by expecting that students be citizens of the school begins before a student's first day at Raleigh. Each April, Raleigh hosts an accepted students day for 8<sup>th</sup> graders who have been accepted. The session is equally divided between presentations from student club and sports leaders and Raleigh's academic deans. At that early stage, students receive the implicit message that getting involved is as important as academics at Charter.

When we asked students to define a successful student, these responses were the norm:

- “It’s not specifically any one aspect. It’s more of an accumulation of things. There’s an academic focus, but also extracurriculars are important. Clubs. Supporting sports teams.”
- “Not grades. We have no ranking. A recent success we had was an “Ideas Festival.” We have been trying to book a speaker on immigration. Eventually we got her to speak. That was my success, but it was shared throughout the club and adds something to the community we have here.”
- “When I look up to seniors, it’s not just that they are smart. They are *involved*. Sports. Drama. They make the school a better place.”
- “Being a well-rounded person where you can maintain your grades but do well in clubs. *We the People* [a civics club] made state. The Science Olympiad is big at Charter. Also being able to enjoy yourself, not to be so stressed out.”
- “I’m in Mixed Ensemble Chorus. I love the chorale class. It’s in the middle of the day, and there are all age groups. It’s a nice break from academics. You still have to work hard, but it’s refreshing. If Raleigh Charter was all academics, it wouldn’t be Raleigh Charter.”

The following was an exchange we had with a focus group of freshmen and sophomores:

RESEARCHER: How is student success defined at this school?

STUDENT 1: It’s not about grades but about how students push themselves. Students push themselves to take those higher classes and to do well in higher placement.

STUDENT 2: It’s about growth. We kind of have a holistic approach; sports and extracurricular activities are important. Always pushing to do more, to have a larger impact on the community and be a better citizen.

STUDENT 3: But also knowing your limits — keeping balance between academic and extras.

STUDENT 4: Success is establishing who you are, what balance or synthesis makes you into the *person* you are, not necessarily the most academically successful. We don’t know how to define ourselves yet, so here you have an opportunity to do that.

We wish to emphasize that this is a transcript of what students said, not our interpretation of what was said. Freshman and sophomores at RCHS used the words *holistic* and *synthesis*. The student shadowed by a member of the research team, when asked how Raleigh Charter has changed him, said it “changed his internal efficacy.”

Given this level of involvement and service to the school, it was not a surprise when a student told us, “Key Club is the biggest club at Charter. It’s not easy, but it’s great.” Groups are student led. A young man told us, “All the clubs I am in are student driven. Students lead and the teacher supports it. If I don’t do anything, the club dies. That’s real world.” Many student groups meet at lunch (25 minutes); others meet after school. A few squeeze in meetings before school starts. Others meet on Saturdays. Every staff member is expected to moderate at least one co-curricular activity. Many oversee several.

The process for beginning a club is purposely simple, and students are encouraged to propose new clubs. A student explained, “One of the great things about this school is anyone who wants to can start a club. Just Dr. Humble approves it as appropriate. All you need is a teacher to sponsor you and three members. Bam, you have one. Clubs are not teacher led; they are student led.” Another student related, “Freshman year I started the Ping-Pong club. It died. That’s OK. There are these other things I can do.” When asked about her activities, a student reported, “I am in Key Club and Quiz Bowl. Plus, I started a club: Voice for Minorities. We do something to help people in minority groups. We had a fund-raiser for albinos in Tanzania who are being persecuted. I am also in Social Justice and Amnesty International.” A male student said, “I want to start a club: St. Baldrics. It’s for people who are willing to shave their head for cancer research. I also started H-cubed. We help kids in this area who, when they go to the hospital, get their clothes cut off. You know? So we raise money to replace them because a lot of these kids can’t afford to just lose clothes like that.”

Service to the school includes participation in improving curriculum, instruction, and school policies. One student shared, “I love that the teachers hear and use student feedback to improve year to year.” Another related, “I am on a committee to change a flex activity to improve a flex day that was not successful. You can see the difference that students make at Raleigh.” A student in that same focus group followed with, “That motivates you because you feel you can really make a difference.” Another student shared that she is on a Diversity Committee with Dr. Humble and other students and teachers to help improve diversity at the school. RCHS has a student-run Honors Council that students can opt to appear in front of instead of the administration if they run into discipline issues (e.g., cheating). When we inquired about outcomes for students caught cheating, students related that the emphasis was on discovering why the student did not have a relationship with the teacher

that led to asking for help rather than cheating and then helping them improve the relationship.

### **“Active, Social, and Creative” Learning**

Raleigh Charter’s mission statement is clear that the means of developing citizens of the world is “by creating an interconnected learning environment that combines a demanding college-preparatory education with a curriculum that teaches and models citizenship skills.” Like service to community and school, this is evident everywhere at Charter. A phrase we heard again and again from staff and students in describing the curriculum and learning environment was “active, social, and creative.” These adjectives are used to describe every level of experience from the policies, procedures, norms, and customs that govern the school to the fully engaging classroom lessons we observed and heard described.

### **ACTIVE**

Active at Raleigh means at least three things: (1) students are physically active; (2) students’ minds are active — questioning, wondering, reflecting; and (3) students are learning outside of the school building. First, students at Raleigh are physically moving all the time. Classes we observed rarely spent more than 10 minutes of any 45-minute period in one activity. Lessons shift from reading to conversation to listening and back to conversation with students moving chairs and desks around as needed. Classes are noisy with discussion and even arguments.

Second, students are expected to be intellectually active at all times. When we asked students what motivates them to do well in class, one replied, “Teachers. They really push for you to understand. If they notice you are not participating, they call you out.” When asked to give an example, the student replied, “English. We are studying *Hamlet*. She can tell when you are not understanding, and she calls on you, ‘Do you understand this?’ and when you say, ‘No,’ she takes you through it line by line.” When asked to explain and give examples of students working hard at Raleigh, a student told us, “Upper-level math allows retakes. So you seek out help, work hard, and you can replace the bad grade and really understand the material better.”

Many students related that the expectation of active thinking is part of what made the transition from middle school challenging. From freshman and sophomores we heard these comments:

- “Oh yeah, it’s all about learning. In my middle school if you want to know what seat work looks like: ‘Here just do this: a crossword.’ Well what’s that going to do? It’s just words. There is another path here. If you have homework, it’s for a purpose.”

- “They don’t even collect most of the homework. It’s just to make you think about what you did in class or to get you ready for the next class. So if you don’t do it you are kind of out of it in class. So you still want to do it even if they don’t collect it.”
- “The work is all valuable and that helps you learn. It can be tedious, but there is always variety. Our English teacher gave us this really big assignment. It was these 12 questions to learn how to do literary analysis. Really hard. But with all the practice — there were three stages you had to go through, but in the end it really ingrained that stuff in my brain.”
- “Middle school math seemed to be always busywork. It was the same 30 problems over and over. Here it’s just five to six problems and they are all different. So it’s challenging us at different levels, rather than just 30 questions repeating all the same level.”

A student who had transferred after having spent freshman year in another school said, “There is a higher level of expectation here. You have to want to come here and do well. You can’t just sit in class and not talk. The teachers ask, “What can I do to help you?” I was at a different school as a freshman and when I got here, my teachers jumped on my lack of participation.”

There are also indications that this is sequenced throughout a student’s four years at Raleigh so the highest level courses are the most active in the sense of expected student participation. In upper-level classes, students regularly do much of the teaching, having read subject material on their own and prepared PowerPoints. This conversation took place with seniors:

STUDENT 1: A lot of the senior teachers have been forcing us to learn as if we were in college. You read, learn on your own, and then drive the discussion. There is not as much support from the teacher. That was frustrating at first, but I’ve grown more comfortable with it. English teachers especially. It varies from grade to grade.

STUDENT 2: Instead of teachers saying: “Here is what this means,” it’s a discussion and we are forming our own ideas.

STUDENT 3: Yeah, it’s on a different level. For example, in AP Psych, you have this reading and you are expected to know this. The teacher is not checking up all the time. It progresses through the four years.

STUDENT 1: It’s easier to learn how to self-learn with the safety net of high school. In college, I think you are pretty much all on your own.

Dr. Humble, several teachers, and students explained to us that there is a “No busywork” policy at Raleigh Charter. Students are surveyed to check on this policy that applies to the classroom and to homework. Many students expressed gratitude for this policy, even though it did not lessen the amount of assigned homework.

In support of this expectation that students be intellectually active, the schedule contains “Ex Days” to deepen learning. Ex Days extend the usual 45-minute period to 90 minutes, so students meet in periods 1, 3, and 5 on Thursday and then periods 2, 4, and 6 on Friday, allowing teachers to do in-depth labs, rehearsals, seminars, practices sessions, or group work. These occur five times per year.

The height of this actively intellectual approach is in the ability Raleigh Charter fosters in its students to think about their own thinking. This meta-cognitive ability, even among freshmen, was surprising and encouraging. When we first heard a student talking in this way, it was easy to assume we were interviewing an especially intelligent student. However, it became apparent that RCHS makes an effort to teach and encourage this skill in all students. A teacher reported, “I teach a lot of freshmen and I am able over and over again to tell them why we are doing something when they ask. I can be frank about why I came up with a lesson. I do not have to keep that from them to keep them focused.” Discussing field trips, a freshman told us, “We took this trip to the museum recently, and back at school our teacher asked us to relate the evolution of humankind to the evolution of our thinking in high school. You know? There are these big giant shifts in thought . . . paradigm shifts . . . and they happened in evolution and even in our own thinking as we get older.” When asked to define a successful student, one student said, “At first it was doing all my work, you get used to that. Now it’s thinking deeper. Getting comfortable with that. Forcing yourself to think at different angles.”

Students and staff spoke highly of a class called Systems Theory in this regard. A student referenced this class when asked to give an example of students working hard:

*Today we are studying systems theory. Trying to think of one topic from every single perspective. The idea is to synthesize all the perspectives to get a less biased perspective. I chose a band I like to write about. The teacher tells you to keep an open mind that you may not be the most qualified person to answer a question; no one might be. You need to build a general concept out of everyone’s perspective.*

Several students told us that this class had “changed their lives.”

Third, many learning experiences take place outside of the building on planned “Flex Days,” or on traditional field trips. Flex Days allow teachers and students to explore topics in depth and often across disciplines. They occur once each semester over two successive Fridays during which regular classes are cancelled. Students meet for half-day sessions in small groups to pursue projects in a subject area. Groups often travel off campus. When you combine pedagogy that requires students to do something different every 10 to 15 minutes, engaging learning that seeks depth of understanding, a prohibition on busywork, and Flex Days, you have what the RCHS community calls “active learning.”

## **SOCIAL**

The social aspect of Raleigh’s “active, social, creative” motto overlaps two themes we have previously discussed. First, the school is actively working to create a social consciousness in its students through service to school and community. Second, an underlying principle of all the pedagogy at RCHS is interaction, as distinct from presentation, lecture, or solo seat work. Students work independently to prepare for intellectual interaction later.

RCHS is also social in the emphasis placed on student-teacher relationships. There is no indication that the relationship between students and teachers is in any way adversarial. Absent is the typical wrangling about dress code, tardiness, missing homework, inappropriate remarks, and so on. The interactions we observed and stories we collected were characterized by respect and a sense of partnership. On the My Voice™ student survey, 83% of Raleigh students indicate that students respect teachers, which is 44% above the national average. Eighty percent agree that teachers respect students. One student, when asked what helped students be successful at Raleigh, shared, “Respect. The respect I have for the teachers. Even if I don’t like the subject matter, I respect the teacher and the other students and you want to be part of the community. That pushes me for classes I don’t like. It’s about community. You establish a passion and a drive for things you don’t love for the betterment of everyone.”

Teachers and students both pointed to smaller class sizes as important to the Raleigh experience. Given smaller numbers, teachers are able to get to know students. When asked about factors that contribute to the success of this school, a teacher said, “Small class size. Plus we do a lot of programs outside of class that help us establish relationships and trust.” Another agreed, “The needs of the individual student are a focus. Sometimes that’s mandated, but we go beyond that. Maintaining that

relationship is critical.”

From the student point of view this creates an environment in which they feel adults care about them. One student said, “Teachers are helpful. They know us as a person. I was planning on taking five APs, but my teacher said, ‘I would rethink that.’ They know us at a personal level.” Several students told us they had teachers’ e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers and that whenever they contacted a teacher, the teacher promptly got back to them. When we asked, “Do you feel like at least one of your teachers knows you as an individual?” we received enthusiastic agreement from all the focus groups. One student shared,

*Dr. Genez, my bio teacher, knows me like a book. She says, “You’re really tired.” I can talk to her whenever. Then there is our drama teacher, Ms. Rasnick; she is almost a mom to a lot of students. It’s nice to have approachable teachers. And Ms. Solomon, geometry. I was struggling and she helped turn me around. I ended with an A. The day the USC scores came in, she called home to say how proud of me she was. Math teachers are always here overtime.*

In response to that same question, another student said, “All of my teachers do! For example, my drama teacher. She knows me. She takes the time to get to know me.” A student in that same focus group explained, “There is a level of respect; you get to know them as a person, and it’s reciprocal. You feel like they are really invested in wanting to help you. Ms. Rasnick . . . every six weeks, we turn in journals. She knows us because she knows what we write about.” A third student added, “If you write about something you are struggling with, she’ll come find you. She is an extremity in that area, but there are a lot of teachers who care about you.”

We could not possibly include all the stories students shared in support of this finding. The relationships of trust and mutual respect they enjoy with teachers affects everything from motivation to succeed — “Teachers have so much respect for you, you don’t want to disappoint them” and “When I don’t study, I worry that if I don’t do well my teacher is going to say, ‘What’s wrong? How can I help you?’” — to course selection: “A teacher wouldn’t sign my registration form because she said I was ready for a harder class; another time a teacher told me she thought I was overloading myself.”

Finally, RCHS is social in the ways students interact with other students. There is very much a sense that they are all in this together. The first two days of school for freshmen are spent getting to know one another and their teachers. The small size of the entering class, typically 125 to 135 students, makes it possible for new students to interact in some form with every other incoming

student. The group is further divided by alphabet for some parts of orientation and in groups of eight for other portions, all to facilitate getting to know one another. Juniors and seniors give tours and lead other parts of the orientation. Flex 101 (a special freshman version of Flex Days) builds on those bonding experiences throughout the fall. On the second Friday of the school year, the schedule is shortened and the afternoon is spent orienting new students to the school's many clubs and sports. One student related, "Kids at other school are afraid on their first day. We don't terrorize freshmen. Here we help freshmen. There is no bullying here. Upperclassman watch over the lower class." On the My Voice Survey™, only 3% of RCHS students agreed that bullying is a problem in the school. The national average is 33%.

The peer academic culture at Raleigh Charter is devoid of competition. It was students who told us this. One student put it this way when asked about success, "We are not trying to be successful like other people. At Charter there is no competition. Everyone is coming together as one and being successful together. Teachers set that up and help us get to success that way." One element that helps create this noncompetitive culture is a lack of class ranking. RCHS takes this right up to the end; there is no valedictorian or salutatorian at graduation.

This translates into a culture of extremely high positive peer pressure. When asked what motivates you to do well in class, many students told us it was their peers. We heard, "You see other students engaged, and that helps you get engaged." Another student shared, "There is a positive peer pressure here. We support each other. We discuss books. Everyone wants everyone else to do better." When asked how success was defined for students, a student responded, "When you find your place in the community. It's easy to find success like that here. Raleigh is very open and broad. It's competitive, but not against each other. You are competing against yourself. There is support from peers for you to compete against yourself." A teacher responding to the same prompt said, "There is this straight A student; she always has been. It's a part of who she is. Her friends have been counseling her on the importance of regular sleep. They are trying to convince her that an A is okay and that there is no need for A+, and now she has signed up for a course she would never sign up for given her science/math track."

Among other things, students told us to indicate the peer culture at RCHS were the following:

- "Here smart is cool. There's lots of positive peer pressure. You don't have to hide it if you did well on a test or paper."
- "There is no such thing as weird here."

- “At other schools, they brag about having an easy schedule. Here they brag they are taking five APs. ‘Man, I am only taking four’ [other students laugh]. At the same time they are not degrading you.”

## **CREATIVE**

Finally, the teaching and learning environment at Raleigh is creative, which is indicated beyond the art and drama classes and creative approach to teaching and learning that RCHS enjoys. Perhaps what makes Raleigh Charter most creative is the effort to apply what is learned to real situations. This has already been noted in the community and school-based service, as well as in the field experiences. Like the other characteristics, application as an expression of creativity is pervasive and so embedded in RCHS’s culture that it is difficult to isolate as a separate feature. A typical response to a question about leadership was “My citizenship is children’s theater. I am in charge of it. I have branched off to doing children’s theater in my neighborhood at my mom’s preschool.”

The purpose of class discussion was frequently articulated to be the formation and development of one’s own opinion. A group of students, explaining how Raleigh Charter helps students become leaders, made these comments:

STUDENT 1: It’s the class discussions. I can form my own opinions, my own morals. I really know what I stand for now. Class debates help, which we do a lot.

STUDENT 2: The teachers really encourage you to step forward. To take a stand. To not hesitate. They really want you to be the best you can be.

STUDENT 3: My math class teacher puts problems on board. We can work with whoever we want. The teacher doesn’t just teach it; students go out of their way to help each other to make sure everyone understands it.

## **ACCEPTING ADOLESCENTS AS ADOLESCENTS**

The themes referenced thus far — creating citizens of the world and “active, social, and creative” learning — are tied in to a third theme we found at Raleigh Charter High School. The staff of RCHS was explicit about the effort to accept adolescents as adolescents, and the students were implicitly aware of it. Raleigh’s emphasis on its own particular brand of service learning taps into the adolescent’s inclination toward optimism and altruism. By integrating community and school service into the academic programming, Raleigh Charter takes advantage of that inclination. Obviously, the

“active, social, creative” approach to pedagogy takes advantage of other characteristics typical to teenagers. Maturing bodies are not forced to sit still for long periods. There is no attempt to contain maturing social skills with stifling (to a teenager) approaches to education that force quiet solo work or mere attentiveness to a lecturing teacher. RCHS has figured out how to put the energy and interests of young people at the service of *learning*, rather than — as in many schools — have teenage energy and interests at odds with *teaching*.

This effort to flow with the capacities of adolescents is evident elsewhere. The start time of school is later than in traditional high schools. Dr. Humble cited current research, and Raleigh students themselves in support of this policy. Note, too, that the schedule overall is not especially regular — there are Flex Days, Ex Days, Community Service Days, and field trips — all well known in advance. The absence of a standard schedule seems to suit the teenagers’ more restless and bored-by-routine mindset.

One of Dr. Humble’s mottos that several teachers repeated was “We have all the power, so we don’t need to use it.” They also made it clear that Dr. Humble modeled the expectation, as one teacher put it, “that students are truly given the benefit of the doubt in all cases.” As a result, we observed a refreshing lack of adversarial relationships between teachers and students at Raleigh Charter. That is not to say teachers never have to correct a student or that students do not sometimes misbehave or take issue with a teacher. Rather the relationship itself in which the correction takes place is one of support and understanding, not a power play. As a result, one teacher said, “When a student messes up, when the student returns we welcome them back. We hold no grudges. That’s required from the top. They can always make up work. We are not out to get them.”

One student shared, “Teachers give you a lot of the responsibility. They trust you as capable. Even if you stumble, they would rather see you learn from that than take over.” Another student said, “Teachers understand you are going to make mistakes.” One student offered, “You learn by trial and error. You try and fail and then learn. Teachers really help, too. They give you advice. They are really thinking about that. They give you homework on Thursdays instead of on the weekend because they know you probably have things to do on the weekend.” A teacher offered this comparison:

*At the school I was at before Raleigh, kids were antagonistic; parents, too. It was us versus them. Parents always saw it just like their kids, even if it was clear what was in the best interests of all students. Administration didn’t support difficult decisions. I don’t have to make those difficult decisions at this school. I prevent them now. That makes me a better teacher. There were all these rules we had to enforce. I had to call a parent about her kid having detention for*

*chewing gum. And while I am on the phone I am thinking, "This is so stupid."*

In addition to pedagogy that takes advantage of most teenagers desire to be social, RCHS pays particular attention to helping students find their niche. This phrase, "find a niche," in reference to students, peppered conversations that ranged from academic success to service to co-curricular activities. The staff at Raleigh takes seriously the power and influence of peers at this age and does everything it can to monitor and recognize students who get lost for not fitting in and the distractions that adhere to the effort to fit in. When asked how Raleigh defines a successful student, one teacher replied,

*When they find their place. We talk as a faculty about how we want every kid when they graduate to feel like they left something behind. The school is different because they were here. They helped organize orientation. They joined the Raleigh Rowdies [a Pep club]. We want all kids to feel like they have something they bring to the school. You won't all be leaders at such and such, but you'll all have an opportunity.*

In a different focus group, answering the same question, another teacher shared, "A student that finds their niche. Anime. Drama. Whatever. Frisbee golf. A kid that finds that passion and carries it through. A lot of our clubs meet at lunch. Science Olympiad has 60 kids; that's 10% percent of the school!" A teacher with a daughter at Raleigh shared,

*Every school wants this. Clubs are a huge part of it. If they have an interest, they can find or start a club. My daughter was terrified when she came here, and within days she was starting to plug in. There is so much emphasis on helping kids find a way to plug in. Meetings, Flex Days, trying to find your group. Most successful students are plugging in in ninth and tenth grades and then taking a leadership role. A number of kids have risen to that level where every kid knows them. They've infused who they are into the school, rather than just getting something out of it.*

Clearly the effort to help students fit in socially — a particular concern of adolescents — freed students to do their best work academically. Here is the consequence of the positive social climate on one student's Latin homework: "We are translating the *Aeneid*. The teacher just says, 'I trust you to translate for 45 minutes.' She doesn't check it. If I don't do my homework in that class, other students have to take up my slack. I do that homework first."

Lastly, the need that adolescents often express to have learning be relevant also seems to be addressed at Raleigh Charter. There is a genuine effort on the part of teachers to make learning

relevant to students currently, not just as a means of passing important tests to get into good colleges to have a productive future. This is as much about teaching methods that are relevant to the teenage mindset as it was about content. For example, debate and argumentation seem to be a part of nearly every class. Considering multiple viewpoints and different worldviews (a part of adolescent identity formation) is also encouraged. When asked to describe a time when he learned something at school he knew was going to help him outside of school, a student said, "Every day in my English class. She is an amazing teacher. We read *Candide* and talked about discovering self and how he says life is absurd. Sisyphus. *Candide*. Voltaire. There isn't one system. Now we are reading *Faust*. These things just change your whole perspective on the world."

To foster relevance one student shared, "Teachers keep assignments broad. They give guidelines but not a specific topic. Like in English. We had to write an autobiographical essay. She could have given a topic: 'A Time in Your Life You Struggled.' But it could be anything. I wrote about something I learned in Sunday school. Someone else wrote about a first dance performance. It helps you figure out what you are interested in." Responding to the question about learning being applicable outside of school, another student said, "Recently I took the North Carolina writing test. So I had all these writing prompts. One practice one had to do with responsibility. I wrote about how I am juggling all these activities. It was helping me to actually use it. What I wrote down, I actually apply now. For example, I gave up TV to play more tennis. It fits in with Civics to learn about opportunity costs." One student said she knew she is having success in school "when I am actually talking about what I learned at lunch with my friends."

Teachers at Raleigh do not feel inappropriately challenged when asked to explain why students are being asked to learn something. A teacher articulated this shared approach: "We can have a conversation about when we will use this. It might go on for 20 minutes. And I feel like I know I am doing well when the students are derailing me in a productive way." One response that drew laughs in a student focus group was "It's not uncommon to ask, I don't understand how this applies. Then their [the teacher's] eyes light up! 'Let me tell you the four examples I have been thinking of, hoping you would ask that question.'"

### **A Highly Qualified Staff**

The first factor Dr. Humble mentioned when asked to what he attributed the success of Raleigh Charter was the staff. He repeated again and again throughout conversations, "We have a great staff." When we asked him what defined a great teacher, he said, "A mind at work. Our teachers are kind, caring, and *smart*."

The hiring process at Raleigh is a rigorous one. Initial interviews are conducted by departments to ensure that, as a prerequisite, candidates know the field in which they are teaching. Not everyone who is hired has formal training as a teacher, and several teachers we spoke to have transitioned from other fields. Just under half the staff is unlicensed. This emphasis on hiring teachers who are extremely well versed in a discipline allows students to become fully engaged in the teaching and learning process. Paradoxically, this high level of teacher confidence allows them to admit mistakes and continually seek to improve. As one student told us, “Teachers are willing to admit they don’t know something, but they will get back to you.” One student said of Dr. Humble, “That guy is always in learning mode.” This confidence also allows administrators and teachers not to exercise power over students. One teacher referred to it as “the confidence that enables kindness.”

Candidates that make it past the interview must teach two lessons. The first is in a regular class that fits in with the curriculum that day. Prospective teachers are told in advance what they are expected to teach, they prepare a lesson (e.g., Hamlet’s second soliloquy), and they come in and teach. Later that day, they teach anything they want as a lesson to the entire faculty. The staff as a whole is highly involved in the hiring process. As one teacher told us, “At other schools I’ve been in, the principal hires the person and the staff rubber-stamps it. Here the team hires the person and the principal rubber-stamps it. That’s how they do it at Microsoft where I used to work.” Other teachers told us that the hiring process creates a feeling that everyone is responsible for ensuring the success of the newcomers.

Once hired, care is taken to induct new teachers with a great deal of intention and with constant reference to the school’s mission. Describing a new teacher’s first session after hiring, Dr. Humble said,

*We use these arm metaphors. We tell new teachers, “Our goal is to bring them [students] all in. [He gestured broadly with his arms as if hugging a large tree.] We know some high school teachers think it should be like this [he extended a stiff arm, palm facing away as if stopping traffic]. “We’re going to be tough; you’re not going to get away with anything while you’re with us.” Another one we use is “We want everyone to get up here [he gestured with his right arm pointing upward] and for most of our students that will mean college. But not everyone starts in the same place or can go at the same pace, and so we are going to support them, bring them along [he moved his left arm lower making a scooping gesture].” They seem to get the point.*

In addition to careful orientation, new teachers are assigned a buddy. One teacher, reflecting on his experience as a newcomer, said, “It’s a bit of a baptism by fire, but there is a lot of support.” Another

teacher said, "I was very overwhelmed by the expectations at first, but there was a lot of support. They ease you into it. For example, they take you off duties." Nearly every teacher we spoke with shared the pressure they feel being in such an elite teaching corps *and* the enjoyment they feel at having it drive them. Everyone at RCHS, including the administration, is on a one-year contract. This does not have the effect of reducing the risk taking necessary to be a creative teacher. One teacher told us, "I feel perfectly comfortable saying, 'I did this and it bombed.'"

Raleigh's space issues (several teachers float, and almost all teachers must share their classroom) put teachers in regular informal daily observation of one another. This, in addition to the more formal expectation that teachers observe at least six classes a year, creates one of the highest cultures of collegiality the researchers have ever seen in a school. Many teachers shared they might be in their classroom correcting papers while another teacher is teaching, only to be drawn into the lesson. They then talk with their colleague about what they thought worked and what did not. One teacher said,

*We are talking to each other all the time. Evaluating, comparing, all the time. It's a lot of pressure. It can be tough to live up to that example, but everyone is helpful. The administration is very involved, not just the two times a year for traditional observation. There is lots of attention to engaged learning. The irony is: I feel like I have more autonomy than I have ever had, yet a lot of people are observing me.*

The "irony" of this autonomy in such a collegial environment was also frequently expressed. Many told us they felt a great freedom to teach as they see fit. Teachers agreed that this was due in part to the hiring process. They were also careful to contrast this situation with the autonomy they had experienced in other schools. One teacher said, "In the regular public school where I worked I had autonomy; the principal never came in." Another teacher added, "I have seen autonomy turn into apathy in a public school. They leave you alone as long as you are not causing problems. You get teachers showing movies every week. Here the autonomy is based on trust and respect." Many teachers were at a loss to explain why friends and colleagues at other schools were anxious or antagonistic about observation. One teacher went as far as to say, "If I don't want other adults in my room, what am I hiding?"

Comparing Raleigh to his previous experience, a teacher related,

*I used to teach in a middle school in Massachusetts. It was so different. Different with students and with teachers. There the pressure is to be bad. You know? Be in this tough group. The peer*

*pressure is to be bad. Here the peer pressure is the other way. Teachers at that middle school cared about cashing their paycheck. There was a guy who was all about union minutes per day. School started at 8, and if he got to school at 7:58 he would wait in his car for two minutes. At 3:30 his foot crossed the threshold to go home. We had a professional development day once, and at 3:30 three-quarters of the teachers got up and left. The presenter was on slide 30 out of 34, and they just walked out. Teachers and students here do not act that way. Here the pressure is positive. Teachers here are out of this world.*

Another teacher said,

*I have great peers. They know their subject matter and far more. They have worked professionally. They have interesting lives that they bring back. Our theater teacher produces plays in her community. Our art teacher has his own gallery. This is my ninth year. I couldn't leave this educational environment. I'm afraid I wouldn't find this anywhere else. This level of respect. They really want you to tell them what you think. I feel really supported.*

Another teacher said, "No one at Raleigh Charter is counting the hours to retirement."

Without question, the professionalism of the staff is what makes the rest of Raleigh Charter work. The combination of the quality of each individual teacher *and* the quality of their collegial interactions drives the mission, the pedagogy, and the approach that accepts adolescents as adolescents. In this environment, the bar is high, and teachers feel comfortable challenging one another and being challenged by others to do their best work. This was a professional teaching and learning community that far exceeded the professional cultures we have seen elsewhere.

In summary, Raleigh Charter High School deserves all the accolades that have come, and are sure to continue to come, its way. Although some might easily dismiss the advantage of being a charter school, all of the major themes are replicable in any public school. Raleigh Charter's mission has a particular focus on creating citizens of the world through service, but what is significant is that Raleigh *lives* its mission and vision. The active, social, and creative learning environment is one that is demanded by the highly interconnected world in which we live, to say nothing of the nature of adolescents themselves. Business leaders have been encouraging schools to foster this form of education and move beyond the industrial age. Accepting adolescents as the work in progress they are, and in fact encouraging experimentation, identity exploration, and mistake making through curriculum and co-curricular involvement, should be de rigueur in high schools. The freedom to learn that the lack of antagonism creates at Raleigh is an approach worth emulating.