



# GROSSMONT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT'S NEWSLETTER

From the office of Superintendent Robert Collins

## Karen

*A story about the influence of teachers and counselors.*

In so many of my visits to high schools these past weeks I have observed tremendous work and dedication by our counselors, teachers, administrators and other support personnel who are working with high-risk students. At the same time, we are not always successful with every student. However, the following story illustrates that we may be a lot more successful than we can imagine.

Karen was probably the most frustrating student I ever met. I first found her on a curb cutting class the first week of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I decided then and there that she would be my major project for the year. Using all of my very best skills I would mentor this child to success.

I called her in and told her I would be watching after her – if she had any problems, concerns, whatever; I would be helping her. I connected with her parent. We were a team.

Karen did fail some classes at the five-week period. I talked with teachers, counseled Karen, helped her with tutoring and arranged for additional counseling.

But Karen's absenteeism didn't change. She cut classes, and even ran away for a week. I kept trying, but whatever I did, the guidance and encouragement I gave just didn't seem to get through to her.

We transferred her to a continuation school at the end of the fall semester hoping that a smaller school would help. She dropped out halfway through the Spring semester. Her mother thanked me for trying and sent me a box of chocolates and a thank-you card.

### **Eighteen Years Later**

I didn't hear anything further about Karen until 18 years later when I met her mother at a dinner party. She wanted me to know that Karen wandered around for several years before attending a community college and later Arizona State. She was now married, had a child, and was an accountant in the San Fernando Valley. Karen's mother remarked that Karen would always comment on what I told her, "You can do it," that "You have the ability" and "You can be somebody."

The moral? We're in this for the long run. Our students do listen to us. When they choose to hear us may be two decades later.

## Professional Learning Communities

Professionals engage in ongoing professional development and renewal. It's part of our obligation to our profession to be life long learners and to keep current with the latest research and developments in our field.

Education, just like medicine and law, is not a stagnant world in which you can continue to "get by" with what you learned in college. Imagine for a minute the doctors who elect not to participate in a seminar on the most recent developments in a particular surgical technique. Just like doctors, attorneys and others, teachers and administrators have a responsibility to continue their professional growth.

The problem has always been the quality of professional development in education. Professional development is often poorly planned and not well presented. Often it does not respect the learning modalities of adults or isn't relevant to the realities of the classroom. Sometimes it is perceived as being another top-down reality of an education bureaucracy.

As a former social studies teacher, I remember the problems of traditional professional development. I also remember that most of my learning took place in departmental meetings with my colleagues, exchanging ideas, working through problems and discussing best practices. A Columbia University study cited the subject matter department as the most important factor in influencing the quality of teaching. These concepts laid the foundation for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in schools.

<b>PLCs Are:</b>	<b>PLCs Are Not:</b>
Small Groups by Subject Area	Large Group, Impersonal
Engage Teacher Discussions	Non-interactive
Ongoing	A Singular Event
Bottom-up	Top-down
Goal Setting Based on Data	One-Stop Delivery of Information
Focused on "Our" Students	Focused on "My" Students

Meeting once a week, these subject matter teacher teams discuss effective instructional strategies, student progress, assessment, intervention, and other topics aimed at improving student achievement. Teachers are encouraged to present different points of view, share instructional strategies, and create a shared vision for their students. The research over the past several years is compelling. Teacher teams provide a high degree of teacher satisfaction and significantly improved student achievement, says Michael Schmoker in Results Now.

What are our goals for PLCs? In my discussions with the Social Science Council, their concern was having the time to do this work and also whether PLCs were bottom-up or top-down. We will be reviewing this Spring how we can address increasing the time allotted for this work. We also want to ensure that the work of PLCs is driven by teachers in that subject area. Consultants facilitate and guide teacher discussions and help bring a team to capacity in terms of doing this work. Finally we will want to develop PLCs in each subject area over the next three years, making PLCs the focus of professional development for all staff. We will also strive for a culture that radically celebrates the accomplishments of every team as our goals become reality.