Introduction

In creating the School Accountability Report Cards for Belmont and Garfield High Schools in Los Angeles, our group developed six focus questions: 1) What is the purpose of school? 2) Is this purpose successfully achieved at your school? If not, what could be done to create a successful school environment? 3) Why are students dropping out? 4) What could be done to keep them in school? 5) What makes a good class? 6) What makes a good teacher? We attempted to examine these issues looking through the critical lenses of the teachers, the parents, the students, the community, and the administration. After evaluating the responses to these questions, we believe we have a better understanding of what is going on in these schools, and some ideas for what can be done to improve the nature of schooling.

Methodology

To create a meaningful way to consider our findings, we used the data collected from the community to make the basic assumptions in response to our focus questions. After reviewing the data, it made sense to consolidate some of the original questions, based on similar responses to different questions. For example, since answers to the questions about what makes a good class, a good teacher and a successful learning environment, were closely related, we made two basic assumptions and used the data collected to respond to them. Our survey findings are presented for each school individually, and answer these four focus questions: 1) What is the purpose of school? 2) Why are kids dropping out? 3) What can be done to create a successful learning environment? 4) What is the communication problem between parents, students, teachers, and administration? Each researcher had his or her own procedures for collecting the raw data, as outlined below.

Dan: I returned to one of the classes that I had observed during my rotation at Garfield in order to get the phone numbers of students’ parents that I could talk to. I informed the class about the nature of the project and 12 students very willingly volunteered their parents’ numbers. I was able to reach 5 of them and conducted the interviews over the phone. Each person I spoke with was very willing to take the time to answer my questions and they were open enough to share their opinions about the school. I posed the specific questions, but often times the conversations strayed into other issues regarding schooling, such as bilingualism and “old school” versus “new”. All of the information was important and helpful in developing a broader perspective of the school.

Adriana: When I observed at Belmont, I developed close relationships with four students. It was these same students that provided me with the information for the
interviews. I met with these students after school on Belmont campus and two of the students introduced me to their parents who allowed me to finish the other half of the assignment. I interviewed one mother and one father over the phone and I transcribed their interviews soon thereafter.

Lupe: At about noon Mayra (a colleague in TEP who volunteered as my personal secretary and aide) and I showed up at Belmont High School. We immediately began taking pictures of the neighborhood and surrounding community. Among other sites, this included a vacant lot filled with trash and a sleeping bum within a block of the school. During the process a car passed right by my partner and I while throwing gang signs up in the air, simultaneously looking right in my direction. As soon as I grasped the predicament, I threw a big corny smile at the individual and took off my shades. Fortunately, the gang-banger and his friend continued to drive away rather than return to our location. Mayra and I continued taking pictures of the community, and then we proceeded to interview Paulina, a mother of three former students at Belmont who was watering her lawn. She agreed to answer a few questions regarding Belmont High, however, we had to explain the purpose of the interview so she could feel at ease. The next people we interviewed were three freshman from Belmont who were off-track and playing catch with a football in the middle of the street. Finally, we walked into Belmont High with the sole intention to interview a person in administration. The first person we approached declined to be interviewed, due to a lack of time, but her aide took us to Mr. Newton’s office. He is the assistant principal of Belmont, and was glad to be interviewed after we explained the purpose of my task.

Catherine: I conducted in-person interviews on site at Belmont during lunch and after school. I used a tape recorder during my interviews, assuring the respondents they would be anonymous. The administration is represented by an office manager in the Main Office and a 12th grade English teacher who agreed to the interview. Other data was compiled from observation field notes and various website public records.

Cristine: I found a wealth of information regarding programs at Garfield High School as well as steps the administration was taking to improve the school on the Garfield High School website. As the result of a 1996 review of Garfield High School an Action Plan to help improve all aspects of the school environment was developed. In 2001, the Student/Community profile was published. As an institution, Garfield High School took responsibility and addressed communication and curriculum concerns. All information reflected in the Administrative portion of this School Accountability Report Card was taken directly from the school’s WASC report found on the Garfield High School website. To view the process leading up to the Action Plan, please visit: http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/Garfield_HS/wasc/report/preface/preface.htm. To view a complete Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) report, please visit: http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/Garfield_HS/wasc/ Our assumptions were based off an interview I conducted with a 40 year-old single mother who grew up in the East Los Angeles community and attended Roosevelt High School.
Linda: A survey was distributed to 23 Garfield students. They responded to the questions regarding the function of school, student dropouts, and successful classes and teachers.

SURVEY FINDINGS

QUESTION: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL?

ASSUMPTION: Schooling provides social mobility in society. An education translates to getting ahead in life by means of attaining a good job.

STUDENTS
When asked what was the purpose of school, most students responded with education and learning; five connected this with their future, life, and job security. The size of this number seems to indicate a disconnect between learning and life. The response of “to learn” did not mention what students were supposed to learn or how this learning would help them achieve their goals. When asked in person how waking up every morning to go to school would transfer to getting a good job, having job security, a good life, they also did not seem to have a straight answer.

When asked if their school was successful in its purpose, half the students were affirmative. The other half (12) was split between direct and indirect negative answers that placed blame on teachers (5) and students (1). The rest did not know or did not directly answer the question. When discussing this issue with students after the survey, many mentioned the overcrowding of their school as a source of discontent with their education.

ADMINISTRATION
Garfield High School has taken an aggressive approach in expanding staff and student awareness of career and vocational options. They plan to assist all students in developing realistic career goals and plans. Resources are provided through counseling and services in the Career Center, a Life Skills course, and tracks that offer courses that prepare students for college and careers in technology and teaching.

PARENTS
Female Parent: “They don’t teach practical skills these days like they used to in school. I learned how to open bank accounts, pay bills… things that they could use in their early adult life. Once you are out of high school, you are expected to take hold of life… but students now graduate without any idea of how to go into life.”

ASSUMPTION: Schooling is an institution that allows students to learn. Schooling is supposed to create thinkers and responsible citizens.
ADMINISTRATION
The administration has defined three school-wide goals that reflect how they believe students can be developed as creative thinkers and responsible citizens. They believe that every student, upon graduation, should be communicators, critical thinkers, and persons of character. Students will be communicators who maintain effective reading, writing, and oral skills at or above State competency levels across the curriculum. Students will use technology and critical thinking skills to overcome obstacles using a variety of problem solving strategies. Students will be involved in the school and community and will place high values on integrity, honesty, and respect for others and self.

PARENTS
Female Parent: “School warehouses the children that we have to send to them. I would send them to a private school but I can’t afford to, so I send them there. Otherwise I would send them somewhere else. The classes have become a waste of time for the students – they show videos. My daughter says that the videos that they show are stupid too… and they do this in important classes.”

QUESTIONS: WHAT MAKES A GOOD CLASS/A GOOD TEACHER? WHAT CAN BE DONE TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

ASSUMPTION: A good teacher is enthusiastic. Teachers have to want to be there. They need to be understanding and respect the students. Their attitude and personality greatly affect the learning environment. They too need to be constantly challenged.

Mother of 10th grade daughter: Having a good teacher.

Female student (9th grade): A teacher who’s not boring.

Belmont Office Manager: Probably the first requirement of a successful class is a well-prepared teacher.

Teacher (12th grade): You gotta start early, getting ready, thinking ahead. You gotta stay at least one step ahead of your students and two steps ahead of the administration.

ASSUMPTION: A good teacher has innovative teaching methods. Teachers should incorporate more than just bookwork into their classroom. Teachers need to challenge students through their methodology and teaching style.

Female student (12th grade): A teacher that can teach.

Male student (10th grade): More youthful teachers instead of the old teachers because they are ignorant and won’t change to new ideas that are being offered to them.
Mother of 10th grade student: Someone who informs the parents on how we can help our children do better in school. I think teachers should ask parents how to participate in the class. We have a lot to offer if they would let us.

SURVEY FINDINGS

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Mother of 10th grade daughter: I want her to have a chance at a good job. If she just gets her diploma . . . she'll be the first in my family. If she doesn't find a boy who takes her away she might work in an office or something after she graduates. I tell her she's got to get a good education.

Mother of 9th grade son: I want my boy to stay out of trouble, if he’s in school he won’t be getting trouble. I had so many problems with my daughter when she dropped out of school . . . she was 16, she got pregnant.

Male student (12th grade): If you wanna get somewheres you gotta finish high school at least. I wanna play football and maybe I'm going to get a scholarship to play in college . . . that’s what I’m working towards.

Female student (11th grade): I think if I finish school, I can go to college. If I go to college, my mom says that I will be able to make changes in my community because people will think I am a somebody.

ASSUMPTION: Schooling is an institution that allows students to learn. Schooling is supposed to create thinkers and responsible citizens.

Belmont Office Manager: Our mission is to provide our students with the best educational services we can under the many adverse conditions we all work under. Unless you work in administration for some time you never know what goes on behind the scenes. We’re all doing our best and it’s frustrating because sometimes we only hear complaints and criticism from students and parents. So we try to get as many of the families involved, but the reality is that many have only so much time. A lot of parents are working multiple jobs just to pay the bills.

Teacher (12th grade): I want to prepare my students to face the world out there. It’s hard living in LA, especially where my kids live -- I live there with them so I know. But I let
them know where I am and that I’m there for them. They got my number and they know my place (house).

Female student (11th grade): I want to become a lawyer. I know for that I need to go to college and learn as much as I can. Afterwards, I can come back to my community and help out everyone in my neighborhood.