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### The Need for Schools to Act as Communities

Courtney Breanna O'Connor

*The College at Brockport*

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Running head: THE NEED FOR SCHOOLS

The Need for Schools to Act as Communities

Courtney Breanna O'Connor

State University of New York College at Brockport

### Abstract

As cities, towns, and neighborhoods continue to break down and lose their original purpose of connecting individuals to one another, the school systems have been forced to take on the additional role as the community. American schools try to incorporate a sense of connection and belonging in a safe environment to combat the growing concern of a violent episode occurring within their walls, as has begun to occur in schools all around the country. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the need of the schools to act as a positive, healthy community for our youth and our larger communities based on current research, and examine if these efforts do work by incorporating a school community building event within a public school and comparing the pre and post event results.

The school community event, titled Celebration Day, focused on a full day highlighting student talents and working as a community to learn these new talents. The goal of this event was to establish a connection between the students, through all grade levels, and staff and promote a positive school climate by giving the community members of the school a day to learn and teach each other skills and talents that are not typically showcased during an average school year. The results of this program were measured by pre and post surveys given to random samples of students. The results indicate that there was a dramatic increase in the positive perception of the school community and the student bodies' sense of belonging.

### Acknowledgments

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## Table of Contents

	Page(s)
I. Introduction	6 - 8
• Description of the Problem	
• Goals and Objectives	
• The Counselor's Role	
II. Literature Review	8 - 16
• Introduction	
• History	
• Way to Build School Community	
○ School Size	
○ The Role of the School Leaders	
○ Student Participation	
○ Reduction of Barriers to Community Growth	
• Lack of Research on Student Sense of Belonging	
○ Connection to Academic Performance	
• Conclusion	
III. Method and Evaluation	16 - 25
• Introduction	
○ Pre-Celebration Day	
○ Celebration Day	
○ Post-Celebration Day	
IV. Results	25 - 27
V. Discussion and Conclusion	27 - 33
• Implications for Counselors	
VII. References	33 - 36
VIII. Appendices	
First Reference to Celebration Day	Appendix A
Interest Flyer	Appendix B
Talent List – Draft 3/23/05 Page 1-3	Appendix C
Talent List Page 2	
Talent List Page 3	
Celebration Day – Fast Facts Memo 3/24/05	Appendix D
Celebration Day Timeline – 3/24/05	Appendix E
Celebration Day – Fast Facts Memo Update 3/28/05	Appendix F
List of All Available Space in Building	Appendix G
Assembly Schedule – Model for Celebration Day	Appendix H
Directions to Teachers for Celebration Day Packet	Appendix I

Celebration Day Talent List Packet Cover Page 1 - 4	Appendix J
Teach, Choice, and Talent List Pages 2 - 4	
Middle School Choice Tally List Pages 1 - 3	Appendix K
Middle School Teach Tally List Pages 1 – 3	Appendix L
High School Choice Tally List Pages 1 – 3	Appendix M
High School Teach Tally List Pages 1 – 3	Appendix N
Letter to Teachers to Supervise Classes	Appendix O
Letter to Celebration Day Teachers	Appendix P
Lesson Planning Workshop Memo	Appendix Q
Celebration Day Student Teacher Lesson Plan Template	Appendix R
Celebration Day Timeline – Updated 4/13/05 Pages 1 - 2	Appendix S
Training for “Celebration Day Sell”	Appendix T
Memo to Teachers on “Celebration Day Sell”	Appendix U
List of Odyssey Academy Connectime Groups 2004 – 05	Appendix V
Celebration Day Updates to Teachers	Appendix W
5/25/05 Sign-up Schedule	Appendix X
Sample of How to Spend 5/25/05 Extended Connectime	Appendix Y
Notice to 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teachers	Appendix Z
Daytime Facility Use Form for Celebration Day Sign-up	Appendix AA
Celebration Day Sign-up Volunteers Memo	Appendix BB
Celebration Day Student Pass	Appendix CC
Memo to Teachers – Celebration Day Instructions	Appendix DD
Celebration Day Booklet and Program Pages 1 – 8	Appendix EE
Example of a Celebration Day Sign-up Sheet	Appendix FF
1 Page of the Hand Created Schedule	Appendix GG
Celebration Day Room Matrix	Appendix HH
Celebration Day List of Supervisors	Appendix II
Memo to Students Attending “Active” Classes	Appendix JJ
Memo to Students Attending “Art” Classes	Appendix KK
Memo to Celebration Day Student Teachers	Appendix LL
Celebration Day Teacher Advisor Packet Cover Page	Appendix MM
Student Teacher Created Lesson Plan	
Class List Session I	
Class List Session II	
Feedback Form	
Celebration Day Schedule	Appendix NN
Building-wide Announcement made by Principal	Appendix OO
Outdoor Class List	Appendix PP
Example of Feedback on Forms Pages 1 – 4	Appendix QQ
Article on Celebration Day in Weekly Staff Notes	Appendix RR
District Flyer – Points of Pride – Celebration Day Listed	Appendix SS

### The Need for Schools to Act as Communities

With the recent onslaught of violence within our schools comes an increase on the scrutinizing of the American school system. The fingers are pointing in every direction - home, community, society, and school, as to who is to blame for this increased violence and the media has it all on film for us to put on continuous replay. For the majority of America it seems impossible for such violence to occur within our country's school walls, but it is a possibility. In the past, the school was a piece of the community, but today there is increased pressure on families from work obligations, financial pressures, etc., the idea of a neighborhood community is a fading memory, and schools are becoming the last place to park this idea of community.

So if the homes are no longer a safe, nurturing community, and neighborhoods do not bring people together, then we must acknowledge that the school will become the new town hall and where the local picnics and group gatherings will occur. "There is growing recognition of the importance of developing respect for human dignity, for teaching students to be active participants, both in their own education and in the community" (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). If this is the case, which it seems to be, then school systems can only embrace this idea to continue to bring some sense of nurturing, belonging, and connectedness to our youth.

Schools are the new center of the community. The schools need to incorporate and implement this value into everything they do from creating small communities within individual classrooms, expanding that to within the school walls, and then embracing the community outside the school walls as part of the community within. These needs are based on over a decade worth of researched-based programs in high

schools throughout the Northeast that are documented in *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, a report developed through The Education Alliance at Brown University. *Breaking Ranks* focuses on, “the well-established facts that many teenagers are disengaged from hard intellectual work expected by their schools and the larger community and unprepared for the harsh world beyond those schools (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004). There are many efforts schools can make to incorporate the sense of strong school community that teaches by example to respect and value others and the need to feel safe and connected. This thesis will present one example of a program that can bring an already connected school community that much closer based on the current research.

#### *Description of the Problem*

This thesis is aimed at creating and implementing a successful school-wide day of celebration to combat the problem of a lack of a positive school climate and sense of community within a 6-12, suburban school in Western New York. A main component of the school’s mission is to create a community within the school. Based on current research within the educational, health, counseling, and psychology fields, positive school climate will foster this idea. While the school does feel like a small community, the overall idea has begun to be diminished by district standards for academic issues. Research suggests that an increase in positive school activities will create a stronger sense of community and climate, and a greater sense of connection between the student and the school.

Like John Dewey, the leader of the first progressive education movement, Nel Noddings (1992) sees schools as a means for creating a world in which people know how



to live together through the way they teach, not just what they teach. An emotional connection is important for students to feel like they are a member of a community and that connection can occur through how the curriculum is taught. Based on the research, including a questionnaire given to a sample of students, of Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) students have a sense of connection to their school when their needs, including feeling a sense of belonging, are met.

#### Literature Review on the Need for Schools as Community

The topic of school as a community became prevalent in the past decade, in part because of the rise in school violence, but also because of the prevailing view of the impact a positive school community can have on all aspects – academic, social, and emotional, of a student’s educational experience. This subject has not been heavily researched. Much of the research that has been done on the issue of the need of the school as a community of has been through a progressive lens (Bluestein, 2001; Dewey, 1938; Furman, 2002). Other research identified that a sense of belonging, to feel connected to the school community, and the “fostering of support and celebration of community [will] ensure a positive school atmosphere” (Hernandez & Seem, 2004).

School community is closely correlated to the topic of school climate and is often researched in connection, most recently with the increasing concern of student safety in schools with the rise of school violence (Bluestein, 2001). The topic of School Community is connected and plays an important role in the climate of the school, but has even more purpose and need than just based on the issue of school safety. The School as a community is one of the top factors in student’s academic, social, and personal success (Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Osterman, 2000; Wilson, 2004). While research on school

climate needed for school safety is relevant and significant to the current American school system, “student’s sense of belonging to school is a critical research topic in education because it constitutes a construct that is distinctly different from other constructs often discussed in education research such as school climate” (Xin, 2003).

This literature review will provide a synthesis of the current research and how it is relevant to this study. By examining the history of the research on this topic we can progress to the current research and then the goals for future research. Research on the ways to build a school community is key in creating the framework for this thesis. A brief examination of the research that has and has not been done follows, and the reasoning behind this study will conclude this section.

### *History*

The call for the need of the school to act as a community became an important issue to leaders during the Progressive education era, such as John Dewey and William Kilpatrick, student-centered curriculum focused on theme-oriented projects and many in the education field feared that a shift in curriculum that solely prepared students for the workforce would result in negative consequences (Ellis & Stuen, 1998; Furman, 2002; Furman & Merz, 1997). During this time educators and school reformers promoted the need for students to be independent thinkers, creative beings, and expressive about their feelings (Schugurensky, 2002). Ellis and Stuen documented that in 1933 the Progressive Education Association conducted a study that compared 30 progressive or experimental schools interdisciplinary, interest-based curricula with 30 traditional schools with subject-based curricula and concluded, after 8 years of study, that the students in the progressive schools were as well prepared as those in the traditional schools and were more involved

in extracurricular activities. They concluded that the opportunity to promote a community culture within the schools would not decrease the level of academic success that students have the ability to achieve.

As communities began to change so did the schools. As Furman (2002) wrote, “Ultimately the emergence of interest in community is best explained as a *reemergence* of a concept whose time had finally come.” She explained that “in the early years of American public education, the sense of community in schools was not an issue because it was a given – a product of close ties that existed between schools and their communities.”

Gradually the purpose of the public school moved away from preparing children who would stay in their local communities to preparing them to be productive citizens of a larger, industrialized American society (Furman, 2002). In the 1980’s reforms began to crop up again in the educational arena. National Standards, learning goals, and high-stakes accountability systems were disliked, but were so common that they were rarely questioned or challenged, but the concept of school being a community when so many neighborhood and family communities were beginning to unravel made sense, and efforts were made to improve the community in the schools (Furman, 2002). These reform movements have again resurfaced in light of the tragic violence increasing in schools and the continuation of the disappearance of the neighborhoods and close, extended families that served as communities in the past. It is evident that it is important that schools take on the role of becoming the new community model for students.

### *Ways to Build School Community*

#### *School size*

Many who researched the value and importance of students feeling connected to their school suggested that it is easiest and most successful to acquire in a smaller school setting (Wilson, 2004; Xin, 2003). Wilson (2004) suggested that schools with enrollments between 300-900 would more likely have students who feel more connected to their school than their peers in larger schools. Larger schools usually have plenty of students to participate but the number of those who do not go unnoticed (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004).

While much of the research seems to indicate that schools cannot exceed a certain student limit if they want to give them a positive community, Bluestein (2001) argued that the size of the school did not matter when it came to the ability to create a caring community environment in the schools. She argued that large schools could offer more opportunities for the students and it truly ended up being based on the care and support the students received from the school staff. Thus the size of the school does not seem to impact the feel of a school community, as long as there is a sense of connection to school staff and leaders.

#### *The role of the school leaders*

If school size is not the key factor in the success of building a school community then the culture that the school leadership cultivates maybe the key. School administrators, including school counselors, are the people who must instill programs that promote celebration of students, the opportunity for exploration, and experiences that makes students feel valued and respected (Wilson, 2004; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004; Hernandez, & Seem, 2004). The role of the school counselor is especially critical to the creation of a

community where students feel accepted because of their knowledge, skills, and education through traditions, and the advocate role that most counselors assume (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). As Wilson (2004) believes, “ensuring this experience for all students should be the ultimate goal of all school initiatives.(need page #)”

### *Student participation*

While the school leaders will set the stage for the way the school will be run and the type of community the building will house, research shows it is important to give students the opportunity to be involved in school projects, decision making, and outlets for students to have meaningful discussions on issues that impact the school (Bluestein, 2001; Gottfredson, 1986; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004). Giving students opportunities, such as school governments, leadership opportunities and groups, and discussion forums on issues that impact the school will help create a direct connection between the students and the school. When their voice is heard by school leaders, their peers, and the school community more often will students feel that they belong in that school.

### *Reduction of barriers to community growth*

If creating a positive school community was easy there would not be a need for research or literature on how to create a school that promotes the feeling of connection for students in their school, but clearly that is not the case; “schools and society are structured in a way that make community formation difficult” (Sapron-Shevin, 1999). There are barriers that have been erected that make creating a community, which at one time happened on its own, a more challenging process. Sapron-Shevin (1999) identified barriers to the development of a nurturing community based on the unfortunate response

that often comes from the lack of acceptance of diversity in our society. Certain groups of people are not given, not allowed to fully participate in our society and many people grew up with exclusion as part of their school experience.

The other barrier is competition. Inclusion is not the only answer because the practice of competition is so common and so deeply instilled in our society. Kohn (1986) described the pervasiveness of competition to the idea of asking a fish to describe water – it has always been there, always surrounds us, and we tend to take its existence for granted. And because it is so much of our culture, it is actual work that needs to be done to counteract competition; to be cooperative takes effort, which is part of the effort that is needed to work towards a community.

#### *Lack of Research on Student Sense of Belonging*

Perhaps the need for students to feel that they belong in school is so obvious of a concern that it is often overlooked in research. Osterman (2000) stated that there is a great discrepancy between theory and practice, and many researchers believe that a developing body of research on the need for students to feel a bond to their school community has yet to be documented. Beyond the need for further documentation is that there is a lack of study on specific examples of how schools can enhance their students' sense of belonging (Crump, Haynie, Saylor & Simons-Morton, 1999; Furman, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Xin, 2003). If current and future research focused on specific schools and programs to cultivate community perhaps there would be less of a need for each community to “reinvent the wheel” when trying to create a school community. More sharing and documenting of school community success is needed.

#### *Connection to academic performance*

Research shows that there is a strong connection between the students' perception of the school community and their academic success; "theoretically, well adjusted students who develop a positive affiliation, or social bond, with their school are more likely to remain academically engaged" (Simons-Morton, B., Crump, A., Haynie, D., & Saylor, K., 1999). In school is the time for "leaders to capture student's sense of social affiliation by implementing a curriculum and school vision that is student-centered and based on cooperative activities, group projects, and schools – as places of citizenship, participation, and esprit de corps are at the heart of the curriculum – are far more likely to ignite the spark of learning" (Bluestein, 2001). A curriculum and school mission that ties academic success to the school as a community will create a student body with a high academic performance outcome.

### *Goals and Objectives*

The purpose of this study is to create a project that can be implemented on a yearly basis that will coincide with an already existing program, Moving Up Day. The school administration would like the current students and staff to reconnect with the school's roots while moving ahead and preparing students for the world after high school by executing programs that will create trust, self-awareness, and respect. The school would like to increase school pride and cultivate a sense of community because, "Odyssey belie[ves] that...students learn best when there is a sense of community and their physical and emotional well-being is valued by all members" (McDonald, 1998). Through this project the school will reaffirm their goal of being, "strongly committed to speaking to each student through his or her strengths [because] all children have something to offer to society" (McDonald, 1998). The objectives of this research is to

create a day that will uncover student and staff talents to create a stronger bond within the, already existing, school community, and do this by, partially, cultivating leadership and organizational skills in identified student leaders.

### *The Counselor's Role*

While this project can be accomplished by dedicated school personnel in any field, the school counselor is the most likely candidate to create and implement a program such as Celebration Day because of their training and qualifications. It is important in building a school community that the students have some sense of the roles and duties of the school staff. The school counselor should emphasize through their involvement with the students that their role in the school is to support, prepare, and guide each student while in that community. When a violent act occurs in a school the counselors are critical in how the event affects the school community. The same should be said for a positive event such as Celebration Day that is proactive in reaching out to all students as staff to build a healthy school climate.

### *Conclusion*

It is hypothesized that a school that promotes and nurtures programs to strengthen the school community will produce students who are more community centered, implementing specific community geared programs, such as a program focused on celebrating the students' talents that will be tested in this study, will help boost the level of positive school community, feeling a sense of belonging and connection, and that students who feel they are in a positive school community will be more academically, socially, and personally successful during and after high school. The goal of this literature review is to explain and support this studies hypothesis.



## Method

This research project spanned over the course of approximately 5 months, from January to June, 2005. It required a large number of steps to complete the process and was a learning experience for all involved. The method and materials used will be described in detail in chronological order. The evaluations used will be described as they occur in the sequence of events to accomplish this program.

### *Pre- Celebration Day*

In early January, 2005 the Counselor Intern and Intern Supervisor began discussing possible ideas for the intern's thesis project. The supervisor explained that she was interested in having the intern create a school program that would give students the opportunity to teach their peers and the school staff workshops based on areas of interest they are involved in outside of the school day in an effort to boost the sense of belonging in the school.

In the school's formative years there was a period of time at the end of the school day that was devoted to classes based on curriculum that was not traditional or required by the school board. These classes were called Exploratories and they were designed to engage students in areas of interest that they may not have the opportunity to be involved with otherwise; some of the Exploratories of the past included photography, karate, drama, or chess. Using Exploratories as a framework, the intern began creating a program that would be titled, Celebration Day.

Celebration Day would, not only honor the supervisor's request that the intern create something to celebrate the students, but would also be an ideal example of an initiative research in creating school communities emphasizes. Celebration Day is an

opportunity for the students and staff to learn new ideas in new ways. The goal of the program was to peel back the layers within the school and restructure the layout of the community for a day. Putting a new spin on the school day would hopefully refresh the individuals and the community and strengthen an already existing positive school climate.

Once the basic idea was solidified it went to the Administrator/Counseling meeting for approval. After approval to continue with this idea by the administrators it needed to go to the Odyssey Community Meeting (OCM), where all teaching staff is required to attend and is open to the support staff, parents, and students. At OCM meetings staff is asked to write feedback, thoughts, and concerns in journals on topics brought up at the meeting for the school principal to read and respond to. This journaling tool was used to receive feedback on the proposed idea of Celebration Day. They were asked to write down if they supported it, what concerns they had with it, and what, if any, role they would like to play in the implementing of the project. The school principal, the supervisor, and the intern used the journals to critically look at the proposed project and strengthen it.

After almost completed approval from staff for Celebration Day to continue the intern met with the Alternative Community Council (ACC), which is similar to a student government open to all students from grade 6 to 12. The intern presented the beginning ideas and plans for Celebration Day to the students and, again, asked them for feedback to rework the project. As a group the intern and the ACC students brainstormed any issues such as scheduling, finding qualified students/staff to teach, finding space for the different programs, and getting students interested and excited about the day.

It was important to the administration/counselors that student leaders play an integral role in the development of Celebration Day. In addition to creating this program the intern needed to find specific areas in the program planning process that could be lead or involve students. As planning continued it was clear that students would be needed in all aspects of the project.

Once approval was received by each group the intern needed to begin to create the list of classes that would be offered. First, some interest was created by asking the ACC students to begin talking about Celebration Day to their Connectimes (homeroom/lunch groups), classes, and friend. Next, the intern created a list of over 100 activities that could be taught on Celebration Day. The list was typed with 3 columns and directions. The first column was for students to check off if they believed they were qualified to teach a certain activity. In the second column students needed to list up to 10 activities that they would have an interest in attending a class on. The third column listed all of the activities.

At the end of the list of possible activities there was an 8 question survey pertaining to student's perceptions of the community at Odyssey Academy. This survey would be used to measure 8 variables that can help improve the climate of a school community. This survey would be compared to results from a post-Celebration Day survey given after the event occurred.

During a Connectime period these packets were handed out to students. Students were asked to complete the packets on their own and return them to their Connectime teacher. The Connectime teachers then dropped the completed packets off at a box marked Celebration Day Packets at the main office. All staff and students were asked to complete a packet. Students and staff who were absent on the day the packets were

handed out were given additional opportunities to complete the packet. The goal was to have a response from 100% of the school population; although there are not exact percentages, the majority of the school participated in this first step for Celebration Day.

Once all possible packets were collected ACC student leaders and the intern began to tally the results. This was an exhaustive process completely done by hand. The data was separated by staff, high school students, and middle school students. A list was created from each group's results for the top 50 activity choices and individuals that marked that they believed they would be qualified and interested in teaching specific activity classes. Then the three activity results lists were compared to the three possible teacher lists and the top 50 activities were slightly altered based on the availability of possible teachers. The final list included activities staff, middle school, and high school student's rank in the top 50 combined and that had a possible instructor to teach this class of interest.

The next step was to contact those individuals who identified themselves as a person who could teach a course in the top 50 selected courses. In an effort to keep middle school students as involved as the high school students, some middle school students were asked to teach a class that they identified they were skilled in with a high school student or staff who also identified that they could teach a class on a certain interest. Middle school students who were also members of the ACC were paired with high school ACC students on occasion to work with their older peers.

The goal was to have the activity classes taught by students, but some classes were of such high interest to the school body and had no student instructor possible to teach the classes. There was staff possible to teach those high interest classes and so some

classes did end up getting taught by staff. This actually aided the goal of building community by giving students and staffs the possibility to show different sides of themselves; the staff who taught activities classes taught in areas that were very different from the classes they taught during a typical school day.

High school students who identified themselves as a possible candidate to teach received a letter explaining the next steps to become a student teacher for Celebration Day. Some activities had multiple students interested in teaching and brief interviews were conducted by the intern. If it seemed that there was more than one qualified student the intern gave the students the option to work together, to teach more than one section of the class (if it was popular enough), or to teach one of the two sessions. All student teachers were required to attend a lesson-planning workshop and to create a lesson plan before Celebration Day.

An email was sent out to staff who volunteered to teach a lesson-planning workshop in their journals during the OCM meeting that Celebration Day was presented. Most of these teachers who were originally interested did not respond to the first email sent by the intern. A follow-up email was sent. After several failed attempts to get a small group of staff to run a series of lesson-planning workshops after school and with the deadline of Celebration Day coming the intern realized she needed to make some changes to the lesson-planning workshop. The intern met with one of the vice-principals who offered to give her a brief lesson in teaching lesson-planning. The intern used that model and met with one teacher who offered to teach some of the workshops, and between the two of them, four lesson-planning workshops were scheduled.

Even with four workshops a few students could not attend. The intern called those students down to the Counseling Office and met with them individually so all students had a lesson plan for their Celebration Day class. To give consistency to the day it was important that all students were working from the same model.

These lesson plans were not only helpful to the student teachers but also to the staff advisors of each of the classes. In order to help maintain safety an adult was appointed an advisor for each activity. All of the staff who volunteered at the OCM meeting through their journals were asked to advise a class, then additional staff needed to be asked. It was a difficult process to fill all of the advisor spots when some staff were going to classes as students for the day and all staff needed to be given the option of having a planning period. After many drafts of the staff advisor list a final draft was created and scheduling could begin.

At the same time as the advisors were being determined the Celebration Day teachers were out purchasing supplies for their classes. They would then turn in their receipts to the intern and she would file the proper paperwork to get the teachers reimbursed. The money came from the ACC activities account.

The next step was to schedule the entire school for the first half of the day to attend two classes for all students and up to two classes for staff if they were not advising or involved in other school obligations. Creating the schedule format was very time-consuming. The intern met with the school principal who had many years of experience in using a variety of scheduling models and with the ACC student leaders to get the students opinions on how it would be most fair to schedule the student body.

After the Celebration Day teachers and advisors were confirmed, a Celebration Day class booklet with a description of each course and a registration page on the back was created. It was distributed to all students and staff a week before scheduling so students had the opportunity to look through the courses and write down the classes they would like to attend for both sessions. Homeroom teachers kept the students' Celebration Day booklets so all students would have them for course sign-up a week later.

Since the intern was not trained in a computer program that generates schedules and the school did not own a program that could create schedules for this event, it was decided that the best way to schedule the entire student body for two classes would be to do arena scheduling. After discussion with the student leaders in ACC the format for Celebration Day scheduling was completed. Tables were set up around the perimeter of the auditorium. At each table a middle school ACC student and a high school ACC student sat. Each table had two signs displaying what courses students could register for at that table. Each ACC student had two sheets – one sheet for each session of the same course. Each session sheet had a maximum number of slots available for student sign-up; this was divided by middle and high school slots in order to allow the middle school students, who would be last to register, to still have the opportunity to sign up for their first choices as well as the high school students. Staff could sign up to take any course regardless of the number of student participants in the course.

During Connectime (1 and ½ hour lunch and group time) each grade was called down to the auditorium for 10 minutes to sign-up for two classes. 12<sup>th</sup> grade was the first to be called down and 6<sup>th</sup> grade was the last. Although each grade had only 10 minutes a few extra minutes were built into this schedule in case some grades took longer, teachers

did not bring their Connectime groups down as soon as they were called, etc. The middle and high school ACC students who volunteered to register students came down early to set-up and as a “thank you” to them for volunteering their time they were allowed to register before any grades were called to register.

After students registered for 2 courses, which meant they waited their turn in line, did not try to sign up a friend, had their name, homeroom and grade printed on the registration form by the designated ACC student, and have the ACC student print the course and initial the back page of the students Celebration Day course booklet , they needed to proceed to the exit where an adult or ACC student would examine the back page of the student’s Celebration Day booklet to make sure it was properly filled out and legible, tear it off, drop it into a designated box, and then the student returned to Connectime.

The registration tear-off forms were then compared to the registration sign-up sheets. If there is a discrepancy between the forms the registration sign-up sheet is used as the student’s choice over the registration tear-off form. Students who were absent or did not properly register for 2 classes were added to whatever classes had openings. The best effort was made to try to put absent students in classes they would have some interest in. Then the class lists were compiled and typed up. A master class list for each student in the school was also made. Copies of these lists were made and distributed to Celebration Day teachers, advisors, school security, administrators, secretaries, and Homeroom teachers. A list with all class locations, in and outdoors, was created, posted, and handed out with the class list packets. A backup class location list was made in case of inclement weather for the activities that would be held outdoors.



## Evaluation

### *Celebration Day*

June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the last day of school, is Celebration Day. All staff have packets with class lists, master schedules, and room assignments. The principal makes a morning announcement with reminders and discusses the purpose of Celebration Day. The day begins with some confusion. A few students do not know where to go and come to the main office to confirm the master schedule. Overall, it runs very smoothly, and the building seems to be bursting with excitement and energy. Some staff get out their cameras and begin snapping photos to commemorate the event.

After the first half of the first session the intern take a tour of the grounds to see, first hand, what Celebration Day looks like in action. Staff and students are working together, laughing, smiling, and truly seeming to enjoy the experience. Once the 2 sessions end students and staff go to Connectime for lunch. The Connectime teachers use this time to discuss the day with their group and get any last minute items accomplished, such as cleaning out lockers. After Connectime the entire student body reconvenes out on the soccer field for Celebrationfest. This event was added to segue between Celebration Day and the Moving Up Day ceremony. It was an assembly that continued to honor student's accomplishments and abilities and connect the school. Student Emcees kicked off the assembly by announcing the first of 3 student bands. Each band played 2 songs and then the 3 bands and some staff joined together as the "Unity Band" and performed a song. The select choir sang a song that tied into the community theme, and then the school improvisational theatre group, Laugh Out Loud, performed. Once the student

performers finished, the assembly moved into the final portion of the day, the Moving Up Day ceremony.

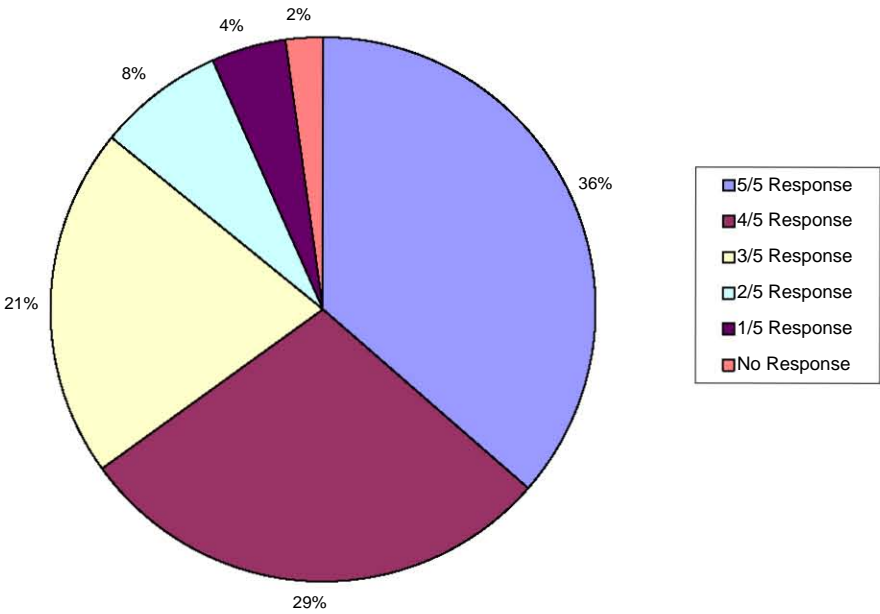
#### *Post-Celebration Day*

At the end of Celebration Day a random sample of students were asked to complete feedback forms on Celebration Day. At the end of the feedback forms was the same survey the entire school took approximately 5 months ago on school community for these students to complete again. The feedback forms were collected, copied and distributed to the school principal, the supervisor, and the intern. The survey results were tallied. Results from the pre and post survey were compiled and compared in the results section.

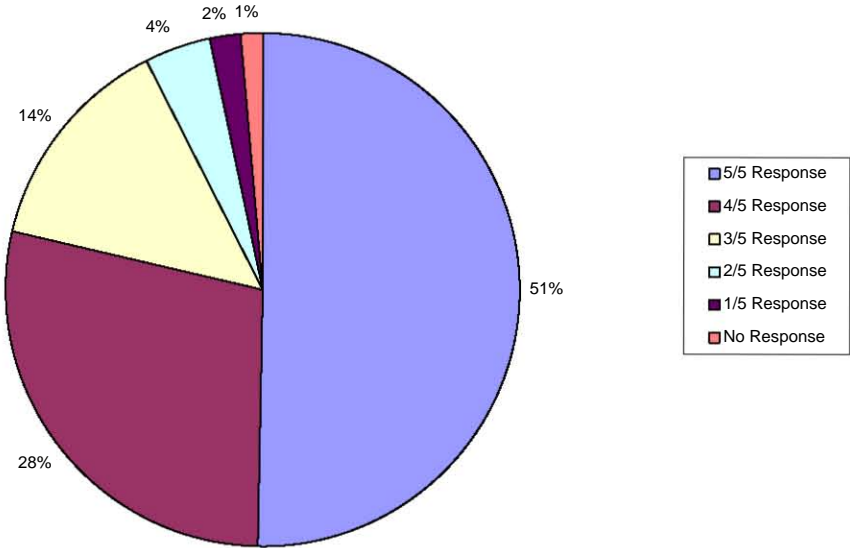
#### Results

The answers from the pre and post surveys were compiled in an excel spreadsheet. Random samples of both sets of surveys were compared.

Pre-Survey Response Average



Post-Survey Response Average



These comparison pie charts show the response average for the pre-survey and post-survey. The charts show an increase of 15% for the 5/5 responses from the pre-survey results to the post-survey results. Because of the substantial increase in 5/5 responses the other responses decreased. There was a 1% decrease for 4/5 responses, a 7% decrease for 3/5 responses, a 4% decrease for the 2/5 responses, a 2% decrease for the 1/5 responses, and a 1% decrease for the no response section. There was a 50% reduction for 2/5, 1/5, and no response from the pre-survey to the post-survey. These results indicate that there was an increase in the student bodies' perception of their school community and their sense of belonging to the school.

The results from this project correlate with the previous research studied. School's that make an effort to engage students and increase their sense of belonging through community activities in the school will be successful. This project was performed in a school that already had a high level of student's who felt connected to their school. Celebration Day fostered a sense of community, connection, and belonging in the students and staff (based on feedback form responses) and the responses increased in every question asked.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The Celebration Day project directly correlated to the research on how to build school communities and help students feel connected to their school. Celebration Day is a program that can be implemented in any school to increase the level of connection and sense of belonging the students have with their school. This program was created out of the needs that were addressed in previous research. The program is similar to other programs outlined in the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004),

*Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, where “the Education Alliance provides technical assistance to high schools that are implementing a research-based process based on core recommendations of *Breaking Ranks* designed to build leadership and school capacity to increase student-centered learning in high schools.” Projects such as these and Celebration Day use the current research as a model to, “guide staff toward implementation of components of systemic reform based upon creating high standards for all students, smaller and more personalized learning environments, collaborative leadership structures, and the use of data to support continuous improvement” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004) and adds to the current bank of information gathered by previous research.

This research project did not create a new set of ideas that were not already discussed in previous literature, but confirmed and exemplified that the previous research has correct findings and can be successfully practiced in a school system. Based on the qualitative and quantitative results of this research project, it is illuminated that school initiatives to create a more connected community for their students will positively and successfully do just that. The student feedback and the survey results both show an increase in student sense of belonging, connection to the building, and sense of pride in the community they go to school in.

Based on the analysis of the data collected for Celebration Day, implementing a community-based program in a small, personalized, learning environment, achieved the desired results. These findings indicate that the school counselor can play a vital role in the goals of the American public school system and the society. The school counselor has the opportunity, through training and job requirements, to create programs that will build

bridges between all branches of the students' communities, which will in effect create the learning environment that research indicates will afford students the opportunity and atmosphere to learn to their full potential.

One concern I had was figuring out how I would measure the students' perceptions of their school community before and after the event. The 8 question survey along with the feedback forms adequately portrayed the results qualitatively and quantitatively. The goal to strengthen an already existing positive school community was successful. All of the steps for Celebration Day, including the day, went smoothly. The staff, students, school principal, and intern supervisor were happy with the outcome and look forward to future Celebration Days.

#### *Implications for Counselors*

Celebration Day was a very worthwhile program, and I would suggest its use at any middle and/or high school. It was a challenging and daunting task for one person, and I would strongly suggest a counselor with a small team of staff and students implement it into a school setting in the future. I would still encourage participation from student leaders, such as a school government, and feedback from the school staff, but a core team would be needed to accomplish the many steps of the program. I was able to complete the multi-faceted layers of Celebration Day with a minimal amount of help from student leaders and the supervisor only because I was in the intern position and did not have many additional responsibilities as a school counselor would have. I would also suggest for the first year of the program the team begin creating the event 6-8 months in advance. Once the program has been accomplished once or twice in the school less people could be needed to successfully complete Celebration Day in later years, but for the first year a

small team and 6-8 months with regular meetings and designated responsibilities would be needed so not one person would feel too burdened or pressure, which could lead to burnout and an unsuccessful program.

To strengthen this school community building program I would make the following adjustments to the current Celebration Day plan:

- Celebration Day student teachers must be required to come early to school to set-up and prepare on the day of the program. They should check-in with a designated Celebration Day staff member, their room advisor, and then prepare for the day.
- Attendance was an issue during this first run of Celebration Day. In the future attendance should be taken manually in homeroom and sent down to the attendance office *before* students are allowed to go to their first class.
  - A staff member should be designated to collect all attendance from the first Celebration Day session, so security and staff can try to find any students who are skipping the first class.
  - Celebration Day teachers should not add students to their class lists. If a student arrives to a class and they are not on the list they need to be sent down to the main desk where the master schedule and Celebration Day coordinator can resolve the situation.
  - If the Celebration Day coordinator will be adding students to a class for any reason the student must have a pass from the Celebration Day coordinator to be allowed in the class.

- Staff advisors need to promptly get to the Celebration Day class they are advising. They need to leave their homeroom as soon as their students do so they can adequately help the Celebration Day student teacher with any concerns, such as attendance. This means that homeroom teachers need to have prepared their students in advance for the day, not on the morning of Celebration Day.
- The room schedule needs the Celebration Day teacher and advisor names next to each room in alphabetical order for easier comprehension.
- The original plan for Celebration Day was to have 4 sessions of classes offered. This needed to be altered because there were not enough students and staff with the qualifications to teach that many classes based on the top 50 options and allow those students to attend at least one session as a student rather than a teacher. Celebrationfest was added and the sessions were dropped from 4 to 2. If this program continues at Odyssey the format could be rearranged to offer 3 sessions and a shorter Celebrationfest. Based on the feedback forms this would please the school body. Students and staff commented that they would enjoy going to even more classes, and while they enjoyed the Celebrationfest it was a, “little too long.” The format for Celebration Day would need to accommodate the specific school planning the program. The sample schedule that was used for Odyssey Academy’s Celebration Day can be found in the appendix.



- The survey would need to be adjusted to better accommodate staff answers. It was mostly geared towards student response and caused some confusion for the staff.
- Staff Advisors continued to try to change the classes that they were scheduled to advise. A firm date on when staff can choose what classes they will advise needs to be set and made clear to staff.
- Stress the importance to the Connectime teachers to prepare their students on registering for Celebration Day and to bring their students down on time Celebration Day registration. Any delay in time backs up the entire process.
- I would suggest using a computer program in the future to register students for Celebration Day classes. Even with a very small group working on confirming the registration and class lists there still was a handful of students who were double-booked for classes, taken out of classes, or not registered due to human error.

Although there were some issues with attendance and incorrect class lists the day went very smoothly. With just a few alterations to the program Celebration Day will be a very solid program to use in schools to promote the school community. Based on the current research more programs like Celebration Day are needed in schools; a school environment that builds a sense of pride in their community will produce students who have a greater sense of connection and respect for themselves and their community.

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Appendix A  
First Reference to Celebration Day

Appendix B  
Interest Flyer

Appendix C  
Talent List Page 1 of 3



Appendix C  
Page 2

Appendix C  
Page 3

Appendix D  
Celebration Day – Fast Facts Memo 3/24/05

Appendix E  
Celebration Day Timeline – 3/24/05

Appendix F  
Celebration Day – Fast Facts Memo Update 3/28/05

Appendix G  
List of All Available Space in Building

Appendix H  
Assembly Schedule – Model for Celebration Day

Appendix I  
Directions to Teachers for Celebration Day Packet



Appendix J  
Celebration Day Talent List Packet Cover Page 1 – 4

Appendix J  
Page 2

Appendix J  
Page 3

Appendix J  
Page 4

Appendix K  
Middle School Choice Tally List Pages 1 – 3

Appendix K  
Page 2

Appendix K  
Page 3

Appendix L  
Middle School Teach Tally List Pages 1 – 3



Appendix L  
Page 2

Appendix L  
Page 3

Appendix M  
High School Choice Tally List Pages 1 – 3

Appendix M  
Page 2

Appendix M  
Page 3

Appendix N  
High School Teach Tally List Pages 1 - 3

Appendix N  
Page 2

Appendix N  
Page 3



Appendix O  
Letter to Teachers to Supervise Classes

Appendix P  
Letter to Celebration Day Teachers

Appendix Q  
Lesson Planning Workshop Memo

Appendix R  
Celebration Day Student Teacher Lesson Plan Template

Appendix S  
Celebration Day Timeline – Updated 4/13/05 Pages 1 – 2

Appendix S  
Page 2

Appendix T  
Training for “Celebration Day Sell”

Appendix U  
Memo to Teachers on “Celebration Day Sell”



Appendix V  
List of Odyssey Academy Connectime Groups 2004 – 05

Appendix W  
Celebration Day Updates to Teachers

Appendix X  
5/25/05 Sign-up Schedule

Appendix Y  
Sample of How to Spend 5/25/05 Extended Connecttime

Appendix Z  
Notice to 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Teachers

Appendix AA  
Daytime Facility Use Form for Celebration Day Sign-up

Appendix BB  
Celebration Day Sign-up Volunteers Memo

Appendix CC  
Celebration Day Student Pass



Appendix DD  
Memo to Teachers – Celebration Day Instructions

Appendix EE  
Celebration Day Booklet and Program Pages 1 – 8

Appendix EE  
Page 2

Appendix EE  
Page 3

Appendix EE  
Page 4

Appendix EE  
Page 5

Appendix EE  
Page 6

Appendix EE  
Page 7



Appendix EE  
Page 8

Appendix FF  
Example of a Celebration Day Sign-up Sheet

Appendix GG  
1 Page of the Hand Created Schedule

Appendix HH  
Celebration Day Room Matrix

Appendix II  
Celebration Day List of Supervisors

Appendix JJ  
Memo to Students Attending “Active” Classes

Appendix KK  
Memo to Students Attending “Art” Classes

Appendix LL  
Memo to Celebration Day Student Teachers



Appendix MM  
Celebration Day Teacher Advisor Packet Cover Page

Appendix MM  
Student Created Lesson Plan

Appendix MM  
Class List I

Appendix MM  
Class List Session II

Appendix MM  
Feedback Form

Appendix NN  
Celebration Day Schedule

Appendix OO  
Building-wide Announcement made by Principal

Appendix PP  
Outdoor Class List



Appendix QQ  
Example of Feedback on Forms Pages 1 – 4

Appendix QQ  
Page 2

Appendix QQ  
Page 3

Appendix QQ  
Page 4

Appendix RR  
Article on Celebration Day in Weekly Staff Notes

Appendix SS  
District Flyer – Points of Pride – Celebration Day Listed