

An Invitational Approach to Overcoming Tough Challenges in Education

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As this article is written, public education in the United States finds itself in “Another fine mess” as the portly Mr. Oliver Hardy of *Laurel & Hardy* fame would say. Many schools are becoming humorless places of high stakes testing, ruthless competition, and real or potential violence. Students are becoming anxious, depressed, angry, oppositional and aggressive. Teachers are feeling over-whelmed by the demands to “Leave no child behind” while striving to meet requirements for higher and higher student performance on standardized tests. Heavy emphasis on high stakes testing has resulted in a narrow curriculum where teachers may feel compelled to “teach to the test” in order to achieve annual yearly progress (AYP). In spite of heroic efforts by educators, a growing number of schools have been placed on “watch lists”, labeled as failing or in need of dramatic improvement.

Added to this conglomeration is the ever-present concern for safety in schools. As a result of highly publicized incidents of school violence, educators have been forced to change security measures in our nation’s schools. In fact, recent events prompted the United States Department of Education to require all states to outline procedures for identifying schools as persistently dangerous, providing an option for students to transfer to from unsafe schools beginning in July 2003. To ensure school safety, many educators are reliant on surveillance methods including, but not limited to metal detectors, x-ray machines, security guards, closed-circuit cameras and placing police inside of schools. Students who manifest highly disruptive behavior are often referred to alternative school placements, suspended, expelled, arrested and in the most egregious cases remanded to, juvenile detention facilities and/or given prison time. There are even penalties placed on parents or guardians who are being held responsible for the actions of their child (ren).

While sometimes effective, traditional law enforcement methods applied to schools carry major negative side effects. These include a significant financial burden, a reduction of time for classroom instruction, and a decline in teacher and student morale. Scent dogs, locker searches, security officers and body searches create a pervasive atmosphere of a prison mentality among faculty staff, students, and visitors. Traditional law enforcement methods add nothing to the primary mission of the school, to educate.

Classroom teachers who are already overburdened are expected to maintain a safe and orderly classroom, teach at-risk and mainstreamed children, raise standards, and at the same time prevent students from dropping out. Perhaps never before in American education have there been more pervasive feelings of helplessness.

We believe that there is a better approach to the educative process that contributes to school safety *and* academic success. This approach is Invitational Education (Purkey & Novak, 1996; Purkey & Siegel, 2004.)

An Overview of Invitational Education

Invitational Education provides an overarching framework for making schools a more exciting, welcoming, caring, and enriching experience for everyone – all faculty and staff, all students, and all visitors. This framework goes beyond reforming or restructuring. Its goal is to transform the fundamental character of the school. Invitational Education provides four guiding principles of respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality.

1. **Respect:** Everyone in the school is able, valuable, and responsible and is to be treated accordingly.
2. **Trust:** Education is a cooperative collaborative activity where process is as important as product.
3. **Optimism:** People possess relatively untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human behavior.

About the authors . . .

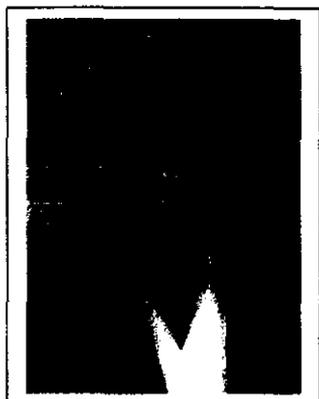


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Dr. Purkey has been awarded the *University of Florida Student Award for Instructor Excellence*, the *Standard Oil Foundation Good Teaching Award*, and the *Outstanding Teacher Award* by Omicron Delta Kappa, National Leadership Honor Society. He is also the recipient of the *Distinguished Alumnus Award*, given by the School of Education, University of Virginia, the *John McGovern Award*, presented by the American School Health Association, and the *Professional Development Award* presented by the American Counseling Association. In 1991, Dr. Purkey received The University of North Carolina at Greensboro *Alumni Teaching Excellence Award*. More recently, in 1997, Dr. Purkey received the highest award for teaching given by the University of North Carolina System: *The Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching*.

An active writer, lecturer, and researcher, Dr. Purkey has authored or co-authored over 80- professional articles and nine books, including Inviting School Success, now in its third edition, The Inviting School Treasury; and Invitational Counseling.

His latest book, co-authored with Betty Siegel, is Becoming an Invitational Leader. Dr. Purkey's interest is in inviting people to realize their potential.



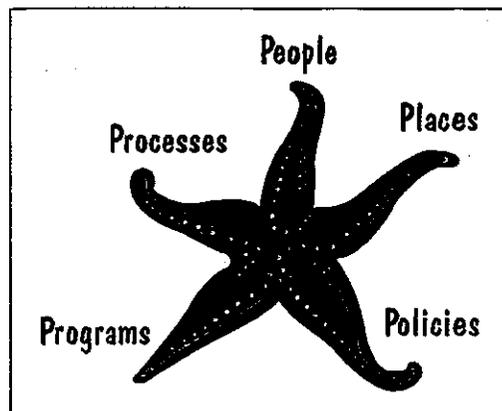
Dr. Diane Powell has 30 years of professional service in the field of education. She has been a teacher, principal of a level IV special education program and administrator in D.C.P.S. She has also worked as a senior level administrator in Montgomery County Public Schools. She is currently a member of numerous professional organizations that support the education of children and youth. Dr. Powell is currently an adjunct faculty member at Trinity University in Washington, D.C. She is the Director of the Student Intervention Services Branch within the Division of Student and School Support Services in the DC Public Schools. Her office is responsible for state and local Peaceable School and Attendance Intervention efforts within the school district. Dr. Powell has received commendations from United Nationals Association of the National Capitol Area for the implementation of the DC Peaceable Schools Initiative.

4. **Intentionality:** Safe & successful schools are best realized by creating and maintaining truly inviting places, policies, processes and programs and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally.

How Invitational Education Works

The “Five Powerful P’s” of Invitational Education, standing for people, places, policies, programs, and processes, provide the means to address the underlying symbolic structure of the school. It is a criteria for evaluating everything that happens in a school and every way it happens. Its design is to apply steady and continuous pressure from a number of points, much like a starfish conquers.

To date, Invitational Education has been successfully applied in over 150 schools at all levels throughout North America, Canada, South Africa, Bermuda, and Ireland. More recently a large effort is underway to apply Invitational Education in some of the most challenging schools in the District of Columbia Public School System.



The District of Columbia Public Schools

At the conclusion of the 2001 school year, a dramatic event occurred in the District of Columbia Public Schools. The nine lowest performing elementary, middle, and secondary D.C. schools were closed for transformation. All teachers and administrators in each of the schools attended a site-based meeting conducted by school officials. The staff were informed that their school had a persistent history, over three or more years of declining, inconsistent or stagnant academic performance. Schools were also transformed if there were concerns about the school climate, or where staff had been viewed as insensitive or unresponsive to student and community needs, failing to engage parents and the community constructively in the life of the school. These schools were designated as transformation schools (T-9). The goal of transformation was to create “Children First Schools” in which teachers can teach, children can learn, parents are involved and communities are partners.

When the schools reopened in late August the schools had been freshly painted and the grounds landscaped. Highly competent leadership, administrators and teachers had been employed and assigned, and a comprehensive reading program was introduced. Moreover, special attention was given to the nine schools by the District of Columbia Division of Student Support Services, Student Intervention Services Branch. These actions represented a major attempt to improve the quality of education in the T-9 schools. This summer of dramatic change provided a unique opportunity to test Invitational Education in the most difficult and challenging situations.

A federal grant, Title IV, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, (DC Peaceable Schools Initiative) allowed a small group of experts to introduce Invitational Education to the D.C. Public Schools Central Office, school administrators, and to all of the teachers, administrators and staff of the nine (9) transformed schools.

Invitational Education was presented as a framework for making the T-9 schools a more exciting, satisfying, and enriching experience for everyone in the school. It also offered a means to evaluate everything that happens in and around schools. The D.C. Administration accepted Invitational Education as an appropriate intervention in T-9 schools.

Introducing Invitational Education to the D.C. Schools

The first task was to introduce Invitational Education to the T-9 schools and demonstrate how it benefited everyone, personally and professionally. Two-member Invitational Education teams visited all T-9 schools repeatedly, observed classes, and distributed additional information on Invitational Education. The goal was to have teachers, administrators and staff feel comfortable with this approach. The team members met with teachers individually and in small groups to explain that Invitational Education has a much wider focus than traditional methods to improve education. Invitational Education is concerned with *more* than grades, attendance, discipline, test scores, school safety, or even student self-esteem. It is concerned with creating a total academic environment in which the skills and desire of becoming a decent and productive citizen in a democratic society are modeled and manifested.

Preliminary Results of the D.C. Project

At the end of the first school year, following transformation SY 2001-2002, the preliminary results for the T-9 schools were significant and impressive. Stanford Achievement Test (SAT=9) results indicated that three of the T-9 schools were labeled as "exemplary" in meeting and exceeding categorical goals in reading and mathematics. Three other T-9 schools received special recognition for their outstanding performance. The climate in one school was dramatically changed and parents were actively partnering in all aspects of the academic program. A review of the data suggests that all T-9 schools showed improvement.

The results were so successful that the District of Columbia Public Schools, Student Intervention Services Branch provided significant funding to further develop the T-9 schools for the 2002-2003 school year. In addition, five additional schools were added to the Transformation Schools Project. Funding was also made available to present two, 2-day summer institutes in 2003 and 2004 on creating and maintaining safe & successful schools. The summer institute courses were open not only to the staff of the transformation schools, but to all staff and administrators in the DC Public School system. In addition, beginning in SY 2002, Invitational Education has also been introduced to all new teachers to District of Columbia Public Schools as a part of their professional development as beginning teachers.

Conclusion

Rather than relying on *one* program, *one* policy, or *one* process, Invitational Education addresses the total *zeitgeist*, the spirit within each school. School transformation is seen as an ongoing process where everything and everybody counts. Invitational Education provides a consistent "stance" or conceptual framework from which educators can effectively create and maintain truly safe and successful schools.

For more information, please contact the authors. Dr. William W. Purkey is Professor Emeritus, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Dr. Diane E. Powell is Director of the Student Intervention Services Branch within the District of Columbia Public schools.

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