



## *An Investigation of Indicators of Success in Graduates of a Progressive, Urban, Public High School*

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### **Abstract**

*Using standardized test scores to measure success in schools is a controversial topic in education today. Many feel that test scores are not a valid indicator of success, or are being overused to the detriment of the curriculum. But if not test scores, then what is the alternative? This study examines potential alternatives, or more authentic indicators of student success through a survey of alumni from one progressive, urban, public school, and also how this school might have contributed to this success. Participants in this study identified markers for success both while in school as well as later in adult life. Project presentations, reflective portfolio work, leadership and service experiences, daily classroom and quarterly assessments, graduation and acceptance into college were identified as indicators of success while in high school. Later in life, participants noted that graduating from college, getting a job, purchasing a home, being able to pay the bills, community engagement, and being happy and satisfied with life were also indicators of success. These findings suggest that while standardized test scores offer a snapshot of information about K-12 students, educational leaders need to look far beyond these scores to gauge true success. This study suggests ways to look at how students and schools are actually performing in deep and authentic ways, and presents curriculum that has been reported to foster success in students' lives.*

**Keywords:** *authentic assessment, progressive school practices, indicators of success, urban school, educational outcomes, student success*

### **Introduction: the Study**

*An appeal to the pseudo-certainties of science might seem finally to settle any question. But this is a moral issue rather than a scientific one; values are at stake here—not facts. It is in the irritating human realm where the interesting difficulties are, and where one might have to really think about and deal with an individual's history, circumstances and reactions. It is the attempted standardization of a human being and of a notion of achievement that is limiting, prescriptive and bullying. (Kureishi, 2012)*

This study looked at indicators of success from a progressive, urban, public school. While many definitions of success in schools emphasize the importance of using test scores to measure achievement (USDOE, 2008; Koretz, 2008), this study looked at potential alternatives to those traditional indicators. Beyond high school, success is often measured by levels of wealth and power (Llopis,

2012). But might not the measure of success in life be more of a personal interpretation? This study will also suggest other ways success could be defined later in life through the responses given on this survey.

The word “progressive” in this study described the type of school these participants attended. Progressivists “believe that the ability to apply knowledge in a variety of contexts is the true test of a well-educated learner” (Nelson, 2011, p. 12). As such, experiential curriculum and authentic practices were incorporated into Key Learning Community’s practices to foster student participation and leadership in a democratic society (Key L.C. Web Site, 2010). “Authentic practices” was defined as theme-based, project-focused curriculum, and assessment practices that consider individual student performances as opposed to standardized comparisons (see Figure 1). Indicators of success in this study, then, extended far beyond standardized test scores.

## **Setting**

The school in this study was the Key Learning Community, which originally opened as an elementary Magnet School in 1987. In the following 12 years, the school expanded to include a middle school, and then finally a high school serving a total of over 600 students once the full K-12 was in place. Cited by Howard Gardner as “the first Multiple Intelligences school in the world” (Gardner, 2009, p. 7), the school received much attention nationally as well as internationally. Great thinkers such as Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and David Henry Feldman kept close contact with the school as their theories and ideas were being implemented in the school’s curriculum and assessment.

The school was a K-12 public school in a mid-size urban city. When the school opened in 1987, approximately 30% of the students received free or reduced lunch. More recently, 84% of this school’s students receive free or reduced lunch (IDOE, 2013).

The school did not receive Title I funds until 2006, when the majority of the student population was determined to be “high poverty” by district administrators. While test scores early on (from 1987 through the 1990’s) were always above state averages, this school had never met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in the more recent No Child Left Behind (USDOE, 2001) era (from 2001 to 2015). But during the time the participants of this study attended Key, standardized test scores were never the focus at this school. During this period, Key Learning Community used more progressive means of assessment to document student success such as project presentations and exhibitions, along with the school’s unique progress reports that incorporated narratives and descriptive symbols (Key Learning Community Web Site, 2010). The educators at Key considered these practices more authentic “performances of understanding” (Blythe and Associates, 1998).

## **Historical Perspective**

For over a century, many educators in the U.S. have been interested in providing a more progressive curriculum for their students. John Dewey developed his Lab School in the 1890’s, and was known for his use of experiential curriculum (Archambault, 1974). In 1930, a grand study was conducted called the “Eight Year Study,” where investigators studied the outcomes of progressive school practices (Aikin, 1942). In this study, 30 schools participated and developed curriculum, mostly progressive, that fostered skills and capacities in their students that they felt would better ensure success in college. Interestingly, the Carnegie Foundation and the College Entrance

Examination Board (CEEB) were early sponsors of the study, and pushed for the use of standardized tests to measure the success of this experiment. But the schools involved pushed back because they felt this could not measure the work they were doing, and actually were able to stave off the use of these tests. Since there were no test scores to measure success, these schools had to look to other indicators. In the end, the outcomes reported in students who participated were "...stronger leadership, better intellectual abilities, better understanding of democracy, and a keener interest in good books..." than students who did not (Kridel & Bullough, 2007, p. 22).

Fast forward to 1987, when the current standards and assessment movement was establishing significance in this country, and extensive standardized testing was becoming status quo in most public schools in the U.S. As an important contributor to that work, even Lauren Resnick, noted: "Many of the tests we do use are unable to measure what should be the hallmark of a thinking curriculum: the cultivation of students' ability to apply skills and knowledge to real-world problems. Testing practices may in fact interfere with the kind of higher skills that are desired" (Resnick, L., as cited in Marzano, Pickering, McTighe, 1993, p. 10).

As time moved forward, the standards and standardized testing movement gained ground. At the turn of the millennium, Howard Gardner (2000) sounded a warning cry, "I believe that many of our current testing policies, no matter how well intentioned, are fundamentally misguided. We are moving toward implementing an education that, at best, is suited to an earlier era, where the amassing of mountains of information was seen as the mark of an educated person" (Gardner, 2000, p. 260).

### **Today's Dilemma**

Today, the "Common Core State Standards" (CCSSI, 2014) dominate most public schools' policies in both curricular as well as assessment practices, and PARCC and SMART assessments are being used in many states to measure the Common Core standards (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). But while the Common Core standards and these new assessments are only beginning to be implemented, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized in December as The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ESSA (USDOE, 2015) has added wind to the sails of educators who have been frustrated with the constraints of the previous ESEA, the well-known No Child Left Behind Act. Through the years, many scholarly voices have been engaged in public discourse on how to best measure success in today's schools, and now this conversation intensifies. In a recent interview on National Public Radio, Linda Darling-Hammond explained some of the problems with the state and federal testing policies, and how the tests are designed and used. She asked: "Will we move from a test-and-punish philosophy, which was the framework for No Child Left Behind, to an assess-and-improve philosophy? Will we move from the old multiple choice tests to more open-ended assessments that allow kids to explain their thinking and evaluate and investigate and research and demonstrate their learning?" (Darling-Hammond, 2013).

Why bother to look at indicators of success that do not focus on the more quantifiable standardized test scores? Basically, because standardized test scores are too simplistic in their function to report on the complexities of what goes on in public schools today. Grinell and Rabin (2013) confirm that when looking for indicators of success in a school, one must acknowledge

...that a deep understanding of the complexities of the educational landscape must take into account the interdependence of the often competing and at times incommensurable

educational concepts, theories and practices played out in the context of the multifaceted experiences of actual children in classrooms and in the context of diverse communities with often very different economic and social capital... (p. 751)

In their paper, these authors strongly caution about using simplifications such as standardized test scores to represent the achievement of students, or more generally, the overall quality of a school.

So then, if standardized test scores are too simplistic to fully report on schools' achievements, what is more appropriate? Participants in this study reported important indicators of success both during their high school experiences, and then later in life. Indicators during high school included a successful apprenticeship experience, a quality digital portfolio that reflects many successful experiences during high school, a significant service record, quality project presentations, the achievement of a high school diploma, National Honor Society status, acceptance into college, exhibitions of leadership, and quality daily class work.

The indicators of success reported by participants in this study that occurred after high school included: college attendance and persistence, earning a certificate or college degree, employment, working hard, making a living, paying the bills, enjoying the fruits of your labor, raising a family, home ownership, community involvement, leadership, volunteerism/service to community, pursuing your dreams, project management savvy, and feeling happy, satisfied, and fulfilled.

This study explored indicators of success during school and outcomes experienced later in life. Do these indicators of success offer a quality alternative to standardized measures to show how students are doing in school? This study looks to contribute to this conversation.

## **Research Questions**

This study explored to what degree former students from one progressive, public, urban school perceived themselves to be successful in high school. It also looked at their perceptions of feeling happy and successful today and then to what degree the participants perceived the practices from this school helped them to achieve this happiness and success. The study was guided by the following four questions:

1. What are the participants doing today?
2. In what ways do alumni from this progressive, public, urban school perceive themselves as having been successful?
3. In what ways do participants attribute their success to the practices of this unique school?
4. What are the indicators of success demonstrated by alumni of this progressive, urban, public school?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is situated in the social justice framework first influenced by James B. Macdonald (Macdonald, 1995), who looked at curriculum from an "impulse for justice, equity and fairness" (as cited by Pinar et al., 1995, p. 628). He believed that "the liberation of human potential in a framework of democratic rights, responsibilities, and practices, leading toward a better realization of justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity" provides a better foundation for school design (Macdonald, 1995, p.154). Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory also enhances the social justice framework in education, as schools that use MI in their curriculum free students to better

find and express their individual strengths. Many scholars agree that the Multiple Intelligences Theory provides a strong foundation for teaching and enhancing social justice in schools (Johnson, 2008; Gould et al., 2014; Michelli & Keiser, 2005). Gardner has identified 8 separate intelligences (2000), and noted that by recognizing all multiple intelligences people have more capacities and strengths than those found in traditional intelligence tests alone. By realizing, for example, their musical or even intrapersonal intelligence, people are able to express important skills and expertise in more areas than just the two (linguistic and mathematical) utilized on most standardized tests. In this way, ideals of social justice are better addressed as more people are able to develop a sense of agency, make important decisions for their future and contribute to the community. People are not shut out of future opportunities for success due to inadequate test scores that have such a narrow scope.

The work of John Dewey (who strongly influenced Macdonald's work) influences the social justice framework here as well. Dewey (1916/1944) strongly encouraged the full implementation of democratic principles in schools:

A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associate life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (p. 99)

Finally, one cannot discuss "social justice" in education without considering the work of Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1994) discussed what it means to be oppressed, but he also laid out the design for the curriculum to achieve social justice: "... it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate" (p. 105). In this, Freire asserted that this program is: "a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for the* oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (italization and parentheses original to author's work, p. 30).

The school's curriculum in this study was designed to be consistent within a strengths-based Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) framework, using James B. Macdonald's model for creating theme-centered curriculum (Macdonald, 1971) in the spirit of fostering a democratic environment for students (Dewey, 1916/1944; Freire, 1970/1994). This very progressive model of education was operationalized with project-based learning, and authentic curriculum including a class based on Flow Theory (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990) as well as electives for students called "Pods" to give them time for enrichment in their area of strength. The assessment process, which assessed the cognitive development of each of the multiple intelligences, was developed from the work of David Henry Feldman's "Universal to Unique" Continuum (1999). Student mentorships and internships were integrated into the curriculum as well as weekly Community Learning Opportunities (CLO's) so that students spent substantial time out in the community. Teaching "ideals of democracy" and preparing students to be leaders in the community grounded the vision at the Key Learning Community, and authentic pedagogy anchored the practice. These examples of authentic pedagogy are illustrated on Figure 1, the *Key Learning Community—Theory to Reality Curriculum Model* (below).

## Key Learning Community - Theory to Reality

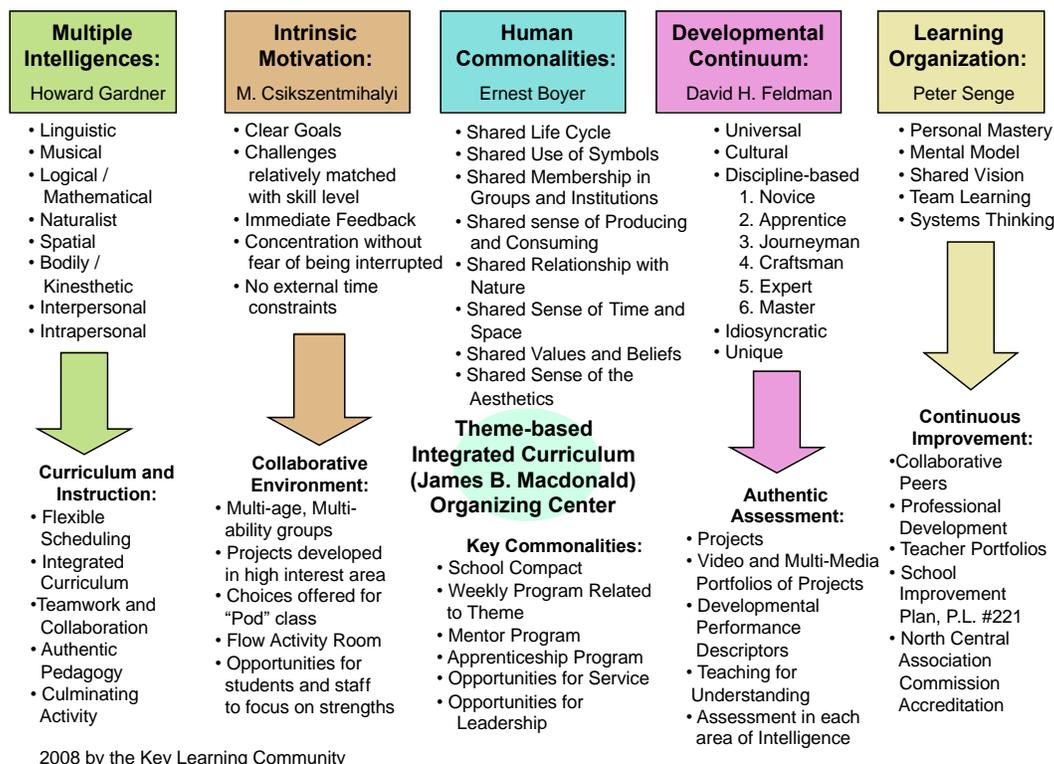


FIGURE 1 - The Key Learning Community Curriculum Model

Education that considers social justice theory looks to liberate students so they might free themselves from the bondages of oppression and/or poverty, and take responsibility for their own learning and life. By providing educational experiences that allow students to discover and use their strengths in their educational process, the power can shift to the personal level where students learn they can control their own destiny, and develop a strong sense of agency. The school in this study looked to implement the democratic ideals of Macdonald, Gardner, Dewey and Friere because by using this authentic curriculum, assessment and pedagogy in daily practice, students had a greater opportunity to realize their strengths, take control of their educational experience, and become the masters of their own success.

It's important to note that if learning experiences had been strongly shaped by test-prep curriculum for the participants of this survey, there would have been a forced math and linguistics focus, teachers would have been required to teach a very narrow curriculum and students would not have had the opportunity to participate more fully in their own learning based on their strengths. They would never have properly learned to identify and develop their individual strengths, including the full array of the 8 multiple intelligences. With this, assessment would likely have taken a heavy multiple choice test focus, and students would not have had the opportunity to experience more authentic assessment practices to display their learning (as is the case in most urban, public schools). Since there was a heavy focus on project presentations and other authentic "performances of understanding" (Blythe and Associates, 1998) at this school, there is an opportunity to analyze

alternative “indicators of success” (beyond test scores) in this study.

## Methodology

This research design is an exploratory study. The purpose of the study was to examine participants’ perceptions of indicators of success while they attended this school, their levels of success and happiness after high school, and then how their success in life after school might be attributed to their experiences at the Key Learning Community. The responses from the survey in this study will help evaluate how a non-traditional, and non-test prep program prepared urban, public school students for the world after high school using indicators of success other than standardized test scores.

### Survey Development

The survey used in this study was constructed collaboratively in 2011 with input from the school’s past and current administrators (at that time), past and current teachers, community supporters of the school, as well as with input from Howard Gardner. An initial draft of the survey questions was circulated through e-mail, and the survey development group sent feedback with ideas for questions that should be deleted, added, or re-worded. The intent of the survey was to have the participants (who were all former students) report which specific experiences—during their time at this school—contributed to their success then, as students, and now.

There were 65 questions in the survey. Of these, 36 were multiple selection questions, and 29 of the questions were open ended. The survey could be completed in 30-60 minutes. Topics of questions included current and past educational and employment situations, practices at the school that were helpful with college and career success, as well as current leadership and community participation. Almost every topic queried asked a multiple selection question followed by an open response question designed to draw out more detail in the response. An example would be to ask the participants to select from a list of possible experiences that they valued while at Key (as seen in Figure 2). The follow-up open-ended question would then ask, “Were there any additional valuable experiences at this school not mentioned in the previous question?”

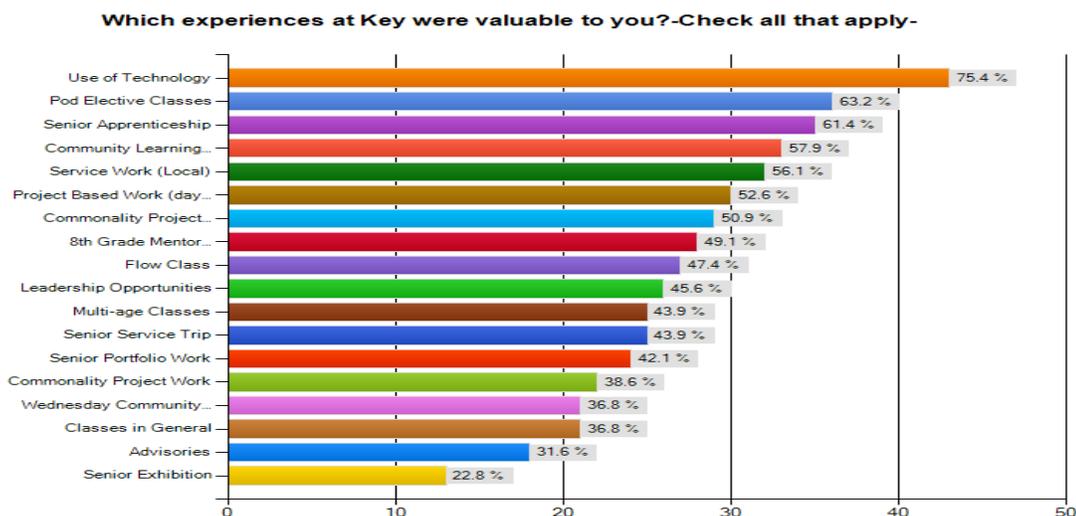


Figure 2: Data Sample

Participants were recruited completely through online social media. The sites used were the school's web site and a Facebook page created and used heavily by the school's alumni and graduates. An invitation to participate and a link to the survey were posted in both locations.

Respondents to the survey ranged in age from 18-30 years old (in 2012). The actual demographics of the school have historically been highly varied as the school worked to recruit a strongly diverse population, so these students came from backgrounds ranging from deep poverty to upper middle class status. The eligibility requirements for the study were that all participants are graduates or alumni of this particular urban, public, progressive magnet school, and all participants reported to be former students. There were 57 completed responses, and there were just under 200 high school graduates from this school at the time of the survey.

Survey respondents were former students who attended or graduated from 1987 to 2012. Their demographics:

- 61.4% of the respondents were female and 38.6% male.
- 64.9% identified as Caucasian, while 26.3% indicated African-American, 8.8% mixed race, 1.8% Native American, and 1.8% "other."
- 52.6% indicated that their family always had the money to pay the bills while they were Key students, 29.8% indicated their family usually had enough money to pay the bills, 14% indicated their family struggled to pay the bills, and 3.5% indicated that their family could not pay the bills on their own, and relied on government help.

Participants of this study were asked about their experiences during their time at the Key Learning Community including their standardized test performance, but also had ample opportunity to report the many other ways they were successful in school and are currently successful in their adult lives. These responses provide a rich data set for this study.

### ***Coding Process***

Through a coding process, as suggested by Creswell (2009), themes were extracted from the data in two ways. The first was through the percentage of times that specific responses were reported in the survey. For instance, participants were asked, "Which experiences at the school were valuable?" They then had the opportunity to check all that applied. (See Figure 2.)

A second means of drawing themes from the data came from the participants' rich and descriptive narrative responses following various questions. These data have been coded and compiled into the themes reported in the next section.

The specific task of coding began by reading through and then organizing all of the survey data. Using Creswell's (2009) method to prepare the data for analysis and interpretation, all of the qualitative data were coded and then triangulated against the quantitative data to determine the overarching themes from the data. Creswell (2009) advised: "The traditional approach in the social sciences is to allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis" (p. 187), and so this was done. The qualitative data were then coded "by hand" by noting and keeping count of all of the relevant terms in each of the narrative responses. Similar responses across all of the narrative data were grouped and tabulated, which determined numerical totals. These totals were compared to questions that were more quantitative in nature (as with Figure 2). This coding process generated ideas or themes that stood out with high percentages on the data tables, and by being mentioned numerous times in the narrative sections in substantive ways. The ideas that were indicated most often

on the tables and/or mentioned frequently in the narrative responses were organized into potential themes. For verification of the themes, in December of 2012, the principal investigator sent the data set to 12 people (without revealing the “potential themes”) and then met with these people to see what themes they discovered. This process served to validate the potential themes with these multiple readers before the final themes were determined.

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

### **Major Themes Found in the Data/Cluster Points**

This study looked at a progressive, urban, public, K-12 school to identify indicators of success beyond standardized test scores. As in most schools, the curriculum was developed to attend to the school’s general goal. For this school, the general goal was providing “enriched learning experiences” to prepare “students for service and leadership in a complex democratic society” (From the School’s Vision Statement, Key Learning Community Web Site, 2010), accomplished through a curriculum based on Multiple Intelligences Theory with a strong emphasis on social justice.

The “Theory to Reality Curriculum” Graphic (as seen in Figure 1) displays a fairly complete representation of the progressive curriculum components implemented at Key Learning Community. The data presented here not only report on outcomes of that curriculum, they also report on the successes of the Mission/Vision of the school. Ultimately, this information will suggest indicators of success seen from the work of this progressive, urban, public school. The major themes drawn from the survey data that have been illuminated by participants as important components of the curriculum (through Creswell’s coding process) include:

1. *Projects, Project-Based Learning and Senior Exhibitions*
2. *Leadership Development*
3. *Strengths-Based Program*
4. *Experiential Learning* including
  - *CLO’s* (Community Learning Opportunities, or field trips)
  - *Service Learning and Senior Service Trip*
  - *Apprenticeships*

### ***Projects, Project-Based-Learning, and Senior Exhibitions***

As identified in the school’s mission and vision, and as seen on the “Theory to Reality Curriculum” (Figure 1), projects were an important practice at this school. Projects were the top method used for assessment, project-based-learning was the recommended method for teaching classes, and project exhibitions were an important component for developing intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences (Gardner, 2007) at Key, as well as leadership. Accordingly, “Projects” were reflected in the survey as an important practice at Key Learning Community by over half of the respondents in the multiple selection questions, and then verified in numerous narrative responses.

Rich description provided by a few of the many participants (in the narrative response areas on the survey) who emphasized the importance of projects: Participant # 35 noted, “Presenting

projects multiple times has undeniably equipped me EXTREMELY well for a professional working environment,” while another participant stated, “I believe that my projects were some of my biggest accomplishments at *this school*, especially in High School, I gained a lot of knowledge and skill from doing them” (Participant # 34). Finally, Participant #50 described the benefits he received from developing and presenting his projects through the years: “My great speaking skills, thanks to the project based learning, helped me communicate this to my audience with ease. The projects, both theme and commonality, are one of the things I feel have benefited me the most since I've been at Key.”

### ***Leadership Development***

Student Leadership Development was an important goal at this school (See Curriculum Graphic, Figure 1). Project development and public speaking are critical skills to acquire in developing leadership, as are the service learning and collaborative aspects of this school's program (Kunkel, 2003). Just over 60% of the participants in the study indicated that they were leaders while in school, and 51% reported holding positions of leadership at this time in their adult lives.

The following narrative responses were a few of the replies to questions that asked respondents to identify strengths developed at this school. Participant #39 wrote: “Due to my exposure to leadership opportunities, I am very comfortable with taking leadership roles in many areas of my life, especially in music.” Another participant noted: “I think my teachers would testify to my leadership which I gained through the Key program and the independence that it gave me” (Participant # 34).

### ***Strengths-Based Program***

As a school built upon the theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983), educators at Key believed that “knowing their strengths” would provide many benefits for the students (Key L.C. Web Site, 2010), and 84.2% of the participants indicated they knew their strengths while enrolled in this school. There was also a belief that “knowing your strengths” would enhance the intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2007), assist students in knowing how they could make a contribution to the school, and then later to the community (Key Learning Community Website, 2010). 76.8% of the participants indicated in the survey that knowing their strengths did help them to make college and career choices, and 69.8% said knowing their strengths helped them to be more successful at their job.

Each participant selected several of the multiple intelligences listed in this “multiple selection” question as personal strengths (See Figure 3). Many respondents in this study also expanded upon the importance of learning their strengths in the open-ended narrative responses. When asked about the benefits of learning their strengths at this school, Participant #36 wrote: “I excelled in my academic studies after leaving Key. I feel having an intimate knowledge about my strengths/weaknesses in the intelligences allowed me to have a better understanding of how to study/exhibit the knowledge I'd mastered.” Another participant noted: “I have a knowledge about what I can and can't do that I learned at Key while discovering my strengths. I know what motivates and discourages me” (Participant #8).

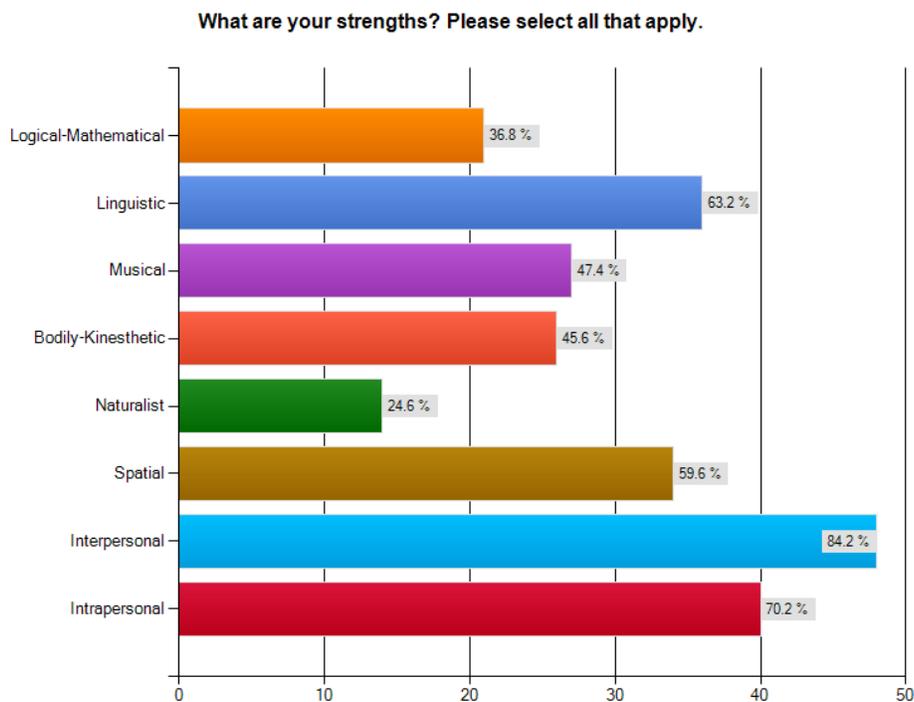


Figure 3: Self-Report of Participants' Strengths

### *Experiential Learning*

Experiential learning has enjoyed global popularity throughout the years; John Dewey favored the practice more than a century ago. After some time for reflection on the process he wrote: "...the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources" (Dewey, 1938, p.40).

In today's educational environment, there are many schools that value and design their school with an experiential curriculum in mind. In a recent writing, Washor & Mojkowski (2013) note that experiential learning (they call it "leaving to learn") "opportunities include internships, travel, community service, work, entrepreneurial ventures, and gap years" (p.xxvii). The Association for Experiential Education (2014) adds that "hands on education, global education, environmental education and expeditionary education" are experiential as well (as reported on their web site). Three aspects of experiential learning reported as important by participants in this study were the "community learning opportunity" (CLO), aspects of service learning, and apprenticeships.

### *Community Learning Opportunities (CLO's)*

Several types of experiential activities were noted by participants in this study as critical to their current success. During their school day, students in this study had frequent excursions out into the local city environs to expand their learning. These were called "CLO's" or "Community Learning Opportunities." 57.9% of respondents felt that CLO's were a valuable experience. Of these, Participant #25 wrote: "I believe that the CLO Trips were very beneficial for myself and other students. I even now still attend plays, musicals, and find myself wanting to get out and

participate in the arts that the local community has to offer here...” Participant #3 added, “I really value the chance we had to go on CLO’s during the day. As a teacher (today), I can’t imagine how much planning that took!”

### ***Service Learning and the Senior Service Trip***

A second experiential focus was to provide the students with many opportunities for service learning and additionally an international service trip was the highlight of senior year. 56.1% indicated that the service component of the school was beneficial to them. Participant #34 noted: “The many experiences I had with service are the foundation to my future careers and goals and working on the senior service trip impacted me... One of the best examples of my leadership would have to be my commitment to the senior service trip and helping my class and advisors with such a big project.” Perhaps students who come from a high poverty background benefit from an experiential education the most. This participant (#28) did, and explains:

The best thing at Key was the Senior Service-Learning Trip to the Dominican Republic. It was great to travel to a foreign country and do service work there. I was amazed to be going on an adventure with my friends and teachers. We worked hard in a lot of service projects, tested out our Spanish skills, and learned more about the history and culture of the country. It was the most memorable experience that I have ever had in my life.

### ***Apprenticeships***

As another part of the experiential curriculum, students at this school had the opportunity to spend time with apprenticeship guides most mornings during their senior year. 61.4% (this number might be artificially low as the apprenticeship program did not start until 2002) indicated that their senior apprenticeship was a valuable component of their educational experience, and narrative responses verified this: “The apprenticeship program was helpful in figuring out what you wanted to do. It taught me how to look for an internship here in college” (Participant #5).

While there could be many benefits of such an experience, perhaps the most important would be to see firsthand what the day-to-day experiences might be in the field they plan to major in. Participant #50 said, “Apprenticeship was so valuable to me. It gave me the opportunity to get a taste of being in the work force and realize my strengths and weaknesses.”

### ***Additional Indicators of Success and other Interesting Data:***

All of the respondents of this survey graduated from high school (except for the 3 still in a K-12 setting). The actual graduation rate at this school was 100% in 2012. The graduation rate at Key has always been much higher than its district average and the state average. For example, in 2012 the district graduation rate was 65.4%, and the Indiana state average was 88.4% (IDOE web site, 2014). In addition, 88% of this school’s graduates were accepted into college in 2012, as opposed to the 63% statewide average and the 51.2% district average (Indiana Department of Education Web Site, 2015).

While 44/51 (or 86.3%) of the respondents who took the Graduate Qualifying Exam (the “GQE” – the standardized test required for graduation in Indiana) in 10<sup>th</sup> grade reported passing it the first time in one or both of the math/English portions, 57.9% felt that their performance on

standardized tests was NOT an accurate evaluation of their success in school.

Two of the 57 were currently unemployed. That is a 3.5% unemployment rate, less than half of the general national average of 8.2% at the time of this survey's completion in 2012 (USDOL, 2015).

69.8% reported that learning about their strengths and the other experiences at this school helped them to be successful in their current job.

88.5% reported that they are being successful in life and 90.7% are happy and satisfied with life.

### Analysis

In the final analysis, how do we know when students have been successful in school, and ultimately how do we know whether their K-12 experience has served them well, so they can be successful in life? Creswell (2009) suggests that in order to make an “interpretation or meaning of the data,” one must look at the “lessons learned” (p.189). Perhaps this is best accomplished by simply answering the research questions.

#### What are participants doing today (The 57 Respondents in 2012)?

In Trade School or in a 2-Year College	7.2%
In 4 Year College	43.6%
In Graduate School, Med School, or Vet School	12.4%
In Military	5.4%
Stay-at-Home Mom/Dad	3.6%
Unemployed	3.6%
*Employed	23.6%

(\*As: Protein Biologist; Therapist; Teacher (3); IT Consultant; Advertising Agent; Youth Symphony Director; Data Analyst; Business Owner; Car Manufacturer; Cashier; Working Military-Wife—There were 3 students who responded to the survey in 2012 who were still in middle school or high school at the time. Those students were not included in these figures.)

In today's educational accountability environment, there is much discussion about retention in college, or more specifically, the students' “ability to persist.” In this study, a great majority of the participants were accepted to college, but what about their “ability to persist?”

The “ability to persist” in college, as defined by Nora, Barlow, & Crisp (2005), is the notion that college students will remain enrolled, or re-enroll each year, past the first year in college and ultimately until graduation, where a degree is earned. So then in this study, 32 of the participants are still in college or university, 3 are in the military and 17 have finished a four-year college. That means that 52 of the 54 are either still in college or already graduated. That's 96% with “ability to persist” in college. Further, these data show that virtually all of these participants are currently either still in school (college), or working.

So where do students find the grit to persist, and finish their degree? Vincent Tinto is respected as one of the foremost scholars in the study of student persistence in college. One theory asserted by Tinto is that the establishment of “learning communities” will improve retention in college (Tinto, 2003). Bean (2005) defines the higher education learning community in terms of

social resources available to the students: “These social resources include faculty, staff, and particularly other students. Social connectedness leads to satisfaction, self-confidence, loyalty, fitting in, and remaining enrolled. The social world of students is important to retention decisions, and there are many potential sources of social support” (p. 229). But what about student access to learning communities during high school? Does that contribute to persistence in college?

The students in this study did enjoy strong learning community experiences in high school. Participant #39 notes: “In most areas, I do feel that Key has been a major factor in my successes in life. I value all the relationships that were created during my time at Key Learning Community and cherish every memory built.” Another participant wrote: “The best thing about my Key Learning Community experience was the sense of community encouraged throughout. I know that I can contact any of the people I met while attending Key or through Key Learning Community if I am ever in need (Participant #8).

This study suggests that persistence in college could be related to a strong learning community experience in high school, but more studies need to be conducted to support this finding.

### **In what ways do alumni from this progressive, public, urban school perceive themselves as having been successful?**

What is the best way to define and illustrate student success in schools? Many look to standardized test scores, and thus equate student success to academic achievement.

But others might look at this question totally differently. Factors such as student project performance, student portfolio quality and completion, student service record, student leadership projects, and co-curricular participation might come into play. Some might point to happiness in life, or the feeling that you are being successful as important indicators of success as well.

By the numbers, 88.5% of the participants in this study reported being successful in life, and 90.7% reported being happy and satisfied. Individual open-ended responses were compelling. Participant #16 said:

I cannot speak for success in college, but for success in a few aspects of my life. If there is something I need to prepare for, I know how to get started because of all the times spent researching topics either for class or the theme projects. I know to never rush into anything, but to prepare and gather information first. Every job I have applied for I have gotten as a result of being articulate, knowledgeable and amiable.

Participant #48 indicated another way to gauge success in life: “I’m young, living life, no debt, working, living on my own, paying for and working my way through college, and training to achieve my dreams and goals.”

There were dozens of testaments in the narrative responses that indicated how the participants were experiencing success in their lives today, but perhaps the best summary could be reported in this response: “I am following my dreams and passions, I am working hard for what I want and getting there because of my determination” (Participant #29).

### **In what ways do participants attribute their success to the practices of this unique school?**

Dozens of narrative responses addressed the question of how this school helped the participants of this study to be successful in life. Participant #39 provided just one example: “In most

areas, I do feel that the Key Learning Community has been a major factor in my successes in life. I value all the relationships that were created during my time at Key and cherish every memory built.”

To support the numerous positive narrative responses, 76% of the participants in this study indicated that knowing their strengths helped them to make college and career choices, and almost 70% indicated that knowing their strengths helps them to be successful in their current jobs. 65% of the participants indicated that their experience at this school helped them to be successful in college, while 88.5% indicate that they feel that they are successful in life.

### **What are the indicators of success demonstrated by alumni of this progressive, urban, public school?**

Throughout the course of this survey, the participants were asked in numerous ways which aspects of the curriculum in this school were important to their success in high school and then afterwards in college and beyond. They also shared the ways that they were successful in high school and then later in life. This was done through selection of responses on multiple-selection checklists, and also through opportunities to expand their explanations in open-ended narrative response boxes. In the final analysis, these were the indicators of success that were significantly reported by participants in this study:

#### ***INDICATORS OF SUCCESS (In High School)***

- Quality HS Apprenticeship Work
- HS Digital Portfolio
- Service Record
- Project Presentations/Public Speaking
- Graduation/ Graduation Rate
- National Honor Society/Honors Diploma
- Acceptance into and College Enrollment
- Exhibitions of Leadership
- Quality Daily Class Work/Quality Progress Report Assessment

#### ***INDICATORS OF SUCCESS (Post HS)***

- College Attendance/Persistence
- Certificate or Degree Awarded in Higher Education
- Holding down a job/working hard/making a living/paying bills/enjoying fruits of labor
- Raising a family/making a life
- Home Ownership
- Positive Community Involvement/Leadership
- Volunteerism/Service to Community
- Pursuing Dreams
- Project Management Savvy
- Happy/Satisfied/Fulfilled with Life

Some might feel that missing from this list of indicators is the standardized test score as an indicator of success. But in this study, only 42% of the participants felt that their test scores were

any sort of indicator of their school success. Even so, most of those 42% indicated in their explanatory narrative that the standardized test scores only really indicated strengths in math or English, or were an indicator important to colleges, so then necessary. One respondent who performed well on standardized tests was asked if standardized tests were an important indicator of school success. She replied: “Absolutely not. Standardized tests are a horrible representation of someone's intelligence, whether they learned a subject, and how successful someone is in school. We all learn, think and process in different ways and we cannot ever expect to have one test that determines whether we are doing all of these things correctly” (Participant #29).

There is much discussion as to the validity and reliability of standardized tests in the education professional literature. Wiliam (2010), for instance, discusses the validity of our current day standardized tests. He posits that the same test is actually valid for some students, and invalid for others. He notes:

a test of mathematics with a high reading demand may support valid inferences about mathematical ability for fluent readers, but when students with less developed reading skills perform poorly on the test, we cannot know whether their poor performance was due to an inability to read the items or to their weaknesses in mathematics. (p. 256)

Standardized test authors and proponents and those who are promoting the Common Core State Standards (including President Obama and many state and local governments) assume that the outcomes measured on standardized tests today are important, and a valid representation of what should have been learned (USDOE, 2013). But what about those individuals and schools that do not necessarily value only the standards measured on state and national standardized tests, those who value what are sometimes called “nonacademic outcomes”? Ladwig (2010) notes:

If we are going to make claims about the benefits of nonacademic outcomes and make normative social appeals for their inclusion within schooling, we would do much better if we actually knew which of these mattered for whom, to do what, where, and when...we need to better know just which outcomes of schooling are in fact powerful outcomes. (p. 135)

Nelson (2011) studied some of these powerful outcomes. In her study, she looked at the benefits of a progressive education in “the era of standardization.” She found:

As the participants in this study have indicated, experiencing personalized, progressive education has had many benefits. They have been given the opportunity for student-centered learning experiences, which has led to self-discovery, creativity, and intrinsic motivation. In contrast to a narrowed curriculum, which can lead to student disenfranchisement, the students in this study feel empowered to pursue these learning opportunities. In the wake of increased concern about global competition, this is exactly the type of education we should be giving our students. (p. 32)

### **Conclusions, Discussion and Recommendations**

Many educational researchers and thinkers have been steadily cautioning educational policy-makers, educators, and the general populace about the dangers of placing too much confidence

into standardized test scores as an overall measure of success (Bracey, 2009; Gardner, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Koretz, 2008; McDermott, 2013; Meier & Wood, 2004; Nichols, & Berliner, 2007; Popham, 2001; Ravitch, 2013; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008; Sahlberg, 2011; Wolk, 2011; Zhao, 2009). These scholars reported that standardized test scores are not an appropriate way to validate “across the board” learning in school.

This study supports these thinkers’ assertions, but here we look at just 57 individuals from one progressive school’s story. Where might we find more examples of schools that consider indicators of success beyond standardized test scores? The Met School in Providence, a Big Picture School, is one in a network of progressive schools (they are one of over 60 Big Picture Schools in the U.S.) that de-emphasize the use of standardized test scores for accountability. At these schools, faculty: “define success using measures beyond standardized test scores, grades, or even college graduation rates” (Washor, Arnold, & Mojkowski, 2009, para. 5).

Washor and Mojkowski (2013) go on to explain the Met School’s concept of school success:

Most would define it as good grades, great test scores, a high school diploma, and a pathway to postsecondary learning. While we do not argue with those indicators, our experience tells us they are inadequate. We prefer additional indicators from a wider perspective: obtaining enjoyable and productive work with good prospects for growth, raising a family, contribution to the community and figuring out how to navigate life’s ups and downs. Indeed, navigating is an appropriate metaphor, since success is better thought of as a journey than a destination. Like happiness, success is an ever emerging state that differs with each individual. (p. 53)

The Met School uses a sophisticated longitudinal data gathering system that follows graduates and surveys them as part of their own “in house” accountability system. They report a 92% graduation rate (with “low income, urban and minority backgrounds”) with 95% of those graduates gaining acceptance to college (Washor, Arnold, & Mojkowski, 2009).

An authentically valid assessment of student performance in school must begin with a contextual analysis of the students’ personal situation. This is the only VAM (value-added measure) that makes sense. Since all people come with different advantages and strengths, judgment on success should not be based on a standardized metric. Yet, we are so seduced by the single-score metric. What could possibly replace such an elegant measure?

One suggestion from the literature would be to use a case study method to thoroughly analyze what is going on in schools, since a complex system requires a complex analysis. A Danish social scientist named Bent Flyvbjerg “advocates and models a case study approach to allow understanding of social organizations such as education systems” (as reported in Horn and Wilburn, 2013, p. xiii).

Consider the school being studied. Perhaps a case study analysis could begin with the standard metrics of attendance, graduation rate, grades and even test scores, but the case study could also look at student portfolios, project presentations as well as student exhibitions. Project Zero Classroom (at the Harvard Graduate School of Education) calls these more authentic indicators “Performances of Understanding” (Blythe, 1998). Perhaps these performances, in combination with many other indicators and observations, could give us a more complete picture.

There are much data presented here to illuminate this point, but much more work needs to be done to shift the mindset of accountability in schools to a more logical and reasonable practice.

It is true that the numbers and charts generated by the testing industry are tidy...even seductive. But as argued in this report, those data are not a complete measure of the complexity of a student, teacher or school's work. They might show a sliver of the picture, but are standardized test scores worthy of the money, time, attention and anxiety we are currently investing in them?

### **Final Thoughts from the Author and Questions for Further Study**

The United States and much of the world are locked into measuring school accountability, and ultimately school success, almost exclusively through standardized test scores. Part of the problem is that a suitably acceptable alternative has not been acknowledged. The data from this study could contribute to the current conversation regarding how to foster conditions in a school that will generate the authentic indicators of success that determine successful schools. This new "metric" could potentially break into the collective awareness and provide a viable alternative to the exclusive use of test scores to indicate success.

A hopeful outcome of this study would be to influence or impact the national conversation regarding the use of more authentic assessments beyond standardized test scores to gauge student success. This study looks to illustrate how an authentic and experiential curriculum (i.e. a "non-test prep" curriculum) could foster beneficial capacities in students, regardless of test performance. It is clear that follow up studies are needed. As a concluding thought, I submit that standardized testing is not a useful tool in today's schools. This continual focus on test scores could even be damaging to our students, particularly students who are disadvantaged, because a singular and intensive focus on raising one's test scores could neglect other things that are important to learn. Also, frustrating and continual poor performance will likely damage students' self-concept and self-esteem which can lead to dropping out. Future studies need to be done with an eye towards what is lost perhaps even as scores rise. The ultimate impact could be to inform educational policy, make changes in educational practices and scale back test prep in schools in a major way. In my experience, test prep is not a worthy challenge, and high test scores are not a healthy goal.

### **Questions for Further Study**

*"For many, a primary reason for getting an education is to become happy, healthy, well-adjusted and fulfilled people who understand how to live balanced lives in the context of our families, communities, cultures and ecosystems"*  
(Grinell, & Rabin, 2013, p.748).

What is a worthy challenge in today's schools, and what is a healthy goal for schools to strive to achieve? How can this be measured? Longitudinal studies like those being done at the Met School need to be expanded in schools, both traditional schools and those like the school studied here. How are graduates in schools like Key Learning Community, and other schools that use more traditional approaches, doing today? Comparisons need to be made. Perhaps more specifically, how are students who came from high poverty settings doing today? How do traditional school outcomes compare to more progressive schools with high poverty students? Which schools have better attendance, lower drop out rates and better student success? How should we define and measure student success? Which schools tend to produce happy and successful adults who contribute positively to their community 10 to 20 years down the line? These are all questions that deserve further study.

## Disclosure

It need be noted and stressed that the primary investigator of this study and author of this report spent much time as a teacher and administrator at Key Learning Community, from 1993 to 2010, and was one of the founders of the school's middle school and high school. This fact alone suggests that removing all bias from this report would be highly unlikely. On the other hand, this truth could also provide a rich "insider" perspective into the story of Key, and might provide another measure of verification to the themes that emerged, and to the conclusions described.

Even so, the author has been extremely vigilant of potential confirmation bias throughout this whole process, and has been open to cautions suggested by reviewers of the research process from the beginning steps of the development of this study. Collaborative groups were used in the development of the survey, and then again in the analysis and interpretation of the data to help keep the research process valid and on track. Peers from both qualitative and quantitative backgrounds have reviewed the final research findings as well as the report, and have provided critical feedback in the final stages of this work.

## Further Limitations of the Study

- \*Only 57 of the 200+ potential alumni/graduates from Key Learning Community responded.
- \*Respondents do not represent (demographically) the diversity of the total group.
- \*Respondents were recruited from alumni Facebook pages and from "a call to participate" on the school's web site. Participants would have to be prone to participate in online social media, which might exclude those who do not.
- \*Data was dependent upon self-reporting measures, so it could not be externally verified.
- \*There has to be a certain amount of subjectivity, and indeed bias on the part of the researcher.
- \*Data cannot be generalized beyond this study.

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