

The Power to Change Lives

Creating a culture of success through mission-based policies, practices and procedures

Keynote sponsored by



Dr. Luis Cruz, an experienced educator and administrator, had a simple, yet powerful message for school leaders — all students can learn at high levels. Cruz said it doesn't matter if a student is poor or if they are English language learners, they can learn and succeed.

"We're here to save lives," Cruz said. "We are not just in the business of educating; we're in a position to help students break free from the cycle of poverty."

For several years, Cruz was principal at Baldwin Park High School located east of Los Angeles where 97 percent of the student population was Latino. The school wasn't known for academics. Many parents opted to send their children to a neighboring high school that had a better reputation.

One evening, when his high school was playing the neighboring high school in basketball, Cruz had what he calls his "Twilight Zone" moment when his perspective suddenly changed. His high school's basketball team was winning when the two student sections began chants back and forth. The students from the rival high school known for its academics began a chant, "We go to college." And, instead of responding, Cruz was surprised to see his students just sort

of shrug their shoulders and accept this as fact.

"What I realized at that moment was that our low expectations had trickled down to their mindsets," Cruz said. "I got really scared at that moment. How are we going to change the community and student mindset? How can we change expectations at our school?"

Cruz realized that his school's culture needed to change from a toxic to a healthy school culture. A toxic school culture, Cruz said, is one in which educators and school leaders come up with every reason why they can't do something and they blame each other for what happens in school. However, when a school has a healthy school culture, everyone has an unwavering belief that all kids can achieve.

Part of the problem at Baldwin Park High School was the lack of a strong mission or even knowledge of the mission. So Cruz invited school staff to his home to draft a new mission. After three months, they developed a concise statement that focused on developing students for post-secondary excellence.

With the new mission in place, the next step was to make sure the school's policies, practices and procedures supported the mission. A

new policy was drafted requiring every student to go on at least one college visit. The school changed practices so the most veteran teachers help teach the neediest students instead of only teaching upper-level courses. Another policy requires all students to be bilingual by the time they graduate.

These changes in policies, practices and procedures changed the school's culture and raised expectations. During Cruz's time as principal, the graduation rate improved from 72 to 92 percent. Today, the school has a 95 percent graduation rate.

"It wasn't just me who made that happen," Cruz said. "More than anything else, it was our teachers and staff."

Cruz reminisced back to the days when he began his teaching career in an elementary school class. In that first job, he said he quickly learned that setting students on a path for success not only changes their lives but future generations as well. Cruz saw how the cycle of poverty can be broken with education.

"I fell in love with the profession because I realized that we don't make a difference in one life, we make a difference in the lives of generations," Cruz said. "We can make dreams come true." ■

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