

## **Creating a Culture**

*By Alan Gottlieb*

### **Science and Technology School Tackles the Big Challenges**

It's 8:15 a.m. on a hot and bright Friday, achingly close to the end of the school year. This is precisely the kind of day that in many high schools leads to daydreaming and disengagement.

Not at the Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST), where an economically mixed student body turned heads with stellar student achievement results in the school's first year of existence.

Kids of all shapes, sizes and colors – 230 strong – stream into the school's common area. It's a post-industrial setting, with exposed duct work and high ceilings. The kids mill about until a couple of students bang an African drum at 8:19, and the place falls silent in an instant. Head of School Bill Kurtz stands amid the throng, clipboard in hand, scanning the crowd, making notes to himself.

Dean of Students Alex Head steps to the mike and in beatnik patois offers a good morning to the assembled multitude. The response is desultory, and so he demands a repeat.

Alex is wearing rose colored shades and his put-on patois is part of the monthly "Poetry Café," which dominates the daily Morning Circle ritual one Friday per month. An LCD projector beams a black and white photo of a small, African American child bearing a cello on his back ambling down a dusty dirt road. Members of the school community were asked to write poems inspired by the photo. One by one, kids and teachers step to the mike to read their offerings. Instead of applause, the crowd snaps its fingers to signal approval.

Looking around at the group, one can't help but be struck by the diversity. There are lanky boys in preppy attire of J. Crew polos and wrinkled khakis. There are a couple of Middle Eastern girls in head scarves. There's a girl with pink hair. But no one is dressed like a slob and no one's wearing saggy, gangster-style clothing. The school's dress code is simple and clear, and no one is flaunting it.

If there's one thing these kids have in common, it's that they want to be here. It's late May, a gentle breeze is wafting through, and bright skies beckon. But this tough, demanding school seems like the place to be. DSST, a public charter school, is more diverse than most Denver Public Schools. Committed by its charter to a student body that is at least 40 percent low-income, the school last year had 44 percent of its students classified as low income and 60 percent as members of racial or ethnic minorities.

Yet its ninth-grade performance on 2005 standardized tests topped all Denver high schools save one – Denver School of the Arts, a magnet school with a more affluent student population.

### **Apologies to the Community**

After about 10 minutes of "Poetry Café," it's time for announcements. First, each student or adult who has arrived late – today there was about half a dozen – speaks up and apologizes to the community for his or her tardiness.

Next, a kid named Max steps forward. He's a ninth grader; undersized; a mop of straight blonde hair; a long, untucked green shirt and green cargo pants. He reads from a piece of paper, in a barely audible voice.

"I apologize to the community for being suspended," he begins, and then describes his misdeed, his awareness of its foolishness, and his sincere intent never to do something of this sort again. He steps back into the multi-layered circle.

Head, who has ditched the shades and the patois, steps back to the mike. “Max was out for the better part of the week for this transgression,” he says. “Folks, we have 12 days left together in this school year. We all need to make this a safe community together.” He asks for a show of hands of those wishing to allow Max back into the community. A forest of hands goes up.

“I’d like to welcome Max back to the community,” Head says, and the issue is over.

In many schools, rituals like Morning Meeting and group apologies would be undercut by students who found it corny or a waste of time. At DSST, visitors sense that kids look forward to the communal time before the hard work of the day begins. “Everything you need to know about what makes this place work you can see at Morning Meeting,” is how Kurtz describes the ritual’s importance.

That’s because Morning Meeting is the most visible manifestation of the hardest work done each day at the school. Since the school opened in the fall of 2004, Kurtz and his staff have labored unceasingly to create and sustain a healthy school culture. In most ways, that culture stands in stark contrast to the atmosphere one finds in a typical urban high school.

## **No Culture of Chaos**

How Kurtz and his team have built this embracing and empowering culture at DSST is the real story of the school’s first two years.

This fall, the school added an 11th grade. Each year, sustaining the culture becomes a bit easier, because students who have bought into the program comprise an increasing share of the student body. And now the most enculturated kids are upperclassmen.

Kurtz cites a healthy school culture as the number one reason for the school’s early success. Data-driven instruction finishes a close second. “But data-driven instruction in a culture of chaos isn’t going to work,” he said. “There is a negative culture in most big high schools,” Kurtz continued. “That’s because in large part it’s left to the kids to determine what that culture is going to be. That’s not a good role for teens to play unsupervised.

“We’re very intentional about our culture. We are very clear about how and why we do things. The first couple of days of the school year we spend all on culture and nothing else – core values (respect, responsibility, integrity, courage, curiosity, doing your best), and community. The morning meeting and other things we do all year reinforce this.”

Kurtz cited the school’s dress code as an example of a healthy culture at work. “Hazing, the way kids treat each other, who’s in and who’s out, so much of it is about appearance. By having a dress code, we narrow the band. It’s no longer about who has the expensive, beaded jeans or the \$300 pair of sneakers.”

Jesus Peña, a 15-year-old 10th grader, agreed that the culture at DSST is markedly different from other schools he has attended, and that the dress code serves as a good example. “There aren’t too many rules, but they enforce the rules they have,” he said. “A lot of other schools have a no flip-flop rule. But no one enforces it, so it’s a joke. Here, there’s a simple dress code, and everyone follows it – no jeans, collared shirt, dress shoes.”

## **Engagement in Action**

Having hooked the students with an affirming culture, the next, crucial step is easier: engaging them in school work.

In a 10th grade world literature class, teacher Molly Lapore is leading 17 students through a discussion of Rustam and Suhrab, part of an epic Persian poem, the Shahnama. This isn’t typical fare for a 10th grade lit class, but the sophomores have been reading *The Kite Runner*, a searing tale of modern-day Afghanistan. At a key point in that book, the narrator cites the legend of Rustam and Suhrab, so Lapore has decided to have the kids read it, to seek out thematic similarities between the poem and that particular section of the novel.

Students sit two to each long table, arranged in two ranks, all facing front. Lapore paces around the room, selecting students to read aloud. Some kids struggle with the intricate and arcane phrasing, while others glide through it.

Unlike many 10th grade classes around the district – indeed, around the world – no one has a head down on a desk. No one looks disengaged. This difficult piece and its thematic connection to *The Kite Runner* has everyone locked in.

When the class period ends, the kids line up quietly at the door and wait for Lapore to dismiss them.

“There’s an Afghani girl in the class, and she’s been having a hard time with reading comprehension,” Lapore said during the brief break between classes. “But she’s really excited to be reading about her own country. And she got a 100 on the quiz today, so she was excited about that.”

Sophomore Peña said DSST is the first school he’s attended where the environment allows students to let their guard down, which makes concentrating on schoolwork easier.

“This school makes you calm and alert at the same time, if that makes any sense,” he said. “You know what’s going on in here, and you’re OK with it. You can be at peace with yourself and everyone around you.”