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Creating a Culture of Empowerment and Accountability at St. Martin de Porres High School (B)

In July 2008 Mike Odiotti and Judy Seiberlich began their positions as principal and assistant principal of St. Martin de Porres High School in Waukegan, Illinois, one of a network of twenty-four Cristo Rey model schools across the United States. The new administrators inherited a wide range of challenges related to SMdP's students, teachers, and administration—from a large number of seniors who failed to graduate on time to teachers who believed they had little responsibility for students' performance issues. SMdP students saw their school, a college preparatory program, as a "school for poor kids," and many outsiders believed the organization was an "alternative" school.

Armed with their commitment to making SMdP a true learning organization for both students and teachers, Odiotti and Seiberlich began addressing the challenges they had inherited.

Shifting the Culture at SMdP

Odiotti, Seiberlich, and the dean of students took a thoughtful, multi-pronged approach to refocusing and strengthening the school's culture, making it one of empowerment, expectation, and accountability. "Vision is where it starts," Seiberlich said. "Gathering data for where we are and where we could be is the second step. Then it's about getting the right information to people on group, individual, and content-area levels."

As part of their initial approach, Odiotti and Seiberlich also presented several key materials to their team: a definition and philosophy of educational leadership, along with a set of core operating principles (see **Exhibit 1** and **Exhibit 2**).

The administrators' strategy included multiple mutually reinforcing elements.

Seeking (and Using) Data

Odiotti and Seiberlich placed a strong emphasis on gathering data to aid in decision making. "We wanted to ground our decisions in real data, not hunches," Odiotti said. Beyond the initial

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interviews and surveys of teachers and students, they sought information about students' performance from Hire4Ed, the group that managed SMdP's internships. "That showed me how some students are high achievers at work but not in the classroom," a science and math teacher said. "That helped me understand their potential better and see routes to helping them improve." Said a history and theology teacher: "Mike and Judy seek all feedback and use it; they take it very seriously."

For example, the administrators assessed the system in place for helping students who were struggling academically. They were kept after school and expected to use the time to study, but simple recordkeeping showed that the system failed to improve students' grades in any measurable way. So Odiotti and Seiberlich developed a new system whereby students in need received targeted support during designated study periods. Their pass rate improved 67 percent. A similar data-driven approach was used to develop many of the other solutions described below. Seiberlich noted that teachers were aware that the new administrators were assessing certain areas and that she and Odiotti were working to make them aware of all areas involving measurement. Odiotti emphasized helping the teachers see how "our recommendations are grounded in data and/or strong education principles." He continued, "Now they're not asking, 'Where does this come from?' but 'How can we use this to help the kids?'"

Recruiting

Given the centrality of teachers and students to SMdP's success, Odiotti and Seiberlich took great care with recruiting each group.

In the case of teachers, Odiotti noted, "We had to make sure everyone bought into the concepts we were promoting." To achieve this, Odiotti and Seiberlich put into place a rigorous teacher-recruiting process. It included multiple phone interviews, followed by face-to-face interviews and a teaching demonstration. Rather than seeking teachers with "perfect" teaching skills, they looked for candidates who felt comfortable working in an "under-resourced" school and who believed that SMdP students could be successful. They also wanted to see evidence of candidates' ability to reflect, including about their performance during the teaching demonstration. A social studies and elective teacher recalled how the new administrators "didn't paint any pretty pictures" and pressed teacher candidates on key points: "They said, 'How flexible are you on a scale of 1 to 10? We need a 30!'"

In the first year, Odiotti and Seiberlich hired six new teachers out of fourteen total instructors. According to the school counselor and social worker, Odiotti's experience with urban schools helped him recruit teachers accustomed to and/or more ready to deal with issues such as low student motivation.

Recruiting patterns changed for students as well. Those who were significantly below grade level were placed in a summer Bridge Program (see "Structures and Systems" section below), with some of them having to complete the program successfully to retain their admission. Similarly, some enrolled students were asked not to return because they were too far behind in credits or had other issues. According to the campus minister and theology teacher, seeing this consequence helped other students "realize their potential and really kick it into gear." Odiotti emphasized that beyond academics, his team was focused on admitting "kids who really want to be here."

Setting Simple Goals

Odiotti and Seiberlich set simple goals that would cumulatively help the school progress in bigger ways. For example, they announced their objective of reducing tardies by one-third within the year. Progress would be shared at the weekly Monday morning all-school assembly, and students would enjoy a party at a local fieldhouse if they met the goal. The idea was that setting and reaching many such targeted goals would help SMdP attain bigger-picture ones. For example, Odiotti emphasized that SMdP should strive to emulate exemplar programs such as the Massachusetts-based Roxbury Prep Charter School, where students from underserved communities routinely scored in the top ranges on national standardized tests.

Empowerment and Trust

From the start, Odiotti and Seiberlich sought to empower SMdP groups at every level: fellow administrators, teachers, and students. They tailored their approach to the needs of each group and the individuals within it. For example, in their early discussions the dean of students expressed concerns about being micromanaged. Odiotti and Seiberlich assured him that he would have sufficient autonomy and that they needed his commitment and support to face the challenges ahead. Armed with increasing mutual trust, the three administrators set out to empower the teachers and students.

One of their first tasks was working with the teachers—one-on-one and as a group—to develop what Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck called a “growth mindset.” This mentality, in contrast to a “fixed mindset,” included the idea that people (e.g., students and teachers) can improve on multiple dimensions through hard work, including in challenging circumstances and against daunting odds.¹ “The [teachers who] weren’t on board with it had the opportunity to opt out,” the dean of students said.

Odiotti and Seiberlich also made clear that all staff members—including themselves—were in it together. “Mike and Judy are very willing to mentor people, especially if they’re struggling,” one teacher said. They were also strong on consensus-building. Another teacher recalled, “They said, ‘We won’t use majority-rules decisions or tell you what to do. We want everyone to buy in.’ That made me feel like part of a real team.” Girded by this support and information, teachers began offering and implementing ideas, including an expository writing semester for juniors. “I told them what we needed [e.g., computers and books], and we got it going. It has really taken off,” an English teacher said. According to the dean, what changed most at the administrator level was the development of a unified leadership team. “We all have accountability now and know whom to go to for anything,” he added.

Trust formed a key part of the new infrastructure at SMdP. “They trust the teachers—that we know what we’re doing,” one teacher said. Another added, “It’s a very involved and aware sense of trust. In some schools it’s more blind; the administration doesn’t really know what’s going on in the classrooms.” Moreover, the dean noted, he, Odiotti, and Seiberlich “let teachers be ‘their own people,’ as long as it’s in service of SMdP’s mission and in service of the students.” This

¹ Dweck cites multiple bodies of research demonstrating that individuals embracing a growth mindset (i.e., open to new ideas) tend to show more improvement on multiple dimensions of performance (e.g., academic and professional) than those with a fixed mindset. See Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

trust was complemented by a sense that the new administration would protect the best interests of teachers and students. “We knew they wouldn’t leave anyone hanging,” one teacher said.

SMdP students were also empowered by the new administrators. Odiotti worked hard to place students in summer academic and leadership programs, including those at universities such as Brown and Georgetown. As part of the empowerment theme, students’ input on key issues was sought and taken seriously. “When the kids were concerned about who their AP Spanish teacher would be, we listened to them,” Odiotti said.

Attitudes and Accountability

As an initial step, the administrators interviewed the entire junior class of forty-nine students. “We made them recommit to learning,” Odiotti said. Based on those conversations, twelve students elected not to continue at SMdP; only one was asked not to continue, based on his behavioral record to that point. In general, SMdP students also faced much greater accountability for the first time. “The administration has built a strong culture of expectation,” a teacher said. “The expectation of students is that ‘You can do this.’” In some instances that meant holding students more responsible than in the past. For example, students failing to appear for credit-retrieval sessions or to complete make-up work were asked by Odiotti or Seiberlich to explain themselves and to improve their performance or lose the credit-retrieval option. In general, students rose to meet the new expectations; for example, their collective performance in English improved to the point that no remedial summer program was required for that subject in 2010.

The theme of accountability extended explicitly to SMdP’s teachers as well. No longer could teachers cite students’ abilities and attitudes as the primary culprits in their performance issues. Odiotti made his philosophy clear to the teachers: “Students don’t fail; teachers do.” According to one teacher, in implementing this approach, Odiotti helped teachers ask themselves, “How do we grow as professionals in a collegial and supportive way, rather than expecting students to change first?” This involved a dramatic shift in perspective for the majority of the faculty. As Odiotti suggested, it also involved “making teaching public.” He brought in outside groups to observe and assess the teachers in their classrooms and implemented an idea the teachers themselves had suggested: visiting one another’s classrooms to learn new approaches. The new administrators also used video-based teaching materials from exemplary charter schools and were open to teachers visiting nearby schools known for effective and/or innovative practices.

In general, Odiotti, Seiberlich, and the dean of students brought a much greater emphasis on expectations than had been in place previously. The dean said, “We made clear that as members of the SMdP community, these are the processes we follow, and these are the consequences for violating them. We’d always had these expectations but hadn’t always enforced them.”

Structures and Systems

Many of the new structures and systems Odiotti and Seiberlich introduced focused on SMdP teachers and their curricula. For example, they announced that for each class session, teachers were expected to write on the board the objective and agenda for the day to help structure the class and to ensure that students understood daily classroom goals. “It was an adjustment at first,” one teacher said, “but now I’m a big fan. The objective and agenda help me understand better what students are learning—and what they aren’t learning.” Teachers were also expected to

observe their peers' approaches and to help improve one another's curricula, largely through Looking at Student Work (LASW) groups made up of four cross-discipline faculty members. Odiotti noted that some teachers were resistant to LASW at first, but soon began "showing up with ideas for improvement." The LASW groups focused on providing feedback on members' plans and discussing the effectiveness of different classroom approaches and assignments. According to one teacher, LASW was "a very nice outlet for gaining feedback we couldn't always get at regular faculty meetings."

Odiotti, Seiberlich, and the dean also introduced Learning Walks, during which they visited three different classrooms together to observe teachers in action. After observing each classroom for ten to fifteen minutes, they met to discuss what they had seen and formulated feedback for the teachers. "It's another way of holding them accountable," the dean said. Observations from the Learning Walks could also be used in completing teachers' performance evaluations.

Another systematic change involved the Monday teacher meetings. The new administration refocused these meetings on teachers "taking control" of their responsibilities, including having teachers from different disciplines collaborate to improve curricula (as through the LASW groups) and having individual instructors set clear personal learning goals and identify ways to achieve them.

The Monday morning assembly for all staff and students was another venue in which to reinforce key messages. Several staff members noted that Odiotti made it a point to bring up elements of SMdP's mission at every Monday assembly and to get students and teachers talking about ways to uphold it. At the Monday assemblies Odiotti also reminded students and faculty of SMdP's three standards: to be prepared for work, prepared for college, and committed to community justice and peace.

Several new structures and systems focused squarely on the students. Many students' experience with SMdP began before their freshman year. The school placed a subset of incoming freshmen into a summer Bridge Program (which students could continue taking during the academic year) comprising subject-specific seminars addressing academic deficits identified in their records. "We do a lot of intervention up front," one teacher explained. Monitoring of students' progress continued throughout their SMdP experience. For example, a five-member student-support team made up of the assistant principal, dean of students, social worker, guidance/college counselor, and Hire4Ed staff member met weekly to determine the best ways to help students in need. "The student-support team catches kids who might be falling through the gaps," Odiotti said.

Odiotti and Seiberlich introduced other, smaller—but nonetheless important—systems. For example, students were expected to carry their keycards at all time, rather than banging on doors to gain entry. Similarly, they were no longer allowed to enter classrooms through side doors; they were to use main doors only. And Odiotti decided to do away with bell-ringing to signal the ends and beginnings of class hours; instead, teachers and students were to note the time on school phones, all of which were synchronized. These changes heightened student and teacher accountability and improved levels of respect while reducing disruptions.

Engagement

Odiotti brought to SMdP a strong focus on engagement with fellow administrators, teachers, and students alike. “Mike is all over the school,” one teacher said. Another teacher noted that Odiotti was “very connected” to the students and that both the principal and assistant principal were “incredibly present.” The teacher went on to say, “Mike shows a very authentic sense that he cares about students well beyond their performance in the classroom.” Odiotti routinely stopped in on student retreats, sporting events, and volunteering activities. He even took a lunchtime proctor shift to interact further with the students. “He has a very humble approach to leadership and stays very involved with everyone here through conversations,” one teacher said. Another added, “Mike’s not only respected but very approachable. All the students know who Mr. O is.” Students responded to Odiotti’s approach by keeping him updated on their goals and achievements. “Students run up to him, excited to share,” a teacher said. “They want to make him proud; they show him their progress reports,” another noted. This approach was adopted by other key administrators as well. “One unique thing here is the presence of the administration,” a teacher said. “They have an open door policy. Students know the administration is right there, keeping an eye on things. That wasn’t true at my last school; it seemed like the principal was there maybe two days a week.”

Changes Seiberlich made to the administrative office’s physical structure symbolized the new level of engagement she and Odiotti were promoting. She removed much of the office’s former cubicle setup and positioned her desk for easy access by others. She also brought in a table and chairs to facilitate open conversation.

Engagement among SMdP teachers increased dramatically, largely through Odiotti’s and Seiberlich’s emphasis on collaboration. “The administration has tried to create a very open atmosphere—not closed-off rooms with teachers working privately, like it used to be,” a teacher said. The LASW groups also promoted deeper and more meaningful teacher interactions. “We can talk to each other much more freely now and share best practices,” another teacher said.

SMdP teachers observed that students were more engaged with one another as well, including through the annual class retreats and the end-of-the-year awards ceremony (see “Recognition and Celebration” section below). Parents were also becoming a larger part of SMdP’s culture and activities despite demanding work schedules. “Parents’ Night has been very well-attended for the last two years,” a teacher said. “The parents also get involved with other activities like the cross-cultural club and cooking for students’ birthday celebrations.”

Recognition and Celebration

The new administrators placed a strong emphasis on recognizing student achievements. For example, SMdP had always held an end-of-the-year awards ceremony to celebrate achievements and serve as a send-off for seniors, but Odiotti and Seiberlich brought “a new energy” to it, according to teachers. The 2010 ceremony, which the SMdP associate board (made up of young professionals) helped organize, included a video presentation and a PowerPoint highlighting the achievements of all graduating seniors. A teacher pointed out how engaged the students were in the ceremony and how excited the freshmen were to see the seniors’ achievements, even though they did not know the graduating class very well.

Student achievements (e.g., college acceptances, scholarships) were also announced on the SMdP website and shared at Monday morning assemblies. According to one teacher, part of the motivation of sharing such news was that “success breeds success”; she noted a strong uptick in the volume of good news since the new administration had arrived. Each semester, Odiotti also took honor roll students out to lunch. “It’s something the kids are excited about and strive for,” a teacher said.

Hard and Soft Signs of Improvement

There was clear evidence of improvement on outcome measures and softer indicators for SMdP.

In the first year that Odiotti and Seiberlich led SMdP, the number of tardies dropped from nearly 2,400 to 1,068, far exceeding the initial goal of a one-third reduction. In two years, SMdP went from having zero advanced placement (AP) classes to having four. Half the graduating seniors had taken at least one AP course, as had 40 percent of juniors. These trends helped drive dramatic improvement on one of the most crucial measures: graduation rate. Just before Odiotti and Seiberlich arrived, ten of forty-two seniors in the class of 2008 failed to graduate on time. In 2009, after the new administration’s first year, five of twenty-nine seniors did not graduate on time. And in 2010, only one of thirty-six seniors failed to graduate on time. Moreover, the 2010 graduates won a total of \$2.1 million in college scholarships, among them a senior—the school’s first Ivy League admission—who had won a full-ride scholarship to Dartmouth. SMdP’s class of 2011 comprised sixty-five students—more than 80 percent more than the previous graduating cohort.

SMdP students were also performing better against national norms than they had in the past. For example, the sophomore class’s measures of academic progress (MAP) mean math scores jumped 4 points (the median score increased by 6 points) from fall 2009 to spring 2010—nearly double the national average of 2.16 points—representing nearly two years of growth in one year. Their mean reading scores increased by 3 points, compared to a national average of 1.2 points. **Exhibit 3** displays SMdP students’ standardized test performance improvements in multiple subjects, with each graduating class after Odiotti and Seiberlich arrived reflecting greater composite-score gains than previous ones.

Improvements were also visible between classes in the hallways. For example, several teachers noted that physical fights were now extremely rare, and students showed much more respect for one another. Students also brought more positive energy to non-academic activities. “More kids come to dances and other events now,” a teacher said. “There’s lots of excitement about social events.”

Even within six months of the new administrators’ arrival, teacher perceptions of SMdP had improved on several dimensions, as demonstrated by survey results (see **Exhibit 4**). Teacher turnover was another area of improvement. After several years with high turnover, only one teacher did not plan to return for the fall semester in 2010. There were fourteen full-time teachers by mid-2010. “We’re batting 100 percent,” Odiotti said of the teachers he and Seiberlich had recruited; each had performed as well as or better than expected.

SMdP's enhanced reputation was also evident in the volume of applicants to the school. A total student body of 240 students was expected for fall 2010—representing more than 100 percent growth from the school's inaugural enrollment of about one hundred.

Underlying these improvements were much-improved student and teacher mindsets. "Our students have a different sensibility now," one teacher said. "They enjoy academics and talk about them. They understand what it means to be part of a college prep school." Several teachers noted that younger students, taking a cue from their older peers, had really "bought into" the idea of focusing on academics and striving for excellence. "They're proud of their school now," a teacher said. "Now it's cool to be an A student or to be recognized by Mr. O or Sister Judy." Another teacher added, "We are no longer a school of struggling students overwhelmed by out-of-reach expectations."

Seiberlich cited a student who exemplified the new spirit and attitude at SMdP: "Last year she failed nearly half her classes, to the point where others called her the Queen of NovaNet. I sat down to help her with her math skills, and she quickly 'got it.' She started to believe in herself, even making up problems to solve. A couple of months later she said, 'I used to be the Queen of NovaNet. Now I'm the Princess of Graduation!'"

The Road Ahead

In two years, Odiotti, Seiberlich, and the dean of students had helped bring about major improvements to SMdP at every level—from teaching to test scores to student behavior. "Today," Odiotti said, "someone walking into SMdP would find a community with a strong culture of respect and an extremely high level of commitment to academic rigor and excellence. The kids feel safe here. That's fundamental." Seiberlich added, "It's not just physical safety, but psychic safety. And while it's clear we're about business, not horseplay, you see happy kids here, enjoying each other and laughing." Overall, the administrators had succeeded in their mission of transforming SMdP into a true learning organization.

Yet their work was far from done. Among the specific challenges the SMdP team now faced was that of maintaining and expanding valuable new academic programs. "We are victims of our own success," a teacher said. "We will have thirty students in AP English this year [2010–2011] and would like to accommodate even more but don't have the money." In general, the teachers agreed that there was no shortage of good intentions and ideas but rather a dearth of financial and other resources to support these. The teachers themselves were affected directly by the funding shortage; they had gone two years without a pay increase.

Administrators and teachers also noted the need for continuous improvement to maintain SMdP's growth-focused mindset and culture. The dean of students explained, "We can put systems and processes in place, but we have to do other things to make sure everything works." He noted that these "other things" included communicating a clear vision and raising expectations at every step. One teacher said, "We have to be lifelong learners here. We can't stagnate."

Continual learning and growth was a fundamental idea for SMdP's administrators, staff, and students to embrace, especially given Odiotti's and Seiberlich's ambitious goals. "We have to continue building the best 'nest' possible for students and teachers to get what they need to grow," Seiberlich said. "We need to allow teachers to teach and students to learn, with the materials they need to do this," she added, noting that it was challenging to tackle bigger-picture,

strategic goals while dealing with daily issues such as scheduling courses and managing progress reports. Odiotti also highlighted big-picture objectives: “My goal is for us to be the best in our network of twenty-four schools—in terms of the student’s growth here, college placement, and performance in college.” He continued, “That means we have to continue to be a learning organization and empower people to make decisions on the ground, while providing the support they need.” Both Odiotti and Seiberlich expressed deep pride in how far SMdP had come in their two years at the school, along with a clear appreciation for the challenges involved in maintaining the school’s new culture and building on its recent success.



Discussion Questions

1. What did Odiotti, Seiberlich, and the dean of students do to shape SMdP's culture? How would you characterize the school's new culture compared to the previous one?
2. Was the SMdP administrative team successful in implementing changes? Use evidence to support your assertion.
3. How did the separate elements of the team's strategy work together (or not) to support its organizational goals?
4. What specific challenges do the SMdP team members face going forward? In their shoes, how would you handle these challenges?

Exhibit 1: Educational Leadership—Definition and Philosophy

DEFINITION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP (FROM JUDY SEIBERLICH)

Leadership is the ministry of marshalling the efforts of the members of a community toward their goals. It involves:

- Developing and articulating a common vision and inviting each member to join in its realization
- Organizing and administering systems that enable members to succeed
- Identifying and solving problems
- Being present and accompanying members by celebrating, challenging, and supporting them

Several values guide the practice of leadership:

- The growth mindset, as described by Carol Dweck
- Hospitality, justice, collegiality, subsidiarity
- The preference for:
 - Community over corporation
 - A focus on abundance over scarcity
 - Cooperation and collegiality over individualism
 - Transparent communication and accountability over control through secrecy

Through the nurturing of these values, a community grows and gains the strength and agility to move into its future in fidelity to its mission.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP (FROM MIKE ODIOTTI)

Leadership is the key to transformation and moving an organization forward. For an educational organization to become more effective over time, administrators, teachers, and staff need to become more skillful. Therefore, the conditions must be set systemwide to create a learning organization. This is hard work and requires instruction be linked to professional development, which in turn is based on the school's strategic plan. In order to create a culture of learning, a leader needs to foster and nurture teamwork, create systems for dialogue and reflection, use authority to set boundaries, and use conflict as a learning opportunity. The ultimate goal is to assist students in becoming independent learners and powerful thinkers who generate ideas and think deeply about the world around them.

Exhibit 2: Core Operating Principles (from Mike Odiotti)

1. If we continually develop the instructional expertise of the teachers, then teaching will be strengthened and all students will learn in deeper and more meaningful ways.
2. If we foster a belief system driven by the principles of persistence, growth mindsets—getting smarter is possible through hard work—and creating highly engaged classrooms through strategies such as No Opt Out, we will increase student efforts to apply themselves to the work in focused ways and promote their achievement.
3. If we develop a school culture where every student feels a sense of belonging, then students will become active participants in their learning.

Exhibit 3: SMdP Students’ Standardized Test Score Improvement (Points) by Subject and Graduating Class

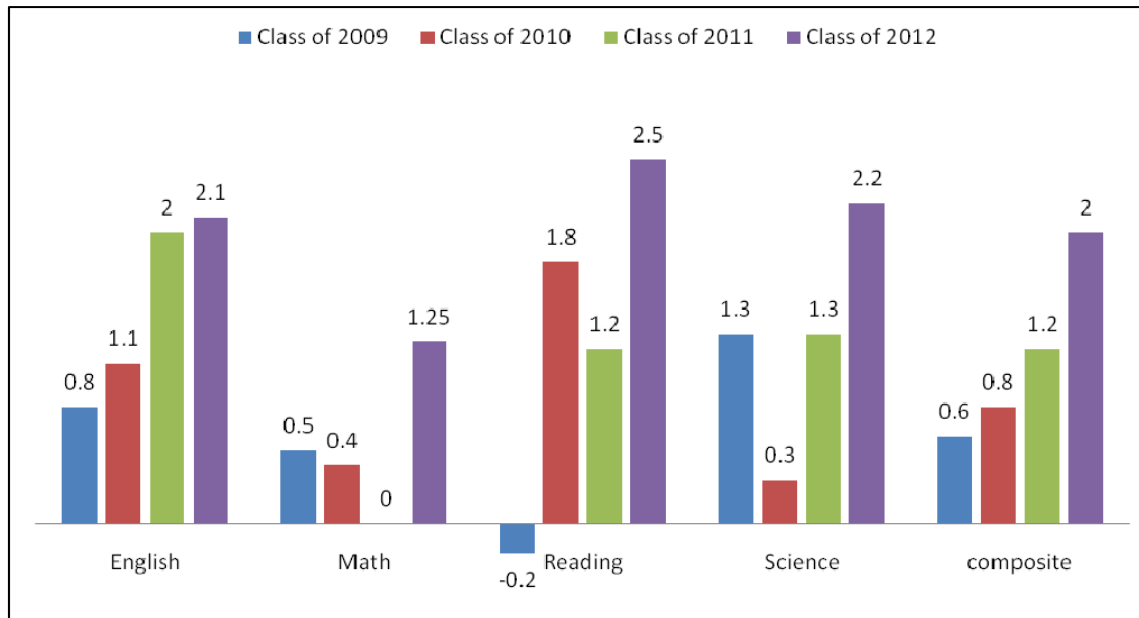


Exhibit 4: SMdP Faculty Survey Results, Summer 2008 vs. December 2008

Statement	Yes		No		Sometimes	
	Summer	December	Summer	December	Summer	December
I believe school policies (discipline, attendance, etc.) are clearly stated.	43%	46%	43%	8%	14%	46%
I believe that school policies are administered fairly and consistently.	5%	39%	81%	7%	14%	54%
I believe our students feel safe and respected.	81%	85%	0%	0%	19%	15%
I believe our curriculum is effective.	47%	46%	26%	8%	26%	46%
I believe we are kept well-informed on matters that affect us.	25%	39%	35%	7%	40%	54%
I believe that there is good morale throughout the school.	33%	50%	43%	8%	24%	42%
I believe that students are clear about learning outcomes they are expected to achieve.	53%	33%	26%	0%	21%	67%
We have a school-wide philosophy about the learning process and its relationship to the improvement of students' skills.	38%	85%	33%	7%	29%	8%