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

“So where do we start?”

Mike Odiotti and Judy Seiberlich asked each other this question simultaneously as they sat in the small administrative office of St. Martin de Porres High School in Waukegan, Illinois. It was July 2008, and the pair had just begun their new positions as the school’s principal (Odiotti) and assistant principal (Seiberlich).

By all accounts, the new administrators had their work cut out for them. St. Martin de Porres (SMdP), based on the Cristo Rey model of funding high school education with corporate internships, had opened in August 2004. In its first four years, SMdP had already had two presidents and two principals before Odiotti and Seiberlich arrived. Moreover, the new administrators had inherited a status quo that included challenges related to students (nearly 2,400 instances of tardiness in the previous year and 26 percent of the senior class failing to graduate on time in 2008); teachers (a tendency to place most of the blame for poor performance on students); and the administration (a limited focus on empowerment and accountability for both students and teachers).

Recent survey results suggested that only a minority of SMdP’s teachers believed that school policies were administered fairly and consistently or that the school had an organization-wide philosophy about the learning process. Partly as a result, teacher turnover had consistently been higher than ideal. It was clear to Odiotti and Seiberlich that they had to change major aspects of SMdP to promote its progress and, ultimately, its survival. What was less clear was exactly how to make the right set of mutually reinforcing changes to SMdP’s practices and policies. Reminding themselves of their commitment to improving students’ lives by creating a learning organization, Odiotti and Seiberlich considered where to start.

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SMdP Background

Plans for SMdP began in 2001, when an advisory committee received a grant to undertake a feasibility study for establishing a Cristo Rey model high school to serve the area.¹ The decision to open the school in Waukegan, a community forty miles north of Chicago, was made in January 2003. It was to be part of the Cristo Rey Network, a group of twenty-four high schools across the United States that “provide a quality, Catholic, college preparatory education to urban young people who live in communities with limited educational options.”² The Cristo Rey model included the idea that students work at corporate internships to help fund their high school education.

SMdP’s board of trustees was established in May 2003 with twenty-seven members representing religious organizations, educators, business professionals, and other leaders from the community. The board hired the first president in August 2003. Student enrollment exceeded one hundred students by June 2004, and SMdP’s opening ceremonies were held on August 23, 2004.

SMdP’s mission statement emphasized student development through education and work experience:

St. Martin de Porres High School, a Catholic, coeducational college preparatory school, is located in Waukegan, Illinois. The school is committed to academic excellence made affordable for young people of limited options through each student’s participation in the Hire4Ed (Corporate Internship) Program. St. Martin de Porres High School, a member of the Cristo Rey Network, strives to develop the full potential of each student in an atmosphere of mutual respect for the religious and cultural heritage of every individual.

SMdP also strove to uphold three standards for students: to be prepared for work, prepared for college, and committed to community justice and peace. When Odiotti and Seiberlich arrived, SMdP’s student body was approximately 80 percent Latino and 15 percent African-American, with about 75 percent of the student body qualifying for free or reduced lunch, in keeping with the school’s mission of serving young people of limited options. Organizationally, SMdP’s principal reported to the president, who in turn reported to the board.

Before They Came to St. Martin de Porres

Mike Odiotti and Judy Seiberlich brought to SMdP rich experience from multiple learning organizations and communities in need.

Odiotti (known as “Mr. O” to SMdP students) earned a B.S. in finance from Boston College’s Carroll School of Management in 1996, followed by a M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction—with an emphasis on leadership—from the college’s Lynch School of Education in 1998. From 2004 to 2007 he worked as an assistant principal in the Boston Public Schools system under the guidance of Elliot Stern. Odiotti’s leadership style was heavily influenced by Stern, who became a professor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. As a fellow for leadership expert Ron

¹ Historical and mission information from the SMdP website, <http://www.smdp.waukegan.org/about/history.htm> (accessed June 16, 2010).

² Cristo Rey Network website, <http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/index.shtml> (accessed June 16, 2010).

Heifetz, Stern introduced Odiotti to Heifetz's models and tactics, central to which was the idea of generating and sustaining adaptive change within organizations. Odiotti sought to implement this theme at SMdP. Most who met Odiotti immediately noted his ability to engage quickly and his thoughtful, no-nonsense approach.

Seiberlich (known to SMdP students as "Sister Judy") said, "I've been in high school my whole life"; she had started teaching in 1964, then moved into administration in the 1980s, always at the high-school level. Seiberlich focused much of her career on serving underprivileged children, including those at Chicago's inner-city schools. "My leadership style comes out of the struggles we've had in my community since the 1960s," she said, "especially the idea of how to build a global community centered on peace and justice." Seiberlich first came into contact with SMdP through the Sinsinawa Dominicans, the religious order to which she belonged. The group asked her to serve on SMdP's board; she agreed, and ultimately decided to seek a leadership role with the school. Seiberlich's strong focus on community-building was clear in her warm and caring demeanor.

Odiotti and Seiberlich interviewed for the position of SMdP principal in early 2008. Both were asked whether they would consider working as assistant principal for the school. "Absolutely not," Odiotti answered. "I'd actually prefer to be assistant principal," Seiberlich said. Both began their official positions with SMdP in summer 2008, though Odiotti had been volunteering at the school since January of that year.

The Status Quo

As a first step to understanding the challenges they faced, Odiotti and Seiberlich collected quantitative and qualitative data through school records, one-on-one teacher interviews, and paper-based student and teacher surveys. The patterns these and subsequent observations revealed suggested that the new administrators faced many issues.

Student-Related Issues

Multiple indicators pointed to challenges related to SMdP's student body. During the previous year, the school's 211 students tallied among them 2,390 "tardies," or late arrivals at school—an average of more than ten tardies per student. The school's credit-retrieval system, or the way students made up failed classes, was another indication of trouble. When Odiotti and Seiberlich first started, there was a backlog of credits that needed to be made up; many seniors were missing class credits they should have completed as freshmen. Compounding the problem was the students' attitude toward credit retrieval. They were to complete make-up coursework using an interactive online system (NovaNet), but they tended not to take the sessions seriously, dawdling or even failing to show up for them. The credit-retrieval problem contributed to a large number of students failing to graduate on time. Almost a quarter of the class of 2008—ten of forty-two students—did not complete their academic requirements in time to graduate.

Non-academic issues plagued the school as well. Physical fights, while not routine events, were not uncommon. "On my first day here, there was a fist fight in the hall," said SMdP's counselor and social worker, who had been with the school since its inception. Similarly, there was an overall dearth of respect for teachers and classmates. For instance, students who forgot their electronic keycards that opened their classroom's main entry doors tended to hammer on the

doors and nearby windows to be let in, disrupting multiple classrooms. Students also often caused disruptions by entering classrooms through side—rather than main—doors.

Several factors helped account for the situation at SMdP. One underlying element was what Odiotti and Seiberlich called a “middle-school mentality” among the students. Specifically, they thought the juniors and seniors, many of whom had transferred to SMdP from other area high schools, had brought difficult attitudes and behaviors to the school, making them less-than-ideal role models for the younger students. “There was a funny edge to the classrooms; I got a ‘jangling’ feeling when I observed the classes,” Seiberlich said. “It felt much more like a junior high than a high school.” One English teacher corroborated this feeling: “When I got here two years ago, some students were begging for strong academics, but others wanted to promote a very non-academic atmosphere and make it difficult for their classmates to succeed.”

Teacher-Related Issues

Teacher attitudes exacerbated students’ performance issues. According to the campus minister and theology teacher, in the past teachers “always made it about the students, saying, ‘They’re not doing what they should be doing,’” partly to absolve themselves. With regard to the credit-retrieval system, supervising teachers tended to “baby” the students by providing answers to the online tests or letting them avoid working on the make-up material at all, according to a SMdP science and math teacher. Moreover, teachers tended to be resistant to observation and other forms of evaluation. A resource teacher noted that when she was asked to assess teacher performance in 2007, she experienced “an incredible amount of pushback” from colleagues. “They saw me as a threat,” she recalled. A teacher who had been evaluated agreed, saying, “There was no explanation for it. So it felt like a spy coming in.” Such patterns contributed to poor student and teacher performance and to an increased need for summer school and other remedial efforts.

The faculty survey Odiotti and Seiberlich conducted illuminated teachers’ negative perceptions in key areas, including the administration of school policies and the presence of a school-wide philosophy concerning the learning process (see **Exhibit 1**). Most teachers also endorsed the idea that SMdP as an organization needed to “decide who we are and whom we can serve,” and expressed the hope that the new leadership would provide “visual presence.” Not surprisingly, teacher turnover was high when Odiotti and Seiberlich joined the school. SMdP had eleven teachers in 2004, its first year of operation. Each year after that, the school was forced to replace four or five teachers; when Odiotti and Seiberlich came on board in 2008, six new teachers started with them.

Administration-Related Issues

The previous principal had come to SMdP to help create an atmosphere for learning and had recognized the challenge of the ethnic, racial, and academic diversity of the student body. She worked with the groups of students, encouraging them to know and respect each other, which led to a safer and more welcoming atmosphere. She also recognized that the students needed greater clarity regarding expectations and disciplinary consequences. Some staff members went too far in their efforts to support students, whereas others believed that students needed to be more accountable for their actions and performance. That principal unfortunately left the school after only a short time.

In sum, there was no shortage of goodwill at SMdP, but few good structures, systems, or solutions. “We were a Cristo Rey school in terms of high standards,” one teacher said, “but offered very little to help students meet the standards.” She added, “There were lots of Band-Aid solutions. We weren’t providing the scaffolding our students needed.” That is not to say that SMdP administrators were not aware of the challenges or thoughtful in their approach before Odiotti and Seiberlich arrived. Both new administrators noted that the dean of students, who had been hired by the previous principal, was keen on changing the school’s culture in a measured way. “He was smart about people and leadership and was all about conversations,” Seiberlich said. “He asked, ‘What’s best for the school? How can we make it work?’” The dean of students brought to SMdP more than twenty years in corporate human resources work, including many years of experience at Allstate. He recalled, “When I joined SMdP, I was called the dean of discipline, which wasn’t necessarily accurate. My challenge was not to just sit back and wait for someone to call me about a student-related problem.” Odiotti and Seiberlich agreed that although the dean’s intentions were positive, his influence was weakened because his role had not been defined broadly enough.

All of these problems and patterns contributed to a general perception among outsiders of SMdP as an “alternative” school. Worse, insiders shared the sentiment; many students embraced a negative attitude toward academics—and one another. For example, one teacher noted, “Students were called ‘smart’ in a mocking way.” She recalled a 2007 incident representative of students’ perceptions: “We had taken the kids on a field trip to the Adler Planetarium, where they met students from other schools. When one of those kids expressed unfamiliarity with SMdP, one of our students said, ‘It’s a school for poor kids.’”

The Challenge Ahead

Through their initial research and observations, Odiotti and Seiberlich knew they faced challenges in every dimension of the school they were to lead: students, teachers, and administration. Based on their backgrounds and philosophies as educators and leaders, they were committed to overhauling SMdP’s culture to build a true learning organization. They faced many questions: Where to start? How could they rally SMdP’s stakeholders around a new learning philosophy and set of policies and practices? How would the stakeholders respond to the many changes they envisioned?

One of the only answers Odiotti and Seiberlich already had was their response to a simple question: When should they start making changes? Now.



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Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the culture at SMdP before the arrival of Odiotti and Seiberlich?
2. Was the school's culture aligned with its mission?
3. Given the situation, what specific challenges did Odiotti and Seiberlich face? How are these challenges related?
4. What would you do if you were Odiotti and Seiberlich? How would you "fix" SMdP? Where would you start if you wanted to build a new culture? How would you integrate the different elements of your solution?

Exhibit 1: SMdP Faculty Survey Results, Summer 2008

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