



## **New Leadership Committed to Excellence A Case Study of Austin Independent School District** by Evangeline Caridas

### **The Situation**

Dr. Paul Mack joined the Austin Independent School District's Department of Professional Development (DPD) as its Director with big goals and even bigger challenges. The DPD is the clearinghouse for the school district employees needs at all levels. The department personnel was split between two locations, reflecting its multitude of responsibilities.

Dr. Mack's predecessor had kept a firm grip on the department's traditional top-down hierarchy. From the start, Dr. Mack was amazed that the department was able to handle its many tasks, but at the same time, worried that the pressure and stratification was taking its toll. Employees failed to share knowledge, because of the lack of a greater sense of vision or apparatus for communication. Although the department was functioning, and responding to the basic expectations of its clientele, Dr. Mack knew they could – and should – do better. Although several layers removed from Austin's schoolchildren, he knew that his team was responsible for helping every member of the Austin school system perform at their best.

With recent flux in the Austin Independent School District, Dr. Mack was handed a rare opportunity to push for change. With the current superintendent in place only six months, and supportive of plans for staff development, Dr. Mack had a clean slate.

He wanted to model a democratic process in which all of his staff could participate, and bring them together to develop a common vision. He had recently trained in Chicago with Evangeline Caridas, an authority on the Open Systems Approach and founder of Caridas Consulting International (CCI), Dr. Mack learned how an Open Systems Approach could benefit a fractured and over-burdened staff situation like he currently faced.



## **The Task**

Working with Evangeline and the CCI team, Dr. Mack determined that a *Search Conference* would be the best starting point. A tool for learning and planning, a *Search Conference* asks people to tap into their own experience, scanning the past and present environment, to determine what needs to be kept and what needs to be changed. In so doing, they can assess what is required for all employees to function at their optimum and help the organization reach its most desirable future.

Sharing knowledge is a key to understanding the importance of individuals within a large operation such as the DPD. Knowing what others are doing (and how and why) also allows people to work from each others' knowledge standpoint and avoid duplication, develop a concerted mission, and promote a cooperative, supportive environment. Dr. Mack's biggest challenge was introducing participative strategies to a so-called "team" which was, realistically, a group of people accustomed to working as individuals.

New to the department and the State of Texas framework, Dr. Mack's first goal was to learn about the department's history, its structure, and its place in the community. "I wanted to get a measure of the department," Dr. Mack says, "I wanted to know what all of the employees saw, what had been going on." The DPD served all employees of the Austin School District. It offered training programs and career planning for all levels of employees from administrators, through support staff down to teachers, and even the custodial staff. It managed placement for new teachers and student teachers, as well as the accompanying orientation and support programs, and published a catalog of services.

Most of these functions were performed at the "academy," an Austin elementary school campus that had been renovated for adults. The academy was known as a desirable place to work; in addition to housing the training programs, the catalog production, a library, and a catering service, the academy welcomed visiting lecturers and educational experts.

## **The Implementation**

The *Search Conference*, which included a dozen employees and represented every area of the DPD, revealed deeply-entrenched obstacles to communication. Dr. Mack states that people "were reluctant to voice their opinions on the same level with their bosses and sub-bosses." Conditioned by the previous hierarchical atmosphere, people were anxious about the security of their positions. This led them to keep their knowledge private, to work independently and interpret cooperative ventures as potentially threatening interferences.

To counter this, Dr. Mack chose the approach of: "I wanted people to understand their jobs." The *Search Conference* method met with some initial resistance, because it encouraged a culture of participation that appeared to be in direct opposition to the prevailing office environment. Fortunately, however, the staff gradually grew to appreciate this new opportunity to exhibit their individual knowledge, discuss the DPD's mission, and create an overall plan of action.

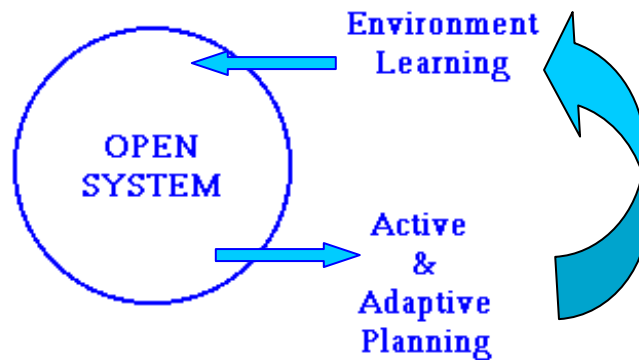


### The Success of Open Systems

Results were evident soon after the *Search Conference* meetings began. Most visible were improvements to the physical environment. As Dr. Mack reports, “the custodians redoubled their efforts.” In response to requests for a wider variety of food, the catering service expanded its menu and was highly praised for the effort. The academy had become a truly productive workplace and Dr. Mack was able to move his operation to the academy site, bridging the split within the DPD.

Once there, he experienced the benefits of the *Search Conference* firsthand. “The academy had a good culture and climate,” he says, one that “promoted the sharing of knowledge, and improved all of the intangible and unmeasurable attributes of a productive work environment.” Dr. Mack continued to use *Search Conferences* to maintain the positive work environment. He set up weekly “check-in” meetings with the program directors, and worked regularly with the secretaries.

For his own secretary, Dr. Mack says the move out to the academy was “enlightening and powerful, because it allowed her to see what was really happening, and to streamline communications.” Dr. Mack enjoyed and learned from working side by side with all of the people he supervised, and having direct contact with the people they served.



Next Dr. Mack took the search conference method into the schools themselves. Search conferences played an integral role in launching a highly successful open enrollment high school. He held search conferences for focused areas, such as the academy's library staff, and continued his regular meetings. "At the meetings, people really benefited from carousel walks'," A method whereby, "we'd leave our action plans on the table, and walk around, so everyone could see each other's goals." The **Open Systems Approach** created a positive, productive, and coherent work environment at the DPD. Dr. Mack says that thanks to **Search Conference** and a participative approach, "we learned how to be a high-performing team to best serve our clients, and to help them improve student achievement in Austin's school system."



For further information, please contact Evangeline Caridas at 713-629-5692, or visit Caridas Consulting International on the web at [www.flowmanagement.net](http://www.flowmanagement.net).