In Recognition of Excellence Dinner
East Williston Union Free School District, Old Westbury, New York

ABOUT THE PROGRAM
Most high schools hold awards events for their graduating seniors. If the awards are based on grades, two or three top students often dominate, especially in smaller districts. Worthwhile students are left out, creating a “recognition gap.” The In Recognition of Excellence Dinner addresses this gap. The event honors students who have worked hard, helped others, and made the school community a better place.

Each year the 10 or so students who are nominated are recognized during the Academic Awards Ceremony. They select a teacher, staff member, or coach who had the greatest impact on their lives. These teachers are then invited along with the students to an intimate dinner held in their honor.

At the dinner, the principal speaks about each student. The students get their turn by speaking about the teachers or staff members and their influence, revealing the personal connection established between the students and the faculty members.

THE BOARD’S INVOLVEMENT
The impetus for creating an award for students who would not normally receive academic recognition came from a school board member. The school board believes in celebrating more than just the typical academic achievement of students. A core part of the district mission states the need to “nurture the best in each child morally, intellectually, socially, artistically, emotionally and physically.” Board members attend the event and recognize the important role it plays in celebrating district wide values.

RESULTS
These days, districts, schools, faculty, and students are often measured by metrics such as examination scores, graduation rates, and number of AP Scholars. Although these measures are useful, they fail to capture the full essence of student learning and growth. Furthermore, when high scores become the primary metric for recognition, successful students are often omitted because their success is not quite at the same high level of a few of the top students. This program allows the district to define and celebrate its values. It is one of the most anticipated end-of-year events. Faculty members are excited when they receive an invitation. Board members, district and building administrators, and families of the 10 selected students are all witness to the powerful student-faculty connections celebrated through the words of the selected students. The evening serves as a reminder of what is most important about the district: the connections created and nurtured among students and faculty.

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Connecting Generations: Teen Teachers for All Learners
Swan Valley School District, Saginaw, Michigan

ABOUT THE PROGRAM
Swan Valley School District believes that, if school truly serves the community, it has to forge partnerships that extend beyond bricks and mortar. Business members come to the district for solutions. Interestingly, a local funeral home approached the district for help with aging residents who have experienced personal loss.

The district set up a program at the high school for senior citizens to learn how to use a smart-phone, and how to set up and communicate through email, Facebook, Skype—even texting. Throughout the day, the seniors meet with high school mentors who do everything from setting up computers, tablets, and phones, to teaching their partners how to use them. Because many senior citizens can’t drive, twice a week a group of students goes to their homes. After the teen mentors provide instruction on how to use devices, they teach the residents how to set up Netflix accounts, play games, and even how to do online banking. Friendships and bonds have been formed that surpass traditional generational relationships.

In another phase of the cross-generational program, teens teach and mentor preschool students with literacy and creative lessons each week of the school year. Also, through the Cadet Teaching program, high school students are assigned classrooms to work with younger children. They earn both high school and college credit for the accredited program.

THE BOARD’S INVOLVEMENT
The school board approved the implementation of all cross-generational programs, and members are visible throughout each of them. It encourages staff and students to engage in problem solving that provides opportunities for authentic learning. Members participate in the solutions, not only by “showing up,” but by actively taking part in lessons the students teach, as well as by sharing their skills and talents with students. They have invited high school students to serve on the board at regular meetings. They serve as mentors to teens, and are committed to maintaining critical pieces of students’ educational plans.

RESULTS
High school dropout research indicates that students are more likely to stay in school if they are involved in service learning, and if they feel connected to the school community. The cross-generational programs provide an avenue to connect students for success.

Students learn about character, integrity, service, and putting the needs of others before their own. Literacy lessons transform into life lessons; scheduled mentoring hours blend into unlikely friendships. Mentors become learners, and teachers become students. Students learn by doing, by teaching, and by listening.

Service has become a way of life for Swan Valley students. Each year the local Community Foundation Youth Award recognizes one student in the entire county who has been dedicated to the service of others. In five of the last seven years, the award was presented to a Swan Valley student.

Some of the students will stop in before school and say, “I couldn’t wait to get to school today because . . .” the reasons would be because they got to work with the little children, or because it was their day to meet with the senior citizens, or even because they wanted to try out something new in technology.

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CREST
Teton County School District 1, Jackson, Wyoming

ABOUT THE PROGRAM
The school board is committed to providing high-quality professional development for teachers throughout the school year. The board recognizes, however, that a traditional approach of holding professional development for teachers during the school day creates challenges for parents. Many parents do not have the flexibility or cannot afford to miss a day’s work to stay home with their children while the district conducts professional development. To address this challenge, the district created CREST (Community + Recreation = Enrich Student’s Time). It is a joint venture with more than 20 community organizations to provide students with a wide variety of experiential learning activities during the three no-school Fridays that have been set aside for professional development. This program is offered at no cost to families, and it provides transportation and meals to ensure all families are able to participate.

THE BOARD’S INVOLVEMENT
CREST began with a commitment from the school board and the superintendent to partner with community organizations to make this program a reality. School leaders were dedicated to ensuring that students had an opportunity to be in a safe, supervised, and educationally enriched environment while at the same time providing professional development to staff. The board supported the application for grants to fund the program. Eventually, the district received over $100,000 in grant funds as well as additional in-kind donations from the community.

RESULTS
Over 500 kindergarten through eighth-grade students enrolled in a full day of engaging, project-based learning opportunities during teacher work days. These activities included building Popsicle stick bridges, participating in acting and dance lessons, and pressing fresh apple juice. Many students were exposed to experiences that would not have been possible for them without this innovative program. By working with community partners, the district was able to meet the needs of teachers, students, and families by providing appropriate supervision and educational services on no-school professional development days.

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Juntos: Together for a Better Education
Tillamook School District 9, Tillamook, Oregon

ABOUT THE PROGRAM
About a quarter of Tillamook School District 9 students are Latino. The district has worked diligently to serve Latino students, but found that they were still showing an achievement gap when compared to the rest of the student population particularly around language arts, math, and graduation. Also, the district was having difficulty connecting with parents as their students moved into junior high and high school.

Juntos, a program of Oregon State University’s Open Campus, was proposed as a way to address these disconnects with Latino families. Juntos includes both students and their families in six weeks of workshops around success in high school and preparation for college. Both dinner and child care are provided during these sessions to lessen any barriers to participation. After the initial six weeks, it continues with student clubs, family nights, and college visits. It offers GED preparation classes in Spanish at the local community college, holds cultural celebrations as a group, and plans continuing family nights around topics such as financial aid, immigration, and basic computer skills.

Juntos began by inviting parents into the high school, where the district provided space to hold the sessions. This provided parents possibly their first chance to go into the school and see the classrooms, lockers, cafeteria, and more. Faculty, staff, administrators and school board members attend sessions, meeting the families and answering questions.

THE BOARD’S INVOLVEMENT
The school board made it a priority to increase outreach and connection to the Latino community. It recognized that achievement and graduation gaps existed, and focused on ways to address them. Board members attended informal community meetings to start the conversation. In 2013, the first session of the Juntos program took place. Board members attended sessions and the first graduation. They continue to attend sessions and promote the program in the community. Last year, as a result of invitations from board members, many families from the Latino community attended a school board meeting. The district provided translators so that all those in attendance would understand.

RESULTS
The district has seen improved graduation rates for Latino students since the inception of Juntos, with a 100 percent graduation rate for Juntos students. In addition, over 85 percent of the students have gone on to college, many with scholarships from the district or their college of choice.

Twenty Juntos parents have enrolled in Spanish GED preparation classes at the community college, which is a result of their commitment to their own education after becoming part of Juntos.

Now in its third year, Juntos has served over 100 people. Families want to participate so that they can help their children complete high school and go on to college.

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Owl Time
Windsor C-1 School District, Imperial, Missouri

ABOUT THE PROGRAM
Windsor High School, with an enrollment of 1,000 students, provides many varied academic, athletic, and social opportunities. All of these offerings are made with the intent to broaden a student’s world experience and prepare them for life after high school. Very little time is afforded to young adults that is at their discretion. High school students are booked from the time they wake up until the end of the day. Self-directed time is squeezed out.

But where do you find time in an already limited and parceled schedule? The school day consisted of seven periods, with 50-minute classes and an extend fifth period to accommodate a three-shift lunch. Using time before or after school was not feasible or practical. Restructuring the school day was determined as the way to create more student-directed time. It was important to maintain the high-quality programming offered at Windsor, so courses would not be compromised or added, such as an advisory class, to already jammed student schedules. Instead, the three-shift lunch was changed to a single 58-minute self-directed, centrally located, time commitment. Class duration was minimally affected, going from 50 to 47 minutes in length. What now was available was time.

Students were told when they could eat, use the restroom, work on assignments, and socialize. Cafeteria rushes occurred early on in the program, since students had not flexed their ability to defer lunch for other options such as using the open computer labs, visiting the library, or seeking academic support. As more lunch seating was accommodated and academic and enrichment options were made known, the student body began to deprogram the institutionalized schedule and embrace their choices.

Students not making strong choices in time management, and consequently earning Ds or Fs on their reports, are given mandatory tutoring or Quiet Time to foster those stronger study skills and increase their learning. With the time flexibility built into Owl Time, the program is able to evolve with the student body needs.

THE BOARD’S INVOLVEMENT
Owl Time was initiated by the building principal, now assistant superintendent, who proposed the idea to the faculty, planned and piloted an Owl Time-like scenario, then approached the school board on full implementation. Three years into the program, the high school has had three different principals. The change in leadership has many implications. The school board extended professional trust in the building leadership and teacher capacity to change a traditional school schedule based on the understanding that the program was to better serve the students. The board has a commitment to student-centered decisions and support, and the teachers and administrators are a trusted team to carry out new ideas that will be adjusted to address the differing needs of the student-centered program.

RESULTS
Discipline referrals have dropped by 15 percent since Owl Time was implemented as a year-long effort, which included an addition of 65 students to the school population (2014-15). Tardies also have been directly addressed through Owl Time; students who accrue at least four tardies must eat in a separate room throughout the entire hour-long lunch. Owl Time has become an immediate answer when a student needs academic support, access to technology, or time to explore interpersonal relationships around common interests. The front-end results are directly related to the extensive planning, trials, feedback, reflections, and ongoing adjustments made to a 58-minute “loose-tight” structured lunch.

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