

by Stephen E. McMinn

A Collaboration That's Making A Huge Difference In Our Local Public Schools

THE CALL FOR HELP

Great minds develop great ideas often as a result of a great need. These elements came together to spawn a very special and gratifying project to address a huge need. G.W. Hellyer Elementary School Principal, Sheilah Lane, needed help. She was concerned about the test scores at her school, scores that were placing her at risk with the State of California. The learning challenges were daunting and something had to be done to reverse a trend headed in the wrong direction. With limited funds and resources, how would it be possible to not only significantly, but quickly increase Hellyer's scores?

This journey began in 2007. At Hellyer, many parents did not know how best to support their children. "Good", it was felt, meant just showing up each day at school. The truth appeared in the numbers and test scores and it was evident that "good", in reality, wasn't.

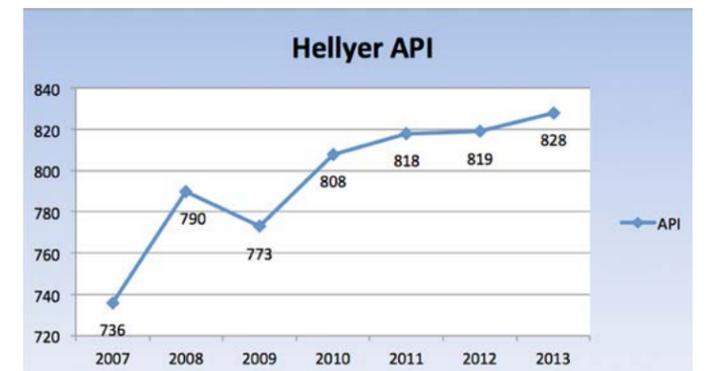
The test results proved something was missing; low achievement seemed uncorrectable. This was the barometer used by the state to measure the school. There was not much room or reason left for optimism. They had tried everything, she thought. The discouragement also reflected an accurate picture of the school's student culture. Was school fun? Was learning fun? What chances, what opportunities, what future laid ahead for the children? Did these children even have a dream of going to college? For many, sadly, the answer was no. The results were clear ... and it was disheartening.

Hellyer Elementary School received their annual API STAR achievement results that year. "API"



Sheilah Lane - Retired Hellyer Elementary School Principal. She saw her school's test scores increase dramatically through the Junior University Program she helped create.

**CREATING HOPE
AND THE DREAM
FOR A
COLLEGE EDUCATION**



From academic probation in 2007 to API scores well above 800 in 2013, Hellyer test scores were among the highest in the county for at-risk student populations.

stands for Academic Performance Index – and "STAR" stands for Standardized Testing and Reporting. This, in essence, is the grade given annually to each public California school based on the average student body academic achievement results. It shows how the students in any particular school are faring when compared with similar schools.

The results came in and they were not good.

The Hellyer API was a startlingly low 736. The passing California state standard is 800 with a top score being 1,000. Hellyer was about to be placed on probation. Principal Lane realized something needed to change, but what? The administration, faculty and staff had worked hard to improve learning and this is what came back. The school seemed out of options.

It was around this time that Liz Nandakumar, a Resource Specialist for Hellyer Elementary had a short discussion with Claude Fletcher, the Chancellor of Valley Christian Schools. Claude and Liz's families attended the same church and they were acquainted with each other. Valley Christian sits on a hill overlooking the south valley of San Jose and was clearly visible from Hellyer Elementary. Many times Liz had looked up at Valley Christian where her children attended and wondered if help might be available from them. Liz had the same concerns as Sheilah Lane and asked Chancellor Fletcher if they might have interest in a collaborative partnership to have high school students tutor the Hellyer students. Claude's answer was positive and from this small discussion came a first meeting held at Valley Christian. Attending were Dr. Clifford Daugherty, President of Valley Christian, Principal Lane, Liz Nandakumar, Cindy Nardi, the Valley Christian High School Outreach Coordinator and Dr. Joel Torode who at the time was the principal at Valley Christian. Ideas were exchanged, concepts mapped out and from this small meeting the Junior University was born. To carry the theme further, the high school mentors were coined by Principal Lane as Junior Professors as a way of planting the seed to her students that college was a viable, reachable option in the future if they worked hard enough.



The excitement of learning is evident in these Hellyer Elementary students as they begin to dream about going to College.

The task of implementing the program fell to Cindy Nardi and Liz Nandakumar. Working tirelessly, they developed a curriculum to teach the Valley Christian students how to mentor. They worked with Principal Lane to secure valuable class time for the mentoring activities. Valley Christian students had to be recruited to join the effort as mentors. And students at Hellyer that would benefit most from the mentoring had to be identified. Even seemingly mundane issues such as transporting the older students to Hellyer had to be arranged. The program was kicked off during the 2007/2008 school year and immediately embraced by the students, teachers, and parents. Once the program became established, Cindy Nardi and Liz Nandakumar began to dream of an extension of the program to include after-school activities such as athletics



The Making of "Junior University" – A Newly Created Foundation for Excellence and Joy in Education and School



Junior University and Lighthouse Initiative Team members from Franklin-McKinley School District, Andrew Hill High School and Valley Christian Schools meet with San Jose District 2 Councilman Ash Kalra (3rd from left) and Madison Nguyen, Vice Mayor of San Jose and District 7 Councilwoman (3rd from right).

and music combined with bible stories attended by students under parental permission. If a child wanted to learn the trombone, they would be teamed with a high school trombone player. The same would hold true for those interested in soccer, cheerleading, painting, robotics, or baton twirling. The opportunities were limited only by the children's imagination and integrated with faith based activities. The initial attempts were rebuffed but then the results of the hard work of Junior University began to bear fruit.

What was happening was a culture shift among the students and the teachers in confidence... in learning... and API STAR results. Where before there was pessimism, there was now optimism. Where there was despair, there was now hope, and with it amazing progress.

In 2008, the first year following Principal Lane's initial meeting with the leadership at Valley Christian, there was an astonishing 54 point increase from 736 to 790 in Hellyer's scores! That indeed was a BIG positive upswing. In 2009, it

dipped a bit to 773; however, it has taken off since then and increased every year. In 2010, it jumped to 808. In 2011, it was 818. In 2012, it was 819. In 2013, it was 828. Armed with these outstanding results, Cindy Nardi and Liz Nandakumar decided to again propose the after school program to include additional activities. Their hard work was rewarded when the request was approved. The results had spoken for themselves and in this case "more was better". Thus came the renaming of the program from the Junior University to the "Junior University and Lighthouse Initiative". The students are motivated to learn and excited to be there. Parents are delighted with the turnaround. The principal at Sylvandale Middle School, Dan Fowler, even commented on the high quality of students he was receiving from Hellyer and wanted to know how he could help. Changes as big and as drastic as these don't happen overnight. But they have. What had happened? Could the program maintain its momentum?



academic achievement of students and the school culture through one-on-one mentoring and tutoring of elementary students by volunteer high school students, serving as Junior Professors.”

Success at Hellyer continued under the direction of Principal Jerry Merza, who succeeded Sheilah Lane upon her retirement, at the end of the 2008-2009 school year. Principal Merza commented on his goals upon taking over at Hellyer, “The State of California requires all schools to have an API score above 800. That is every school’s goal.

“My first year here we were not at 800. When we made that tremendous growth that catapulted us above 800, it was a huge accomplishment and put us where the state wanted us to be. With the help of Valley Christian High School and the Junior University and Lighthouse Initiative, we have been able to sustain and grow our score each year.”

Hellyer students were so successful that the program was attracting the attention of officials in the Franklin-McKinley School District, of which Hellyer is a member. In a meeting with Dr. John Porter, Superintendent of the Franklin-McKinley School District, he urged the schools to continue working together and answer the question in everyone’s mind: “What is the magic”?

In 2012, Carla Haakma, then Principal of Los Arboles Literacy and Technology

K-3 Academy and now a district administrator, collaborated with Jerry Merza to bring Junior University to Los Arboles. Dr. Daugherty, realizing that Valley Christian students couldn’t scale their resources to multiple schools, reached out to Andrew Hill High School Principal, Bettina Lopez. She endorsed the program and appointed Joshua Greene, Support Services Coordinator, as the coordinator to find mentors from Andrew Hill to work in conjunction with Valley Christian students at a third school, Lairon College Preparatory Academy (Grades 4-7). More wonderful high school “Junior Professor” mentors were needed and Andrew Hill High School delivered.

Principal Maria Dehghanfard of Lairon was delighted with the involvement of Andrew Hill, commenting that, “We’ll be involved with Andrew

WHAT A DIFFERENCE THE “ASK” MADE

As explained by Principal Lane in a Franklin-McKinley School District newsletter from 2009, “Junior University has the objectives of improving



An Andrew Hill High School mentor gives one-on-one instruction to his mentee.



One-on-one mentoring creates a spark driving the mentees to excel.



Sam, a Valley Christian student mentor, teaches two aspiring Hellyer trombone players.



“Our students via mentors in the Junior University and Lighthouse Initiative, are exposed to the qualities of Goodness, Peace and Joy. These positive role models create a desire to learn and emulate these qualities in their own lives.”

Jerry Merza
Principal
Hellyer Elementary

Hill High School, where most of our children end up ... so for us to have both schools involved as mentors is really a great opportunity for all of our kids.”

This collaboration was so successful that through the efforts of Cindy Nardi and Liz Nandakumar, the program expanded even further to include the after-school Lighthouse program offering even more enrichment opportunities. By 2013, the program blossomed into a three-day-a-week schedule involving over 700 student trips and seven collaborating schools. The “Junior University and Lighthouse Initiative” is now under the direction of the Leadership Team. This team includes Carla Haakma, Franklin-McKinley Director of Categorical Compliance and Assessment Programs, Dr. Maria Dehghanfard, Principal of Lairon College Preparatory Academy, Dr. Ricardo Balderas, Principal of Los Arboles Literacy and Technology Academy, Jerry Merza, Principal of Hellyer Elementary and, most recently, Dan Fowler, Principal of Sylvandale Middle School. Principal Mark Lodewyk of Valley Christian High School and Principal Lisa Arnett of Valley Christian Junior High School also serve on the team with the support of Dr. John Porter, Superintendent of the Franklin-McKinley School District and Dr. Clifford Daugherty, President of Valley Christian Schools (K-12).

More than 325 volunteer high school and junior high school students are now transported to three Franklin-McKinley elementary schools, including Hellyer, Los Arboles and Lairon. Cindy Nardi, Valley Christian High School Community Outreach Director and Joshua Greene, Andrew Hill



Robotics and dance are two of the Lighthouse programs taken advantage of by the Simon family.



Mentors look forward to their interaction with mentees, such as Ramatu and Kasandra.

Support Services Coordinator lead volunteer Junior Professors as they inspire and mentor their eager elementary mentees.

The initiative expanded offerings for a wider range of student gifts and talents including not only academics, but also the arts and athletics for the Seven Trees Community elementary students. Participating schools are asked to join an organization called the “Quest Institute for Quality Education”. The Quest Institute serves as a conduit for the development of capital and human resources to support collaboration.

Expanding the program to after-school elective type activities was a key for Dr. Ricardo Balderas, Principal of Los Arboles. As he relayed, “When students are exposed to different things, who knows where they’ll find their passion? Maybe it will be service, maybe mathematics, maybe music, maybe acting. So the more things they are exposed to, the more choices they have. We look forward to those opportunities.”

Principal Lane initially envisioned this program as providing cross-age learning, an older student teaching a younger learner, providing inspiration and academic support in an effective, comfortable environment. Connecting with successful, motivated, college-bound high school students implants the idea in impressionable elementary students that they too can go to college. Many of the Seven Trees Community students are second-language learners and with extra tutoring provided by Junior University and Lighthouse mentors, they are achieving great success. The benefits are two-fold: the elementary students receive tutoring and support, improving their academic performance, and high school mentors discover that they can

truly model success and transform lives by their volunteer service.

As each week comes and goes, the excitement in the young students’ faces is tangible as their Junior Professor mentors disembark from their buses and arrive on campus. As Dr. Daugherty explained, “More comes back on the bus than goes over on the bus as the Valley Christian and Andrew Hill High School mentors realize the joy of selfless service.”

At each visit to the three schools, Valley Christian High School and Andrew Hill High School students provide kindergarten through sixth grade students with one-on-one academic, artistic and athletic mentoring opportunities. Under the supervision of professional teachers, each “Junior Professor” is assigned one or more students to teach reading, math, choir, dance, weekly instrumental lessons,



Maddie, a Valley Christian Junior High School student (left) looks forward to weekly mentoring to help Zeke with reading.



Javier worked with his Grandfather to create a special hat for his mentor, Jeevan, a Valley Christian High School student.

art, robotics and more. Volunteer high school students develop a highly personalized connection, offering inspiration, encouragement and a challenge to hundreds of elementary students to plan and prepare to attend college.

From the start, the students became more excited about learning. Each time the buses arrived, they exuded enthusiasm and with anticipation ... they looked forward to their new friends from Andrew Hill and Valley Christian who spent time with them, serving as tutors and mentors. The “magical” connection of the minds and hearts between high school students and elementary children, combined with the “Of course you’re going to college like me” message, brings a feeling of “Goodness, Peace and Joy” to involved students. The test scores reflect that.

During the summer of 2013, the Leadership Team debuted a Lighthouse Initiative called “Splish! Splash! Learn to Swim Camp”. This special program paired Valley Christian High School student volunteer athletes with almost 200 elementary school students from the Franklin-McKinley School District. Held at Valley Christian Schools’ Aquatic Center, the program consists of swim lessons, Bible stories, prayer and training in the Christian faith, all done with parental permission. Special reduced fees from \$150 to



have received such mentorship ... the joy, confidence and appreciation ... are abundant. The answer to a call ... met with success and meaning and results ... that go well beyond words, pride and happiness.

It may seem awkward that a private Christian school can collaborate with a public high school to make such a difference in the lives of at-risk younger students. The key to the cooperation and success can be found in one of our most important documents – The Declaration of Independence. The program

only \$25 for eight lessons over a four week period are available to students from the three Seven Trees Community Schools, where 85% or more of the children qualify for low cost or free lunch programs.

Cathy Manthey, head of Valley Christian's Aquatic Center, directs "Splish! Splash!" by recruiting enthusiastic Valley Christian High School athletes and alumni as volunteer swimming instructors. She explains, "Drowning is a leading cause of accidental deaths among children in the United States, ranked second only to car crashes. Participation in formal swim lessons can reduce the likelihood of childhood drowning by 88%. Our athletes are happy to volunteer. They realize these children may never learn to swim without their help."

"I have never heard of a program such as this where swim lessons are offered at a discount for children. It is such an innovative idea. Because not only is it benefiting children in this community, but the students that are providing the swim lessons from Valley Christian High School are receiving a benefit by participating in this and being part of this experience for the kids. It's a "win-win" for everyone involved", said Carla Haakma, District Administrator for the Franklin-McKinley School District.

Andrew Hill and Valley Christian students love every moment of their involvement in these initiatives. There is a team spirit of community ... the bus ride back is always one of happiness. They feel they have received more than they have given when they leave. Clearly, the real joy for the high school mentors is in the giving. And for the students who

has relied on a foundational segment of that document which states the following: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are



Cathy Manthey, Valley Christian Aquatics Director encourages a young "Splish Splash" participant.



Antonio and Luis give a "thumbs up" to "Splish Splash."

"We are anxious to spread into our schools and the surrounding community these concepts of value building and joyfulness."

Carla Haakma
Franklin-McKinley
School District
Administrator



created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them, are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

This one phrase puts us all on equal footing. We have a platform for common virtues. In every child there is value and promise. The goal of the Junior University and Lighthouse Initiative is to create within the students a light of promise that as equally created individuals they can experience life as it was intended.

This leads to a thirst of learning and dreaming about what they can achieve. This combination of Light, Life and Learning is the process through which these students become successful. It is the "Magic" that Dr. Porter spoke of when he challenged the Leadership Team to discover and answer the question, "What's the Magic?" in such achievement scores.

Students at this young age have no concept of the barriers that exist between private and public, religious and non-religious schools or those with or without extraordinary means. What they do have is an understanding of when someone values them as

individuals, puts the time in to prove it, leading to the students beginning to realize that life is what they make of it.

Thus far, the results are a testament to the powerful receptivity of students to the time that's invested in their lives from outside role models. It in no way seeks to diminish the love and support of their teachers and family structure, but rather works to affirm and support it.

Comments or inquiries are welcome at StephenMcMinn@creighton.edu



Applied Math Science & Engineering students learn team building through Robotics competition. (Standing L-R) Timmy, Kevin, Jerry Merza – Principal at Hellyer Elementary, Annette Lane – Robotics Director at Valley Christian, Joshua, Dale. Jason and Troy, kneeling.