



Dr. Vince Carbino

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Strengthening Organizational Wings

Using Appreciative Inquiry to Achieve School Excellence

This article tells the story of a school for students from preschool through secondary school in a large urban district in California. Misunderstood by and at odds with district administration, the faculty felt discounted, fragmented and angry. A new principal found himself facing an accreditation visit and evaluation with no preparation. The appreciative initiative helped the faculty discover alignments, identify success stories, surface strengths and create shared capacity to move forward. This is a story of an amazing organizational transformation.

City of Angels School is the independent study and online education program for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). It started as a school in 1993 serving students in the entertainment industry who could not attend school fulltime due to filming and auditions schedules. Teachers were assigned to work at studios. As the program matured it became a support for students who could not attend school for a variety of reasons beyond the entertainment industry: students caring for parents and siblings while working; those with children; students experiencing bullying; and those who just wanted to have an individual educational experience. The City of Angels School grew to include online education for Los Angeles Unified students living around the world. Currently the school has 24 sites and annual enrollment of 2,300 students, making it the largest independent study program in the United States.

Throughout its existence, City of Angels has not been well understood by the district administration. The rules of independent study are unique. There is no training program for administrators for this type of special program, where they can come to understand why the school exists, and how to operate and support schools and students. Therefore some leaders in the district view this school as a tutoring program, others as “home instruction”, not realizing this is a comprehensive, individualized instructional program that leads to a high school diploma and college, or entry level employment.

This misunderstanding led to a myriad of issues for the school and district. Many faculty members felt that district policy and procedure did not apply to them, since they constituted a special program. District Human Resources would often place low performing teachers or those with medical issues at the school, thinking it was

an easier environment, since there is no classroom management in independent study. A study conducted by the California Legislative Analyst's Office on California Independent Study Programs called it a place "where senior teachers go for the last few years of their careers". District officials having many other issues to contend with at traditional schools did not have time to evaluate and assist City of Angels. In good economic times the school was left alone; in poor economic times the school faculty and parents would defend it from being shut down.

This ebb and flow of good and bad times created a micro-culture within the faculty of the district being viewed as an "enemy", and a need to constantly defend and explain what City of Angels does and the value it provides the school district and community. It also created an environment of adversarial relationships between administration and faculty, since so many of the faculty did not choose to come to the school, and were placed there because of performance issues. This created a perception that the school was out of touch with the rest of the district. The school also frequently changed principals, and administrators looked at the school as being hostile and difficult to lead.

Transitioning to a high-performing organization

Vince Carbino was named principal of the school in July 2013. His goal was to support this school to transition from the shadows and put it into the spotlight so that every school district employee knew the service provided by the school.

One of the first challenges was how to take a school that has experienced such a history and turn it into a high performing organization able to support an accreditation self-study visit occurring in six months. Preparing for this is a comprehensive process, and at the time Vince became the principle nothing had been done to support the process. This accreditation would determine if the school continued or be shut down.

What was needed for the accreditation was an analysis to determine the strengths of the school, its performance over the past three years, and the goals that would be created to enhance the school's instructional program. What was challenging was the school was faculty-centered, and the students came second. To be successful in the accreditation, it would be necessary to align the school to the students' needs.

Introducing AI to shift the culture from anger to moving forward

As Vince talked with teachers, he sensed an organizational void. Teachers worked on 24 school sites, many of them alone or in a very small team. This created isolation, a feeling of not fully understanding each other, or the foundational skills or beliefs of the organization. No one could describe the rituals or routines that occurred at the school. No one could tell him about special events, awards or simply what they believed in and wished for the school. He soon learned that they needed a process that would allow for a common understanding of the beliefs, talents and strengths of this faculty, if the accreditation would be successful.

Vince met with HR division of LAUSD to ask for help. They mentioned an organizational change management process called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). They urged him to email Tenny Poole and see if she would work with the school.

In talking with Tenny, it became clear that not only could AI help address many of the faculty members' issues, the 4D process could actually start the self-study data collection that is part of the accreditation process.

The process of AI validated Vince's personal beliefs in servant leadership and the value of shared vision and goal setting to empower organizations. With City of Angels, he felt that the faculty had never had a chance to explore their dreams and goals for the school; they just respond to external threats, or conformed to the vision of the latest principal assigned to the school. A shift in the culture from one of anger and feeling under-valued to a positive, high energy, forward-moving organization would be key. The dialogue of strengths, goal formation and vision was critical if this school was going to move forward successfully into the future. It also would provide a vehicle in which to do organizational change, which was necessary to align the school to district policy and procedures and the new instructional and graduation requirements that would substantially change the direction of the school.

Developing a multi-perspective approach

We started by having a meeting between Tenny and selected members of the faculty to introduce the AI process. For the meeting, a diverse group of teachers with various views about change was present. These were teachers who had expressed a desire for the school to improve, as well as members of both the formal and informal leadership. This allowed a multiple perspective approach to the process as well as time for the consultant to see the various personalities that made up the faculty.

At the end of this two-hour presentation, faculty members wanted the training to take place. However, they felt that involving the entire faculty would not be immediately productive. They suggested involving half the faculty. This recommendation communicated that ownership of the process was being assumed, and we began identifying the teachers who would participate. The method used was self-selection, by the use of mass email going to all faculty asking for volunteers, followed by members of the leadership team having personal conversations to encourage faculty members to volunteer.

Angels take flight: Selecting a metaphor

These self-selected volunteers were to participate in the first two of the four days of the 4D process. They selected a metaphor and name for the process: "Angels Take Flight in Pursuit of Excellence". The metaphor had a double meaning: it symbolized both the school and students taking flight. We introduced the notion of stakeholders, that of the voices of students, parents, community members and teachers. A positive core map would be created for the first session: a blue sky, with strengths posted on angel wings cut out of construction paper. The school had never had a method or symbol to represent the organization.

AI Tools Self-selected volunteers participated in the first two of the four days of the 4D process and selected a metaphor and name for the process

The notion of stakeholders was introduced

A positive core map was created for the first session

Left: Groups preparing for their creative enactments; Right: Faculty and school administration identifying their strengths.



Delving into the most promising topics

The first two days of training 43 teachers came – all school administration and teachers who volunteered to be a part of the program – included some of the most outspoken and frustrated people as well as the most passionate. Some initially demonstrated a high degree of anger and frustration.

The faculty created an interview guide to be used to delve more deeply into the most promising topics for the future of the school:

- Shared best practices
- Differentiated instruction (curriculum)
- Access to technology
- Infrastructure

At the conclusion of the two-day session they demanded that the second two-day session, to be held two weeks later, be made mandatory: “We need everyone to be with us”. Each participant selected one missing teacher to do a two-way interview with, using the newly developed interview guide. In addition they agreed for each interview pair to interview one parent and one student.

AI Tool Creative enactment of dreams

The second two days of the process involved about 85 people, including all the school administration and teachers, and some parents. The most remarkable part of the process was the creative enactments of their dreams. There were twelve enactments. It was amazing to see participants prepare, and to watch them use their creative skills, to have the opportunity to “let loose and play” with one another.

Writing the self-study for accreditation

In spite of being a team of people without a single building, spread throughout a very large school district, their dreams were remarkably similar. The unity of spirit that this demonstrated was critical and demonstrated a high degree of cohesion.

Some innovation teams were created in the session, and additional ones emerged in the weeks that followed. These innovation teams focused on writing the self-study

Faculty and school administration preparing their vision statements.



for their upcoming accreditation visit: one team to work on streaming and creating school information forms needed for collection of data; a school team to work on increasing enrollment and marketing the school; and a team to develop a community resource guide.

The faculty also recognized that the school leadership team needed additional training in an appreciative leadership approach, so that they could support the new organizational management structure. Tenny facilitated the appreciative leadership session, which included two days to develop a unified vision of school leadership and for one day, two months later, on individual leadership. The administration, counselors and coordinators of the school attended the training. The sessions created space and time to keep the appreciative dialogue alive. The school defined appreciative dialogue as being positive, solutions oriented, nonjudgmental and maintaining the motivation to utilize multiple viewpoints.

Vince also attended a Power of Appreciative Inquiry four-day training event delivered by the West Coast Center for Positive Change to be better able to weave AI into daily work. This also allowed him to provide support and training in AI for two new assistant principals, as they started their new assignment with the school.

Achieving school excellence: 'City of Angels is the best'

Appreciative Inquiry allowed the school to receive a six-year accreditation with a one-day revisit. This was the strongest accreditation in the school's history, and one of the strongest visits of any school in the district. Through the projects that were the outcomes of the 4D process, the school has increased its size by 500 students, grown by four new school sites, and has received an additional \$500,000 in supportive federal grants to increase services for students. Additionally the school more than doubled their graduation rate in the first year alone. The school has gone from a reputation of being in turmoil, to one that where it is considered to be leading the school district into the 21st century.

Just seven months from beginning the Appreciative Inquiry process, LAUSD's superintendent told Vince, "What has been done with this school is nothing short of a miracle". As one senior district administrator stated in a meeting, "City of Angels is the best." The school has also been identified as one of the most innovative programs in the school district.

The school also has transitioned to becoming a support provider for specific schools in the district and providing specialized services. Through various projects designed through AI, the school has moved to providing concurrent online education support to students enrolled at other schools when the schools they are attending do not have the capacity to provide these services. The City of Angels faculty collaboratively plan these support programs with the host school using AI techniques. One project, coordinated with ten schools, allowed 71 students to do remedial work online for a class they needed in order to graduate, with a success rate of 94%.

Continuing the dialogue

The school has decided to work on developing appreciative teaching practices to have even more direct appreciative impact on students. This would include a shift to focus on the positive, on what is working, what they and the other stakeholders want more of, rather than having a constant focus on weaknesses and short comings: something as simple as putting the number of correct answers at the top of the paper, rather than number of incorrect answers. We believe there is great potential to strengthen students by helping them discover and leverage their strengths, explore their dreams and plan for their most desired future.

Specific faculty members will be involved in developing appreciative teaching practices to help students be more confident, to increase the love of learning, and to enhance their sense of inclusion in the school and as citizens of the community. These faculty members have been chosen by their natural inclination for this approach. They will be working on developing their own skills and creating approaches that focus on student strengths and guiding students through instruction where they focus on growth and correct answers, rather than on missteps.

City of Angels is also piloting other positive psychology programs. Currently the school is initiating a pilot program in restorative justice, which focuses on enhancing student-teacher relationships, conflict de-escalation and mediation, and management of student behavior and transgressions. The school was asked, due to its training in Appreciative Inquiry, to pilot this program in a non-traditional school setting for the district, to see if it would be appropriate for other schools serving special populations. All faculty members completed six days of training in developing these skills to be used with students, parents, community members and each other.

With all the results and City of Angels' continued growth in size and credibility, it is clear that Appreciative Inquiry provided a foundation and a strategy for organizational change. It is hard to believe that the progress that has been discussed above occurred in just one short year.