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## **Project San Francisco and Student Engagement**

### **Research Question:**

Project San Francisco was initiated in 2001, when a survey of Visitacion Valley Middle School students revealed that a shocking 90% of the eighth graders had never been to the beach in San Francisco and 75% didn't realize there was a beach in San Francisco. Now, in the fifth year since the Project was initiated we ask, "What has been the impact of Project San Francisco on student engagement?"

### **Context for Research:**

Project San Francisco is a school wide learning activity in which sixth, seventh and eighth grade students are organized into small learning communities that study six non traditional academic topics over the school year. Each group level rotates thru a wheel of topics which are designed to meet the socio, affective and cognitive domains of their age and ability. The Project goals are to promote awareness and appreciation of self, school, community and city, and the resources and rich cultural diversity that abounds in San Francisco. Each Friday during the first period class students meet with their heterogeneous learning group and every six weeks, a project or trip culminates the unit. Rally activities are held each semester and the groups battle for the FALCON cup in a series of teamwork, academic and athletic challenges.

### **Findings:**

Four hundred students from six to eighth grade were anonymously surveyed on various questions regarding their engagement on Project San Francisco days. Twenty essays were sampled for evidence of being able to recount their experiences on project days, expressing something new or untraditional that they learned, or evidence of a greater awareness of their future. Suspension records over the last five years were collected and compared to a similar school with the same breakdown of ethnicities and socio-economic status.

The preliminary findings of the research indicate that Project San Francisco has had a great impact on student engagement, most students have learned new things and had experiences they would not have had opportunity to by themselves, with family or within the “traditional curriculum”. The data collected shows that student suspensions have decreased since the start of the project and are significantly less than the other school that has no program like Project San Francisco. In various comments on the survey, students expressed a desire to have a stronger voice in the design of the curriculum. The findings of the teacher engagement survey are yet to come as I collect more data.

**Policy Implications:**

The implication of this research is that enrichment classes need to be funded. As a matter of equity for all students, those who attend public school should have the same access to enrichment as the mandated State Standard Curriculum.

Professional development that enables teachers to engage students with inspirational curriculum is a need in our learning community. Our District needs to recognize the value of an inspired and inspirational teacher and fund professional development of the teachers’ choice. Training is required to produce citizens from students across San Francisco. If students do not gain an appreciation of their home, community and city they become at risk of being poor citizens as adults. Since many of the residents of San Francisco are not San Francisco Natives, the only real venue to teach San Francisco appreciation is at our public schools.

**Next Steps:**

Project San Francisco will continue to seek funding and offer this unique curriculum for the students of Visitacion Valley Middle School. There will be a leadership class that will increase the student voice in the design of the units. Hopefully there will be funding for teacher professional development to do unit lesson study and engage in further personal and professional growth, which in turn will inspire more future Project San Francisco students.