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- Tony Hopson



what works? the whole relationship.

Tony Hopson, Self Enhancement, Inc.
interviewed by Jay Hutchins
and Cynthia King-Guffey.

Self Enhancement, Incorporated (SEI) has been helping underserved students and families in north and northeast Portland since 1981. Youth participate from age 8 through 25, and there are currently over 900 participants. On average, 95 percent of students in SEI programs graduate from high school and 80 percent go on to pursue higher education. Last year, 100 percent of the students in the program graduated from high school.

In the following interview Tony Hopson, founder and president of SEI, explains what it is about SEI that puts it into the category of “what works” and why he thinks it can be replicated across the country.

Hutchins: We are interested in knowing more about your plans to replicate your program in other parts of the country, but my first question is how does the program actually work?

Hopson: Let me talk about three different pieces of SEI. First of all, we have a contract with the state to provide a multitude of support-services to African-American children and families, that extends from here to Gresham. These services include anything from culturally specific domestic violence programs to helping schools that don't historically have experience dealing with African-American children.

Then we have our charter school, which is in its fifth year. We recently graduated our second eighth-grade class and it's gone very well. We started the school because of a real lack of strong middle schools in Northeast Portland, and wanted to give kids an additional option. The charter school is not part of our core program and we don't see a need to do this again.

Our core services are elementary, middle, high school, and post-high school programs for kids attending 11 different Portland public schools. We follow kids from 8 years of age all the way through to age 25. These are the services that we want to replicate.

Hutchins: Your kids are mostly African-American?

Hopson: Yes, we have used Jim Collin's Good to Great model, and we have decided we can be the best in America at educating African-American children. We have white and Latino students, and our model works with any group of kids, but I'm very comfortable saying that today we are the best agency in America at servicing African-American kids: keeping them in school, getting them graduated, and moving them on to become positive, contributing citizens.

Hutchins: Who are the kids in the program?

Hopson: In SEI, we have kids that have never seen the ocean, so we take them there on a clear day. We have kids who've never been to Mount Hood who may be the next best snowboarder on the planet. But our black kids don't get to the snow unless we take them. We could have the next great opera singer but who's going to take a black kid in the inner city to opera?

Hutchins: Describe your average SEI kid.

Hopson: Ten percent are high achievers. But the group we impact the most is students who are on the fence. Sixty percent are like this; they are the most underserved in America. This is where we create the positive peer pressure. If you have 700 to 1,000 kids in a school and we can get 250 to 300 in an SEI program, we could probably impact the whole school culture.

We think there is nothing magical about what we do. We think all kids want to be loved, all kids want to have relationships with positive parents and adults.

Hutchins: So adults are triggering this change in the culture, but the momentum is actually created by the kids?

Hopson: Yes, it's about positive peer pressure. If I'm in SEI, when I hit the front door, I take my hat off, and if I was dragging my pants before, I'm certainly not sagging now. After awhile you create a whole thing that kids can buy into, and all of a sudden it's cool to be a decent student, to do positive things.

Hutchins: What is the culture you are trying to change?

Hopson: In many urban communities you get your rep by how sexually active you are, how much marijuana you smoke, or how many folks you've shot at. About 30 percent of our kids are affected by the drug culture. These kids live in a thin little box of experience. We're saying to these kids, "Enough already! That doesn't represent you."

Hutchins: How many kids are in the core program here in Portland?

Hopson: Of the 920 or so kids in our core program, close to 700 of them are in Portland public schools; over 200 are in our post-high school program, many with family-wage jobs; and 170 of them are in colleges across America.

King-Guffey: What is the ratio of coordinators to children?

Hopson: Each coordinator has about 35 kids and this is expensive. But they know everything there is to know about those kids and are accountable for them. We also think about a group mentoring model, the village model, so that if a kid doesn't get along with a particular coordinator there are enough other adults around that can step in. This is a consistency of adults who are all speaking the same language—which doesn't occur in most schools.

And we carry all this forward into our whole relationship model. We start with kids at age 8 and stay with them to age 25. What a lot of kids, especially poor children, don't have is consistency and we provide that for them.

Hutchins: Please speak about "the whole relationship model."

Hopson: We're in the schools, we're after school, and we're

with the kids all summer, until they graduate from high school. We're virtually 24/7, 365 days a year, and then we support our kids until they are 25. Until graduation our work is connected to the schools so when you show up at our center, the first thing you're doing is homework and tutoring, because we believe academics is the straightest line to success.

We train all of our coordinators to be a mentor, teacher, and parent; advocating for, mentoring, disciplining with love, as a parent would. Our people put their last name on every kid and expose their kids to new things. The simple fact is that every kid on this planet has a gift and our job as adults is to provide them the opportunities to find it.

People will go to the end of the earth to save their child, and we feel like we've got to do the same thing for every child that walks through the door.

King-Guffey: And do you also work with the parents?

Hopson: Another very different thing about SEI is that we work with the entire family. We have parent coordinators who work with parents on drug and alcohol issues, employment, and parenting classes. Our 10-week parenting classes are important because some parents had kids too young and never learned to be a parent. If you don't address the parenting component, oftentimes you will send a kid back to a very dysfunctional family that will offset all of the good work that you do.

Hutchins: What's the biggest challenge for the kids in the core program?

Hopson: The major difference between kids that become successful and those who don't is getting up after falling down. A lot of our kids, when they fall, man, there is absolutely nobody there. So if you are in SEI, every time you fall, SEI is there to push you back in the game.

When our kids get in trouble at college they're calling us. We're still right there for them. This is an area that, frankly, we'd like to do better with. Many of our kids come back and maybe get an associate degree at PCC or a job. But success for us is two years post-high school, either in a family-wage job, vocational training or college—a positive contributing citizen, someone that can take care of themselves and their own children.

King-Guffey: What is your vision for the program in the future? Have any institutions evaluated the core program?

Hopson: My vision is to expand what SEI does so that there are SEI coordinators in schools across America, working with kids, in addition to what teachers and educators do. The public school system cannot get this done and we shouldn't even expect them to get it done with the product that's walking into their classrooms. We are finishing up an evaluation through the University of Oregon right now.

This is important for us because we want to go to scale, to expand the project to other regions of the country. The private sector has been carrying the ball on our work for some time. To really go to scale here and across the country we are going need government help. If I was the government, I would want to see something measurable, a really positive evaluation, and we want to be ready.

Hutchins: Incredibly successful programs like SEI often are sustained by a gifted and charismatic person who is difficult to replicate. Tony, you definitely fit that description. Often these programs decline when the founder leaves. Why do you think your program is different?

Hopson: We think there is nothing magical about what we do. We think all kids want to be loved, all kids want to have relationships with positive parents and adults. We've just developed a systematic way to do that, one that gives us an opportunity to be in a kid's life over a very long period of time.

We've been around long enough that some of our kids now work here as coordinators. And I have three sons who work here so that the vision and culture we've created will continue to move forward without the current leader.

Hutchins: So, you are not concerned about what happens when you are no longer around to keep an eye on things?

Hopson: No I am not. Our SEI standards support a very positive culture and make what we do sustainable and reproducible. All kids have to learn our standards, and all staff members have to live by them. Number one is that we greet each other every day with a smile and a handshake. When you walk through our front door, you ought to feel a certain kind of love. That is how we do business in this facility.

We have an I.S.P, an individual success plan, which is a part of the culture. All of our kids have one, and we have a similar program for our staff. SEI staff meetings are like no other staff meetings that you have ever been a part of. It's a complete love fest, with shout-outs and stories about the work happening outside of these walls so that everyone can get a feeling that we are making a difference.

Hutchins: You have a program in Miami you are developing?

Hopson: We've been in Miami for several years, and for the last two years there's been a pilot effort to officially replicate

Self Enhancement, Inc.'s standards, founded upon the principles of integrity and respect, are:

- We greet each other every day with a smile and a handshake to strengthen the relationship between us.
- We honor and respect each other and so we address one another with proper language and speech.
- We value the space of ourselves and others and are careful not to intrude or injure each other.
- We are mindful of what is true, and strive to be honest in word and deed.
- We treasure our rich culture and hold the cultures of all people in high regard.
- We strive to reflect our beauty both inwardly in our understanding and outwardly in our appearance.

SEI for the first time. We've been working with Alonzo Mourning, who wants to do this in a very big way. Another NBA player, Dwayne Wade, and some other quality people have joined that effort as well.

King-Guffey: Tony, can you share with us what goes into your theory of change?

Hopson: We're into prevention so we work at both ends. We put most of our time and energy on the kids' side because, while we believe the adult side is where the issue is, it is going to take decades to turn this thing around because it took decades for us to dig this deep big hole. We get the biggest bang for the buck by directing resources to the kids, so that's what we do. The best way to turn this around is for the kids that we work with to become better parents, who will take care of their children in a much stronger way.

Hutchins: What have you learned **doesn't** work?

Hopson: What doesn't work is the quick-fix. Mentoring is a strong word that everybody uses but some mentoring programs don't drill down deep enough, don't stay long enough to make a difference. They want to be in and out in a minute and think they're going to save somebody. What is needed is a long-term commitment that carries on with tremendous energy.

I think very few people in America understand Martin Luther King's concept of "the fierce urgency of now." America has yet to be prepared to put itself in the position to take this whole issue seriously. When we're talking about what's happening with children in America, what's needed is Hurricane Katrina fierce and 9/11 fierce. America has yet to put itself in the position to take this whole issue seriously.

How can the nation not understand this as a fierce, urgent issue that we all must rally around and do something about now? 