



Quest Early College High School  
Humble, Texas

# Learning by Heart

*Five American High Schools Where  
Social and Emotional Learning Are Core*

**CASE STUDIES OF PRACTICE**

**WKCD 2014**

# I Belong Here

QUEST EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL, HUMBLE, TEXAS

by Barbara Cervone, What Kids Can Do, Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice

When the progressive Quest High School opened in 1995 with under 200 students, against a Texas landscape where large is sacred, its founders were making a bold wager: that bigger was not always better. They believed their new school would become a national model for best practices, while local skeptics, of which there many, bet the school would disappear with the sunset.

It wasn't just size that set Quest apart. Everything about the school was different. Classes were interdisciplinary, teachers "facilitated" rather than lectured, and mastery, not grades, tracked learning. The Quest "creed" had just two dicta: respect yourself and others in word and deed, and keep a clean and safe environment.

A pair of core elements has always undergirded learning and growth at Quest. One is "family," an advisory structure that mixes students across grades, meets daily, stays together all four years, and provides encompassing support. It's the school's heart and soul, students say. The other is service learning. Every Friday, all students spend four hours volunteering in sites throughout the community, practicing empathy and giving back.

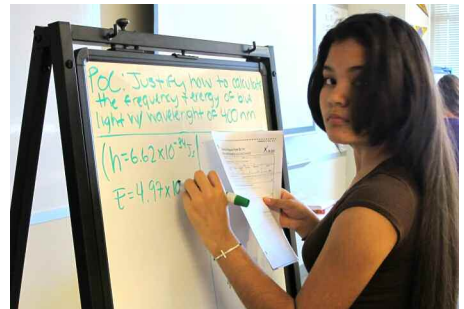
In 2010, Quest High School added "early college" to its name, moved to the campus of Lone Star College, and integrated dual enrollment into its offerings for students. With this, the school's commitment to students who would be the first in their family to attend college grew, along with its embrace of academic rigor. Its dedication to the social and emotional growth of students remained strong as ever.

In 2011, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development honored Quest with its Vision in Action "Whole Child Award," a gratifying recognition of its long drive to create a school where every child was known well.

"I Belong Here" provides a snapshot of how Quest Early College High School (QECHS), for almost two decades, has centered its daily practice on nurturing the whole child. We begin by tracing the school's origins and the beliefs that permeate its distinctive culture. Then we apply a discrete lens to our documentation. We examine the mindsets that infuse learning at QECHS—about belonging, valuing what is being learned, hard work and persistence, participation, and becoming mature. Whenever possible, we link these mindsets to academic success.



PHOTOS (3): BARBARA CERVONE



In October 2013, at the time of our visits, its first students in the early college program were well on their way to graduating with both the high school diploma and the associate’s degree. The school, it seemed, had become a magnet for ambitious first-generation students looking to step outside the district’s five large comprehensive high schools. At the same time, the latitude Quest had long enjoyed when assessing student learning was coming up against local (and national) pressures for “strict” accountability and more standardized testing. It wasn’t clear how much ground the school might have to give.

This is the third of five WKCD case studies produced by WKCD’s research arm, the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice, that documents the transformative power of social and emotional learning and its connections to deeper learning in a diverse collection of U.S. secondary schools. Each study—each portrait—explores particularities in that school’s embrace of social-emotional learning. The series, *Learning by Heart*, was produced by WKCD for the NoVo Foundation and is aimed at the broadest audience possible: policy-makers, practitioners, parents, media, and always the students at the center.

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See [howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html](http://howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html)

## I. Small By Design

*Six teenagers sit in a small conference room at Quest Early College High School in Humble (pronounced “umble”), Texas, clearly comfortable with each other and the questions of visitors. They take turns telling what makes this small, innovative district school so different from the large comprehensive high schools that serve the rest of Humble’s roughly 9,000 high school students.*

*“We’re like a family here,” says Kenneth, a lanky, voluble sophomore. “Or maybe a clan with lots of families.” In fact, at Quest students are randomly assigned to a “family”—a facilitator (a.k.a teacher) and fifteen students, freshmen through seniors, who meet for an hour a day and stick together through the high school years. “It’s the heart and soul of this school,” Kenneth declares. “I’ve counseled through so many emotions in my family. When I came here I was your basic little kid. This year I feel like I’m on my way to manhood. I feel like a better person.”*

*“What makes this school stand out for me is service,” says Phillip, also a sophomore, who just the day before had been awarded a service-learning star by his classmates. Every Friday, Quest students spend a half-day volunteering in the community—in Phillip’s case, at a nearby elementary school. Shy about telling his own story, Phillip defers to Missy, a senior. “So Phillip walked into the classroom and noticed this girl with a black eye, looking dizzy, not writing like the other kids,” she explains. “He went over and talked and comforted her. He carried her down to the nurse’s office and stayed with her all morning until she’d been treated.”*

*Phillip shares his own proud moment: teaching eight-year-old Austin how to read. “When I was young, I wasn’t great at reading,” he says. “He reminded me of myself.”*

*“What comes to mind for me is the tight relationship you have with the facilitators,” says junior Amen, who moved from Ethiopia to Houston at age thirteen and “ran right out the door” when she toured the district’s large high schools. “The faculty at Quest, they’re always looking at the whole picture and asking: ‘How can I help you?’ ‘Where do you want your grades to be?’ ‘What’s holding you back?’”*

*“I like the freedom and the responsibility,” says Nyla, who has been quiet until now. “They give you lots of choices, the students plan all of the clubs, we decide what we’ll do in family, no one tells you what to do. But it means you’re 100 percent responsible, too. You feel mature.”*

*Jason remembers losing friends in middle school because he took algebra at the high school. “The other kids would say, ‘Don’t be with that guy, he’s weird,’” he says. “They made me feel ashamed. Then I came here and kids would say, ‘Wow, that freshman is in Algebra 2. He’s kinda cool.’ I felt like I belonged.”*

In the nineteenth year since its September 1995 opening, Quest still enrolls fewer than 400 students. Its students have shared a social and academic experience so different from that in a typical comprehensive high school—not just in Texas but in most districts across the nation—that it has given them a heightened consciousness of what fully engaged learning feels and looks like.

As they get up to leave the conference room for their next class, these students joke with each other, warm and companionable. “There are no bystanders here,” Missy turns back and says. “At this school, they give you the whole and expect the same back.”

## Creating Quest

One hundred years ago—before the discovery of oil in Humble temporarily turned the town into the largest oilfield in Texas—the Humble Independent School District consisted of a one-room schoolhouse with twelve students, a teacher, and a four-month school term. It’s been growing ever since, with good schools a prime asset in this suburban community 25 miles north of downtown Houston.

At last count, Humble ISD was the largest “industry” in the area, with 40 schools, 37,000 students and 5,000 employees. In 2011 and 2012, Harris County, into which the district juts, added more residents than any other county in the United States. For the past decade, Humble ISD has been one of the fastest growing school districts in Texas. Three of its five comprehensive high schools, with enrollments ranging from 1,500 to 3,100 students, were built between 2006 and 2009. Before that, Humble High School (founded in 1918) had swelled to over 5,000 students.

The population influx and the large high schools it has produced are deep points of local pride. This is Texas, where, as one Quest student put it, “Bigger is better.” Schools are ranked by their size—from one A (1A) to five A’s (5A)—and whether competing for football or mathematics, schools match up with others their size and the 5A trophies carry the most weight.

So when Quest opened with under 200 students in 1995, its founders were making a bold wager: that bigger was not always better. The experimental school offered a stark contrast to nearby Kingwood High School, where the gleaming strut of the “Military Marching Band,” alone, engaged almost twice as many students.

Then as now, the schools here in suburban Houston seemed to work just fine. The district dropout rate was less than 3.5 percent, attendance hovered around 96 percent, 90 percent of students passed the state proficiency exams, college admission rates at the two comprehensive high schools were excellent, and the football teams regularly won the state championships. Yes, the high schools were enormous, district leaders said, but virtually any student could find a niche in the extensive extracurricular organizations they provided.

Yet not all students thrived in such conventional large high schools, the district leadership acknowledged. Many students slipped through the cracks: students whose strengths matched poorly with eight-period days, traditional pedagogy, and “shopping-mall” course selections in which teachers could rarely get to know students well. For some students, to adjust socially seemed to require a more personal setting—one that Texas educator and visionary Thomas Sergiovanni called “communitarian.”<sup>1</sup> Humble’s assistant superintendent agreed. For some students, the large traditional high school “spelled disaster,” he said.

Quest promised an alternative. After a year of reading, thinking, and visiting innovative schools nationwide, the school’s planning team (convened by district leaders) settled on a set of design principles aligned with Theodore R.Sizer’s cutting-edge **Coalition of Essential Schools**. They included teaching loads that made it possible to know every student well. A vision of students as workers and teachers as coaches. Personalized

**A belief that bigger was not always better immediately set Quest apart in a district where large schools were the norm.**

*The school’s founders were convinced the school would take hold. The skeptics, of which there were many, were convinced the founders had lost their minds.*

– GINGER NOYES, Quest Early College High School

teaching and curriculum. Advisories. Graduation by exhibition. An atmosphere of trust and respect. A full embrace of democratic practices and diversity.

One of the school’s founders, Kimberly Huseman, added a vision of her own: connecting students with local service opportunities to increase their engagement and motivation. She convinced her colleagues to set aside a full day in the Quest weekly schedule for students to serve as volunteers in the community.

The business of where the school would reside had already been settled. A year earlier, the district had issued a bond to house under one roof several alternative programs for “at risk” youth, including kids in trouble with the law, pregnant students, and English-language learners. This new Community Learning Center, the district reasoned, was the perfect setting for a small alternative high school for students unhappy in a large high school.

As the school welcomed its first students, excitement—and skepticism—ran high.

“The school’s founders were convinced the school would take hold—indeed that it would become a national laboratory for best practices,” said Quest principal Ginger Noyes, who taught at Quest for ten years before becoming principal in 2011. “The skeptics, of which there were many, were convinced we’d lost our minds.”

## Whole Child Award

When Quest won the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s **Vision in Action “Whole Child Award”** in 2011, the school felt both honored and vindicated in its long drive to create a school where every child was known well.



**Video | Vision in Action:  
The ASCD Whole Child  
Award—Quest Early  
College High School (7:00)**



“I knew Quest was an awesome school,” said Missy.

The school had come to shine academically. In 2011, Quest led the district’s five other high schools when it came to daily attendance (96 percent), the pass rate on state proficiency exams (almost 100 percent), and student retention (94 percent)—winning begrudging praise from those who continued to view the school as an outlier.

The ASCD award pointed to an additional set of strengths. It recognized Quest for the school’s move beyond a narrow focus on academic achievement to “take action for the whole child, creating learners who are knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, civically active, artistically engaged, prepared for economic self-sufficiency, and ready for the real world beyond formal schooling.”

Unsaid, but also noteworthy, Quest had built and made these strides with an increasingly diverse student body—against an educational landscape where race, ethnicity, and class chronically separate students. At Kingwood High School five miles to the north, 77 percent of the 2,659 students were white and only 6 percent met federal poverty guidelines in 2011. Eight miles to the south at Summer Creek High School, just 17 percent of the 1,980 students were white and over half were eligible for free or reduced lunch. At Quest, 43 percent of the 221 students were white and the remainder were Hispanic, African American, and Asian; 43 percent met federal poverty guidelines.

When seniors at Quest recently picked a social justice topic for their senior project, the byproducts of inequality invariably drew their attention. “I don’t know if that falls into the category of getting us ready for the real world,” quipped Emil, “but reading [Barbara Ehrenreich’s] *Nickel and Dimed* sure opened my eyes to poverty in a new way.”

## Early College

At the time of the ASCD “Whole Child” award, six core beliefs had come to define teaching and learning at Quest:

- “We should educate the whole child by valuing social, emotional, physical, and academic learning.”
- “A learning community shall be respectful and safe where all are nurtured and valued.”
- “Integrity, responsibility, persistence, creativity and hard work are keys to success in high school, college, and life.”
- “Teaching, learning, scholarship, and service extend beyond the classroom.”
- “Students become responsible for their own success when they are taught the process of thinking and learning.”
- “People have the power to make a difference in their local, national, and global communities and to be advocates for themselves and others.”

A seventh belief soon joined the list.

- “Our students can successfully complete a high school and college curriculum and be lifelong learners when utilizing deliberate and consistent structures and systems.”

In the same way that the decision to devote one day a week to service learning had been pivotal to Quest’s trajectory when it started, the school’s decision in 2010 to become an early college high school opened a new phase at Quest.

Launched in 2002 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation among others, **early college high schools** were designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education could simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate’s degree or up to two years of credit toward a bachelor’s degree—tuition free. There are currently ten other early college high schools in Greater Houston and more than 240 nationwide.

So when Quest opened for the 2010–11 school year, it had a new name, Quest Early College High School, and a new home, on the expanding campus of Lone Star Community College. The previous spring, Quest staff and students had made a special effort to recruit incoming ninth graders who would be the first in their families to go to college.

“When I explained to eighth graders at my former middle school how they could get an associate’s degree and a high school degree at the same time,” student ambassador Caitlyn said, “they asked, ‘What’s an associate’s degree?’ The more I explained, the more their eyes popped. I think I changed a few minds that day.”

**Just as the decision to embrace service learning infused Quest’s start, becoming an early college high school heralded a new future.**

*Graduating from high school with an associate’s degree, tuition-free, plus a high school diploma. I know for my son, it puts a shine on all the hard work.*

– QECHS PARENT

The logistics of providing for dual enrollment were daunting. Scheduling, arranging placement tests and transportation, and negotiating the requirements of an array of college courses consumed a lot of administrative oxygen the first year. And since Quest faculty and students remained deeply committed to the systems and structures they had built over the years, the core elements of the “classic” Quest needed as much nurturing as ever: the daily “family” block, interdisciplinary curriculum, senior projects, clubs, service learning, and more. Early college, in short, did not supplant the old Quest; early college extended it.

“I hope you didn’t mind being the guinea pigs,” Noyes said in 2013 to a group of seniors who had been freshman when early college started. “You took the brunt of all of our learning lessons.” But these students figured early on that they were guinea pigs, they told their principal. It was a bonding by ordeal that brought them closer. Besides, they said, it turned out fine.

And it has. In possibly unexpected ways, dual enrollment has sharpened the focus at Quest around ambitious learning—and made the link between social-emotional and academic learning unbreakable. It has deepened the school’s commitment to students for whom low income seemed a barrier to advancement. And the college credits that QECHS students are earning while enrolled in high school—over 2,200 in 2012-13—have grabbed media attention and local interest. The school expects to enroll 400 students in the fall 2014, with the majority being the first in their family to go to college (and/or with one or more at-risk factors specified by the Texas Education Agency).

“Graduating from high school with an associate’s degree, tuition-free, *plus* a high school diploma—it can’t be beat,” said one Quest parent. “I know for my son, it puts a shine on all the hard work. He may still be short for his age, but he’s got tall dreams.”

## II. Shaping Mindsets

In a 2012 paper on the role of noncognitive factors in adolescent learning, researchers at the Chicago Consortium on School Research identified the critical factors that underpin student success in middle and high school.<sup>2</sup> They group those factors into five general categories: academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, social skills, and learning strategies.

**School performance is a complex phenomenon shaped by a web of behaviors and skills, attitudes and strategies.**

*If you want to understand this school, you gotta look at what it takes to be successful. It’s about mindsets, growth and otherwise.*

– EMIL, Grade 12

“School performance is a complex phenomenon, shaped by a wide variety of factors intrinsic to students and in their external environment,” the authors noted. In addition to content knowledge and academic skills, “students must develop sets of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are crucial to academic performance in their classes, but that may not be reflected in their scores on cognitive tests.”

Emil, a Quest senior delighted to share his opinions, put it more simply.

*If you want to understand this school, you gotta look at what it takes to be successful. You have to want to be here. You gotta work hard. You have to respect yourself and others. You gotta contribute. You need a teamwork mentality. You have to manage yourself. You need goals.*

*It’s about mindsets, growth and otherwise.*



Under headings that represent students' felt experience, the following pages describe how these mindsets take shape at a school where wholeness and smallness are brass rings.

## **I belong in this community**

When Sean, a quiet eighth grader, made an exploratory visit to QECHS, his parents did all of the talking. For Quest recruitment coordinator, Gwen Geiser, it was a scene she had encountered before. On one side were parents who had been sold on Quest—perhaps because of its academic push, its small size, its reputation for developing maturity and responsibility in teens, or worry that their soon-to-be high schooler was losing his or her way. On the other side sat a skeptical, pubescent child who was far from convinced: *What would my friends think? Isn't this a school for nerds or misfits? Do I really want to study that hard? How can a high school have no team sports? Would I fit in? Do I want to fit in?*

When Gwen went through the QECHS contract Sean and his parents would need to sign, which tested his willingness to complete challenging school work and study two to three hours a night, she saw Sean stiffen. "What if I don't like it?" he asked. "We ask that you stay a year, which means you have to give it a heartfelt try," Gwen answered.

She guessed Sean would buck his parents and not apply. She was right.

"It's common for parents to lead their kids toward Quest," said Gwen. "But if the kid doesn't light up and show some interest in the interview, we're quick to say that Quest isn't for every child. The last thing we want to do is admit kids who are coming here against their will, who enter unhappy."

Quest uses a rubric to help sort through applications. Being the first generation to attend college and economic disadvantage top the list, but a willingness to work hard is a close third. Students are encouraged to visit Quest, not to tour its facilities but to feel the hum.

Typically, the students who do decide to give Quest a try, along with those who jump in head first, have thought a lot about belonging—and they are ready to seek affirmation beyond the large campuses that characterize the district's other high schools. Jason, for example, was worn down by the taunts of peers who found his math precociousness odd. Missy seemed to have it all together, all the "supposed to's" as she put it: cheerleader, junior varsity team leader, student council member, straight A's. "My friends thought I was pure crazy when I said I wanted to make my own path, you know, to step outside the box," she said with a grin.

Since its earliest days, the goals of creating a strong school community and helping every student feel they belong have permeated Quest. The sense of belonging, of having a place in one's group, is a basic human need, as psychologist Abraham Maslow noted long ago. Because human learning is socially constructed through interactions with others, feeling part of a community of learners has a strongly motivating effect in schools. Considerable research supports the connection between students' sense of belonging in a classroom or school and their academic performance.<sup>3</sup>

**Because human learning is socially constructed through interactions with others, the goals of creating a strong school community and helping every student feel they belong permeate Quest.**

*The last thing we want to do is admit kids who are coming here against their will. – GWEN GEISER, recruitment coordinator*

Before school starts, a weeklong “Bridge Camp” program inducts new Quest students into the school’s distinct community. It brings together incoming ninth graders, staff, and older students who volunteer as mentors. This past August the class of 2017, 119 students strong, spent five days rotating between Socratic seminars, games, trust exercises, cardio workouts, relationship building, talks on growth mindset, relaxation techniques, and just plain fun.

“I came in pretty much not knowing anybody and wondering if I’d made a mistake,” said one ninth grader, whose parents were split on whether she should attend Quest, with the girl falling somewhere in between. “I left with three new friends and ready to go.” (Quest also runs a short Bridge Camp for parents, focused on “myth-busting.”)

When training camp ends, the school’s family (advisory) structure takes over. As tenth-grader Kenneth said, “family is the heart and soul” at Quest. Much more than a typical brief advisory period, family at Quest meets every day for half an hour. On the first day of school students are randomly assigned to families, each with a facilitator (again, the term for teachers at Quest), and a 9–12 grade mix of approximately fifteen students.

**Meeting daily, family is the heart and soul of Quest. Each family charts its own course within a common set of expectations, including respecting each other in word and deed.**

*I’ve learned how to relate to people I never really would’ve been friends with before. And when they graduate and leave, you feel like you’ve lost a sibling.*

– VIVIANNA, Grade 11

No one picks their family members, principal Noyes always reminds students. Welcoming difference is a norm here; the school has zero tolerance for exclusive groups and cliques. “Put downs and push outs aren’t acceptable here,” said Vivianna. “I’ve learned how to relate to people I never really would’ve been friends with before. And when they graduate and leave, you feel like you’ve lost a sibling.”

Each family—twenty in all in the fall of 2013—charts its own course within a common set of expectations that students will participate, they will be respectful, they will venture outside their comfort zone, and they will support one another. Students help plan each day’s activities. Sometimes, family starts with a game that gets students on their feet. On one warm October day, a family group knelt in a circle and crossed hands, then tried to keep them clasped as they rose to their tiptoes. Another played the game “Little Sally

Walker,” showing off and mimicking quirky dance moves. Working in pairs, “sighted” students were helping their blindfolded partner put together large jigsaw puzzles in the classroom next door.

“I was pretty iffy about it all,” recalled Vivianna about her first family meeting. “We played musical chairs, always a great ice-breaker. We raced around, laughed, wrestled over chairs, all those things.” When the game ended, one student commented that the game seemed to be based on excluding players. “I knew then,” Vivianna said, “that I was going to love these people forever.”

Sometimes, family starts with a discussion. Students in social studies facilitator Jim Nerad’s family talked about the electives they missed at Quest. “I wish the school had an orchestra,” a ninth-grade girl said. “I play the violin, and the orchestra in my middle school, like, kept me motivated. Now it seems like I have no time, you know, no urge to pick up my violin. It makes me sad.” A boy next to her wished he could learn about game design, but he couldn’t find enough other students who shared his interest. Another student spoke wistfully of the varsity swimming that had filled her afternoons, which she was trying to make up in a weekend swim club.

The girl who had talked about missing the violin raised her hand again and took a deep breath. “I feel embarrassed about my speech,” she said. “I just got a retainer and I can’t make the sounds right.” A student called out, “We understand you fine,” and others rushed to share their own trials with orthodontics. In family, “off topic” rarely applies.

And when events like Hurricane Sandy or the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings burst onto the public stage, family becomes a time for students to sort through emotions and reach out. No one considers these sudden immersions in world events a detour from the curriculum. “We want our kids to feel they are part of the global community,” Noyes said, “that they are connected. Or when someone in school is sick or in crisis, we’ll figure out how to help that person.”

A staple in many families is a ritual they call “connections.” Students sit in a circle and anyone with something to say may speak uninterrupted. Sometimes students share a personal accomplishment. Other times they ask for advice. Predictably, the invitation to open up in a safe space, with peers who wish you well, deepens the talking and listening. One student described the bad fight he had with his parents the night before. Another spoke of her ongoing feelings that she’s “not smart enough.” A third related a misunderstanding with her boss, which made her not want to go back to work.

*At regular school, there are times when you feel you’re the only one going through something, that everyone else is walking around with a smile on their face. Here you have a classroom full of kids you can talk to and say how you feel.*

– NYLA, grade 10

Sometimes these conversations yield advice or solutions that those involved might try. Just as important, the connections normalize their struggles. They see that other young people also have difficulties; they learn that setbacks are part of growing up.

“At regular school, there are times when you feel you’re the only one going through something, that everyone else is walking around with a smile on their face,” said Nyla. “It’s lonely.” Not surprisingly, research suggests that this loneliness and alienation, to the extent to which it is associated with academic work, drains a student’s engagement in learning.<sup>4</sup> “Here you have a classroom full of kids you can talk to and say how you feel,” Nyla explained.

In some families, mentoring relationships between students in upper and lower grades also become part of the structure. Pairs find their own rhythm—there is no protocol—and it is a two-way exchange. “Even though they’re younger than you,” said Missy, a twelfth grader, “they have a different mindset and a different opinion. And you learn from them, too.”

Finally, a growing body of research backs up what makes gut sense: students recognize and try hard for “a teacher who cares.” Teachers who take the time to know their students well create trusting and respectful relationships that bring learning to life. They act not deliverers of knowledge but as facilitators and coaches—whether that means accommodating individual circumstances, offering extra help and attention, or intervening in times of stress. By showing young people that they matter and that their efforts bear results, such adults make all the difference in an adolescent’s sense of self.<sup>5</sup>

Many QECHS students say that the best part about family is the relationship they create with their facilitator and, by transference, to other adults in the school.

*My family facilitator, she's kinda became like my second mom. Whatever the problem, I can go to her, there's that trust relationship where we can talk about anything. And I know if I haven't done something and I see her coming down the hallway, I better find somewhere to hide because she's gonna ask me about it. And it's not them just hounding you about your grades, which, you know, they want you to keep. There's a friendship. They're on your side. – AMEN*

*And a great thing about the relationships is it's not only with your family facilitators. It's also with any of your teachers. You'll come in the room and they'll [act like], "If you respect me, I'll respect you." And actually care. They'll help you. Like if you come to them about a problem you have at home, they'll understand. . . . They're not just, "You didn't [do] your homework." They'll be willing to work through you with this and figure out ways they can help you raise your grade, things like that. – KENNETH*

*Teacher-wise, me personally, I've never had a group of teachers that I know I can just go to for help. I mean, it's not like I've ever had a teacher just outright hate me or something like that, but I've never had teachers that I felt I could go to at any period of the day and tell them something that's going on and then they would be able to help me or give me advice. – NYLA*

## **This work has value for me**

It was Friday morning and instead of lugging backpacks to class, Quest students were traveling light, jumping into buses that would take them to the “service sites” where they will spend the next four hours. They fanned out across the area—to elementary schools, a center for disabled young adults, an animal shelter, a hospital clinic, a nursing home, and more. At Jesse Jones Park, an oasis of small forests and fields a 25-minute drive from the school, one group, the “Green Team,” serves as environmental stewards. Another group tends to a nineteenth-century replica of a pioneer farm, built by Quest students several years ago. Clothed in britches and long skirts, they demonstrate the ways of early settlers to visiting groups of elementary school students.

**When asked what they value most about the school, Quest students put service right after family, if not ahead.**

*When I came to Quest, I saw Fridays as a day I didn't have to go to class and could, you know, knock off. Now I don't just want to make an impact in my community, but around the world*  
– JONATHAN, Grade 11

Black vest and trousers pulled tight around his narrow frame, Jason, the budding mathematician, sat on a stool surrounded by leatherworking tools and small pieces of animal skin. Pioneers would soften fresh skins by soaking them in water for six days, he explained, then use “brain paste” (brain innards mixed with water) to tan the hides.

Missy was tutoring a third grader who had just told her there was no point to school. “I’m just gonna go to work,” he said. After three years of serving as a teacher’s aide, Missy now wants to be a teacher. She took the occasion to start a conversation with the child about grit.

Jonathan, who has a brother with autism, worked elbow to elbow with two disabled young adults at the Cambridge Center. As they rolled out the dough for dog biscuits, he drew them into conversation about pet peeves.

At the nearby Texas Medical Center, half a dozen students greeted patients as they entered the large waiting room. The students offered water or coffee, eased the restlessness of young children waiting with an ill parent, and answered patients’ questions about what to expect.

When asked what they value most about the school, Quest students put service right after family, if not ahead. Passionate about community service, the school's founding principal allocated a day a week to service learning long before such hours showed up on other high school transcripts. Nineteen years later, early college notwithstanding, the tradition remains vital to Quest's mission.

Students volunteer at an array of sites where Quest has built steady relationships. Like Missy, many find their place at one of the district's elementary schools. They move quickly from helping a teacher with chores to working directly with groups of kids or individual students—teaching them to read, to speak English, to multiply, to persevere. Twelfth-graders may pursue an internship on their own, with the school's backing. Or they can elect to become a service-learning leader assigned to a particular site; they alternate between observing classmates at work and providing feedback one week, then joining the action the next week. They receive special training for their observation duties, using a rubric developed for this purpose.

As well as reflecting aloud on their service in the family group, students complete written reflections on their service at the end of each semester. They also evaluate themselves in four categories: attendance (e.g., consistent), attitude (e.g., exercised good judgment), learning process (e.g., showed initiative), performance (e.g., handled constructive criticism well). Their adult supervisor applies the same standards; service is a credit-bearing course.

When a site placement does not gel (it happens), Quest's service coordinator, Bobbie Rogina, steps in. Take the example of Celine (as we'll call her) whose diffidence often made her hot to handle within the walls of Quest—and outside, too. When successive elementary school placements went sour, Rogina arranged for Celine to stack books at the public library while she searched for a placement that would not just accommodate Celine's temperament but also challenge her. Rogina finally found a social worker at one of the district middle schools willing to take Celine under her wing—and where Celine has since flourished as an assistant.



**Audio Slideshow**  
**Building Relationships**  
**Through Service**

**Phillip, "It Touches Me" (1:50)**



**Vivianna, "Do They Change, Themselves?" (1:05)**



Service learning at Quest goes deeper than every student volunteering one day a week, four years running—as substantial as this is. It gains full force from the relationships it nourishes, said both students and coordinator Regina.

Vivianna applauded the annual day of service at high schools across the county, but wondered what students got from this "one-off" experience.

*Say they spent a few hours at an animal shelter. Did they become part of, you know, the growing process with each of the animals? Did they have an emotional connection and, you know, be happy when an animal got adopted? Did they know what happened to animals when they're not adopted after a certain amount of time? Did they grow as a person themselves?*

After four years working in two elementary schools, Missy looked back.

*All these kids I've met. They see me in Wal-Mart and run up and hug me and I'm like, "Wait a second. How do I know you?" You get to learn so much about yourself, you grow so much patience, you learn to see the world through another person's eyes. Now I can actually explain a concept up here [the head] to a child who could only grasp something down there [the heart].*

Importantly, service at Quest holds value in its own right. Though many schools strive to link learning to the academic curriculum, here the ties to social and emotional learning matter most. “It creates a better whole child,” Bobbie Rogina stated simply. “It’s the little stone that creates a huge ripple.” Looking back on their service experience, several seniors who act as service learning leaders made a list of what they had learned: to relate to people of different ages and backgrounds, to communicate better one-on-one and publicly, to take initiative and assume responsibility, to show patience, to reach out without being asked, to think ahead.

Most of all, students will tell you, they feel they are making a difference through their service work. For adolescents—an age where idealism and justice compete with self-absorption—the belief that their contributions matter goes a long way to making them feel valued, themselves. Youth grow in important ways when adults in the community invite and salute their contributions, research suggests.<sup>6</sup> The 40 developmental assets identified by the **Search Institute** as critical to youth ages twelve to eighteen include promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty, helping others, acting on convictions, and a sense of purpose.

“When I came to Quest, I saw Fridays as a day I didn’t have to go to class and could, you know, knock off,” Jonathan admitted. “Now I don’t just want to make an impact in my community, but all around the world if I can.” Phillip picked up the beat: “I came here figuring I’d give it a year, then probably go back to regular high school. Now I can’t imagine doing high school without service.”

### **Nourishing academic value, too**

The other four days of the week, it is up to the facilitators at Quest to add value to the English, science and math, and social studies classes that fill students’ schedules.

The college classes QECHS students take on the Lone Star campus have patent value: the credits students earn put them ahead academically and may win them an associate’s degree, tuition free. When Quest students outperform their college classmates, as they often do, their pride swells.

**The college classes QECHS students take on the Lone Star campus have patent value.**

**Regular classes must win student interest and commitment.**

Regular classes at the school must earn their value. When students head to service sites on Friday, Quest teachers gather for three hours of professional development (alternately meeting as a full staff; as grade-level teams; and as content-area teams, including family). They ground their conversations in the research: the academic tasks and topics students value most are those that connect somehow to their interests, their future, and their lives. When students value what they are being asked to learn, they are more likely to expend effort mastering it and to persist when the going gets tough. When a task is not valued, students may struggle to focus their attention on it, forget information related to it, or simply give up.<sup>7</sup>

The contract students and parents sign when they enter Quest includes an unlikely clause that bears the heading “Uncensored Curriculum.” Students will be expected to participate in “open exchanges of ideas, discussions, debates, and class assignments concerning every possible subject matter,” it cautions. “Every QECHS student will assuredly have his or her values and beliefs challenged at various times while enrolled in this program.”

For her sophomore English class, first-year teacher Danielle Maldonado chose George Orwell's *1984* to kick off the 2013–14 school year. To prime students for Orwell's "Big Brother," Maldonado uploaded to the class website two provocative newspaper articles about schools using computer chips to track pupils. After reading the articles for homework, students were to debate the question: Do public school students deserve privacy when it comes to attendance, search, and seizure?

Three weeks later, the class had analyzed Shelby Steele's essay "The New Sovereignty," about grievance groups becoming nations unto themselves, and completed a timed writing about Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," a chilling tale of conformity gone mad. Having shared their writing and reflections online, students took turns leading classmates through a discussion of a chapter from *1984*. Maldonado encouraged them not to focus overly on the plot but rather to pick a theme they thought stood out. "It's not that important that they know every detail of the book," she said. "The idea is pulling out motifs and connecting them to current society, reflecting on what it means today."

Tucked between college classrooms on the second floor of the building Quest shares with Lone Star, Kelly Carruthers, who teaches dual credit biology, anatomy, and physiology, has "flipped" her classroom. She records two 25-minute lectures a week for each class and students watch the lectures at home, on their own schedule. Class time is reserved for a warmup exercise (typically an invitation for students to find real-world examples of what they are studying) followed by an activity (often a lab, sometimes a worksheet). "You're always figuring things out in her class," said one biology student, "bouncing ideas off the other kids in your group or Ms. Carruthers. You can hear all the thinking going on."

Meanwhile, students in Jim Nerad's "Senior Social Action" class were discussing Patricia McCormick's *Sold*, the story of Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old Nepalese girl forced into sexual slavery in India to support her family. The book had so upset one student that she sought out a documentary on human trafficking to understand it better. Another, who grew up in India, had read the book in one day and felt angry that its theme did not surprise her: "It's a disgrace you get used to if you live in India." Nerad pushed his class to think about what might have happened if Lakshmi had resisted. "I kept asking that myself," answered a boy in the front. "All I could see is that she would have been killed. It broke my heart."

*You're always figuring things out in her class. You can hear all the thinking going on.*  
– 9th grade biology student

*You have this teacher who's been teaching forever. He knows his stuff, but what he really teaches you is about life.*  
– EMIL, grade 12

His students were hungry, said Nerad—always asking for more. They spend first semester immersed in analyses of injustice and inequality nationally and globally; for second semester, they pick a local social action project. "Just go out and find something that has real meaning for you," the teacher told the class. "Go out and meet, talk, interview. Go out and give, go out and learn." Such work had ample value to his students, by all accounts. "You have this teacher who's been teaching forever," said Emil. "He knows his stuff, but what he really teaches you is about life."

## **My ability and competence grow with my effort**

Delicate in appearance, ninth-grade facilitator Mishka Douglas—a Quest graduate herself—is known for being quirky and tough. She has a habit of asking her students an open-ended question; as students offer answers, she tells each one, "You're right." They find it annoying, but they get her point: many questions have no single answer.

“I have higher expectations than a lot of the students are used to,” said Douglas.

*They come here from middle school with straight A's, having been taught that they are, say, a good writer, and then their first assignment with me they don't pass. All of a sudden it's "What? Either I'm stupid all of a sudden or the teacher is bad." I really want them to work for their grade. I tell them it's a process, like tying your shoelaces. At first you struggle, you can't seem to get the loops right, then one day it comes. I say the same thing with English. Few of us are born knowing how to write a good introductory paragraph. But if you do it over and over again, you'll figure it out.*

Most ninth graders who enroll at Quest arrive tuned, at least, to receive Douglas's message. At Bridge Camp, they hear it loud and clear: it's not about talent but about how hard you are willing to work to get what you want. When asked what they thought set them apart from classmates in middle school, many Quest students talked about drive.

*In my middle school, other kids looked at kids like us as nerds or overachievers. Working hard wasn't cool. Here you're with other people who have the drive, it helps keep you going. At Quest we all wanna go different places and accomplish different things, but the thing is that we wanna go! – KENNETH*

*At my old school, like here, every student is different. But at Quest we're all the same in our drive. – CAITLIN*

Even with drive, challenges as well as opportunities come with a growth mindset. It may be reassuring that one can master trigonometry with effort, even without the math gene. But the decision remains how much effort to make. Although Quest students sign a contract pledging to work hard, they may underestimate the bargain.

In “normal” high school (the adjective both students and staff use to describe the other high schools in Humble ISD), kids often blow off hard work and get away with it, three tenth graders agreed. At Quest, “it catches up with you fast,” said Jason. “There's no such thing as ‘I'm not good at that’ and checking out.”

Facilitators do everything they can to help students stay on track and engaged. In family, time is set aside each week for students to meet individually with their adviser and go over schoolwork, talking about where they are confused and strategies that might help. In class, facilitators become practiced at scaffolding teaching and learning. They prize classroom discussion and are mindful of best practices: distributing opportunities to talk, asking open-ended questions, fostering discourse among students, and nudging them to justify their responses.<sup>8</sup>

Facilitators always build choice into their courses, encouraging students to select assignments that are just right—not so challenging that they risk discouragement, not so easy that they court boredom. Each morning before school begins, facilitators are available to tutor students. (Quest opens at 8 a.m., but classes start at 8:45 and end at 4:30.) In twice-weekly “Student Support” time, the cafeteria fills with students who meet to complete assignments in peer study groups or with facilitators. Rubrics and student self-assessment are the norm at Quest; students grow accustomed to reflecting on where they stand in relation to multiple indicators of progress.

“I guess you'd call it a mantra here: helping students grow their competence through effort,” said assistant principal Janette Horton.

In the fall of 2013, Quest added a new structure to its already robust academic scaffolding for students. It joined the other high schools in the district as a site for **AVID**, a system that uses Socratic seminars and trained college volunteers to teach skills related to organization, note taking, speaking, writing, and inquiry. AVID's success in nurturing self-regulated learners and metacognitive skills seemed a good fit at Quest, especially given the



college coursework its students are expected to complete to receive their high school diploma. While the other five district high schools make AVID an elective, all Quest ninth and tenth graders must take it.

The day before their twice-weekly 90-minute AVID class, students submit a brief form in which they describe a “point of confusion” in one of their courses. The AVID facilitator uses that information to divide students into inquiry groups of four or five. Within each group, students take turns outlining their confusion on a flip chart and inviting peers to help sort it out with questions or strategies.



**Audio Slideshow**  
**“Yes, a Mistake!”**  
**A Look Inside an AVID**  
**Class (3:00)**



In Kathy Moss’s AVID class, for example, a group of students had written these points of confusion on its flip chart:

- *If you have wavelength in cm, identify what you multiply to do dimensional analyses.*
- *How do you use the “me” conjugation with reflexive verbs? [Spanish]*
- *Compare and contrast the Persian Empire to the Roman Empire.*
- *How many valence electrons would transition metals have?*
- *How do I create a mnemonic device to remember suffixes?*

Their peers posed related questions, offering and debating the strategies others offered, with tutors and the facilitator acting as guides. Each presenting student in turn jotted down notes on the left side of the flip chart and problem solving suggestions on the right, while also engaging in the discussion.

Quest counts on its students to shape and critique the curriculum, including the AVID protocol, new to both youth and adults here. The week before, students had huddled during their AVID period to discuss their points of confusion with the framework (does it need to be so rigid?) and to suggest possible workarounds.

Yet with AVID as well as other formal academic structures, many students say that their strong and informal relationships with faculty most affect their willingness to engage. Kenneth talked about the “improvement factor” that results.

*They’ll set out a goal and then they’ll say, “I’ll help you get there.” They believe you can improve and you get to feel that way too. They say, “Come to me if you are confused, email me, I’m here for you.” You work for yourself, but you work for them, too.*

These relationships also come into play with students who are under water.

“Why do kids fail at Quest?” principal Noyes asked. “Often it’s their maturity, sometimes their work ethic. Perhaps we underestimated their skill deficits. We believe we can help them, whatever the issue. We rely on the power of the relationships we have built with them.”

In the fall of 2013, Quest created a program for students most at risk of failing, starting with seven eleventh graders who seemed unready for the college courses required in the junior year. Working with Quest’s assessment coordinator, Dolly Covington, the students and their parents or guardians drafted individual contracts for how they would address the biggest trouble spots. Each party had a role to play: the school, the student, and the parent. The contract, as Covington sees it, is less a binding agreement than an ongoing occasion for conversation.

“Every time I meet with a student and his or her family, we pull out the contract and talk about how things are going,” said Covington. “The goal is to have conversations that get to the root of the problem and give kids the strategies they need to be successful, so that they aren’t walking around the school feeling they are a failure.”

In the end, however, “the student may simply not want to work that hard,” Covington concluded.

Not surprisingly, there are also times at Quest when the concept of growth mindset collides with societal and family pressure to achieve high grades. In a suburban community like Humble, grade point averages provoke fierce competition, and QECHS parents (more than students) are not immune to that.

Mishka Douglas recalled meeting with a tearful mother about a low grade her daughter had received in Douglas’s class.

*I told her that I care more about her child learning a concept than getting a good grade. I care that at the end of the day her daughter understands what she needs to learn. The A will come. Most of our kids get the growth mindset concept, but it’s a real struggle for some parents who may not only have a fixed mindset but are also fixated on their child’s being a valedictorian.*

To ease such anxiety and keep the focus on the learning process, Quest teachers do not average grades across the semester, but focus on mastery. Learning is measured continually and mastery is celebrated when it occurs. [Humble ISD, it must be noted, is currently challenging this practice and wants Quest to use the district’s customary averaging system.]

## My participation matters

“So here’s the drill,” Holly Shoettlin yells as twenty or so Quest sophomores line up for “boot camp” on the Lone Star College athletic field behind the school. She gets them started forming teams of four, picking a mascot, and creating a team cheer, then sets the task: “Flip these tires to the cones you see down the field and back, with each team member taking a turn.”

Shoettlin, herself a kinesthesiologist, leads this thrice-weekly cardiovascular workout that is part of the school’s longstanding commitment to wellness. It’s not a competition, she tells them. “Your job is to support your team members and to make a strong effort. What matters, as always, is your participation.”

**Whether it’s a classroom discussion, a game in family, a student-led club, a public meeting, student participation is the norm at Quest.**

**On the school’s official organizational chart, students appear alongside faculty and administration.**

Whether in boot camp or humanities class, hanging back at Quest is rarely an option. Student participation is considered essential to building community and also social and emotional skills. Even on the organizational chart the principal must submit to the school district, Noyes made sure that students appeared alongside faculty and administration. “They are integral to our structure,” she said. “They give as much as they receive.”

Twice weekly, the first block of the day is set aside for student-run clubs. On one October morning, twenty students joined Amen, an eleventh grader from Ethiopia, in the club she formed to explore women’s rights in the developing world. Across the hall, students performed skits in a theater club with no adult direction. Another room filled with students eager to reach out to disabled adults in the community. In an empty parking lot in front of the Lone Star campus, students in a makeshift sports club played pick-up soccer, basketball, and dodgeball, with no prior athletic skills required.

The school's Student Ambassador program attracts close to a quarter of the student body. Its participants help facilitate meetings that involve parents or local citizens, visit middle schools to recruit new students, host visitors to the school, and speak publicly on behalf of Quest. They also provide day care for parents who bring young children to their conferences with QECHS staff.

"Every adult in the building wears multiple hats," said Noyes. "We couldn't make this place work without the ambassadors, they fill in so many holes."

The games students routinely play in family are also part of the culture of participation. Whether or not they like the game, students are expected to participate, even if they only make a gesture. It is purposeful play, intended to build community and trust and to release tension. "Yeah, and it teaches us to have fun," said Jonathan. "We can be a pretty serious lot." At lunchtime, students are as often out on the field kicking a ball or playing tag as they are inside eating or huddled in conversation. "Ginger may be the only principal you'll hear telling sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to go out and play," said Dolly Covington.

As noted earlier, classroom structures at QECHS also pivot on student participation and discussion. The give and take in family, with its emphasis on respectful conversation, primes students for the back and forth they encounter in their classes. "The comfort level students feel with each other here is remarkable," said facilitator Jim Nerad. "And it shows up in class discussions, where just about everyone comments and the conversation can run deep."

Quest faculty talk openly about their own hurdles in learning how to be participants rather than potentates in the classroom. Danielle Maldonado, a first year teacher, described her natural preference for lecturing.

*That was what I was used to as a student, and—I thought—how I learned best. I resisted group work, I resisted all these techniques that I thought were silly, just wasting time. But there was no way lecturing would work as a teaching strategy at this school.*

*Here it's a true facilitator role, the opposite of getting up and leading all the time. When I started to plan for the year, I thought hard about how I could facilitate rather than direct, to constantly feed them information. I decided that the best way students learn is by teaching. So half of the time, they are in front of the classroom and I'm seated in back.*

*I worried a lot at first. What if students didn't want to participate or contribute? But it's worked. I also learned to model the participation I expect from them.*

## **I am becoming mature**

**The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** at the University of Illinois–Chicago identifies five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that evidence suggests contribute to student growth and mastery. Daniel Goleman's landmark book *Emotional Intelligence* provides the theoretical foundation. The competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Faculty members at Quest pointed to those competencies in describing what they hope to achieve with students. Jim Nerad spoke of the social awareness he seeks to stimulate in his action research class with twelfth graders. Assessment coordinator Dolly Covington described coaching self-management skills with students who are falling behind. Saxon Batungbacal, who oversees the school's nascent peer mediation program, remarked on

the relationship skills that activity develops. Ginger Noyes talked about fostering self-regulation and responsible decision making in the student body.

*We have a famous saying here, “We don’t do that at Quest.” And then we say, “This is why we don’t do it.” In six months, you’ll see the same kids who were behaving in ways that challenged others now saying, “We don’t do that here.” They become self-regulating. We have lots of conversations about the choices they make and what they could have done instead. We teach kids the day they walk in the door that you simply can’t be impulsive and make poor decisions and be successful in life.*



**Audio Slideshow**  
**“I Was a Very Quiet Person” | Four Quest Seniors Reflect on How They’ve Grown (3:20)**



Quest students, however, boiled down such social and emotional attributes to one ingredient: becoming mature. Gathered again in the small conference room in the QECHS office, they reflected on what maturity meant to them.

They talked about being treated like adults.

*You come from middle school, being treated like you’re still in kindergarten, and then all of a sudden you’re given these new standards, you know, higher expectations, more responsibility. It’s not just free and easy. Far from it. You have to act like an adult to be treated like an adult, and that’s what we learn here. – VIVIANNA*

They talked about gathering direction in their lives.

*When I was in middle school, I know this sounds really bad, but I started getting irritated with people ‘cause I felt like they weren’t really thinking. Like they were doing things that make sense, they weren’t contemplating the consequences of their actions. And so I was like, “Okay. Maybe I need to make a change, maybe I should distance myself a little.” So I tried coming to Quest and I found a lot of people who are like myself. Not that they think they’re better than other people or that other people are stupid, but they were more on a mature level and they were more thinking about where they wanted to go in life, what they wanted to do with themselves, how they could get there. – NYLA*

*I completely agree with that. When I was in middle school, I was a cheerleader. I was really involved, but I didn’t feel I was making any difference. I was just that girl. Part of the group, you know? So when I told my friends I was coming to Quest, everybody was like, “Why are you going to Quest?” They didn’t understand that they’re only thinking about right here, right now. And that’s not gonna benefit them in the long run. Here, when you’re in an environment where everybody thinks in a mature level, then your own maturity grows. That’s just how it goes. Your friends influence you, too. So when you’re around people that are mature, you’re mature as well. – MISSY*

They talked about growing confidence, most of all in relation to speaking up and becoming a leader.

*That’s definitely how Quest is. I feel like in eighth grade sitting in this meeting right here, I’d be like, “Oh my goodness! I don’t know what to say. I’m so nervous.” But I’ve had so many opportunities to speak to people and to speak to adults about what I’m doing and what’s this program that I’m in. And so I really feel like I’ve, like you said, blossomed as a leader, as a speaker, as everything. Because like I said, my knees would be shaking sitting here. – CAITLYN*

*I was always shy in middle school, like I just wanted to get out of there as quick as I can, and then I came to Quest and every, every year I've grown in confidence. And being a Quest ambassador, when I went back to my middle school and spoke in front of a class, the teacher was one I'd had. She announced, "This young lady, she used to be the most quiet person. Never talked in class, just had her head down. Now you see her here and she's like talking about with a passion the high school that she goes to, and you can just see how it's changed her so much."* – MISSY

They talked about suspending judgment and gaining empathy.

*There's no judgment here compared to other schools where you have certain groups of people and you have to fit a certain kind of category. Here we're encouraged to be ourselves, but we're interconnected.* – KENNETH

*You learn a lot about other people in the world and how you want to reflect on others. In family, my freshman year, it really hit me when fellow freshmen shared their stories about what they were going through, like homelessness or violence. It really teaches you about empathy. Here you are with these kids who just an hour before were smiling and all that stuff, and now you're sitting in a circle hearing about their life and figuring how lucky you are and how strong they are. And then service, getting out into the community and meeting kids and other people you'd ordinarily never meet—it really helps you to think about other people and not just what's going on with you in your life. It's, you know, the world.* – PHILLIP

They talked about shedding identities that limited them and using freedom responsibly.

*One of the things you learn here is that the identities you have in high school—the athlete, the nerd—disappear when you go on in college and beyond. Part of learning and becoming an adult is shedding these identities and the ways they limit growth and who you can be.* – JONATHAN

*What stands out for me is freedom. Your freshman and sophomore year you get practice, you know, in managing yourself. Then your junior year you're sent out into a college with so many different people. You basically have the freedom to do . . . you don't have to go to class. No one's gonna find out. But you go because it's your responsibility. You've learned to work hard, to go after what you want, without anyone telling you.* – AMEN

They talked about learning to be close to others.

*One of the big things you learn in family is how to open up. How to build those relationships, how to be close to someone, because sometimes you just don't know how to do that. You don't know how to open up to someone who's not in your family or who's not, you know, some major part of your life. But then there's this group of people who are with you at school all the time, and you learn how to be close to them, how to accept who they are and what they do and how to have them accept what you do. It feels great.* – KENNETH

When they first started at Quest, these students reflected, they eased their qualms by remembering that they could always return to “regular” school. A year later, none of them could imagine ever going back.

*I belong here, they say*

## Endnotes

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