

**Grover Cleveland  
International High School Community  
Needs Assessment**

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**Completed by the  
Junior Social Work Class  
at  
Daemen College**

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## **Introduction**

Through the efforts of the Social Work Department, and the Center for Sustainable Communities at Daemen College and Ms. Kathleen Houlihan from the International House at Grover Cleveland High School, (**GCHS**) a potential partnership was initiated this spring semester, 2006.

Grover Cleveland High School is composed of a 6-house system providing education to over one thousand (1,000) students. Students attending the International House at Grover Cleveland come from 70 different countries and approximately 40 languages can be heard throughout the halls of GHHS. Grover Cleveland is also a magnet school for health occupations as students can receive training in the medical profession.

Several meetings were held with staff and a faculty member from Daemen College, along with teachers and a Kaleida Health Care representative from Grover Cleveland to discuss how Daemen students could assist with the various programming efforts going on at the International House of Grover Cleveland High School.

Several areas were identified for possible student involvement, but due to time restraints, conflicting school schedules and limited student availability, (this semester only), the instructor for the social work junior class focused student efforts on conducting a community needs assessment. The information from this assessment would be used to specifically identify the needs of the GCHS community.

For this assessment, community was defined as the student body and teachers in the International House, as well as staff and administration of Grover Cleveland High School.

A total of forty-seven (47) students were interviewed; twenty three (23) females and twenty-four (24) males ranging in age from fourteen (14) to nineteen (19) years old.

### Student Profile

Age	14 yrs old	15 years old	16 years old	17 years old	18 years old	19 years old
	3	10	16	8	7	3

The average time that the group had spent in the United States varied from one month to four years. The counties primarily represented by the students were Somalia, Puerto Rico, Russia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Dominican Republic, Liberia, Burundi, Cuba, Kenya, and Afghanistan. The students all come from large families with many siblings. Most were responsible after school and at night for the care of their brothers and sisters. None of the students had their driver’s licenses and all had to walk or take the bus to school.

Ten (10) teachers were interviewed; eight (8) female, and two (2) male. The ethnic background of the teachers was not obtained. Information regarding length of employment was collected from eight (8) of the teachers.

### Teacher Profile

Years at GCHS	2 months	2 years	3 years	5 years	17 years	31 years
	1	2	2	1	1	1

This information from the other two teachers that were interviewed was not available because they were not present at the time this question was asked.

The Administration and Staff consisting of the Principal and Vice Principal, one of the guidance counselors, the senior school clerk, and the education counselor from Kaleida were interviewed. Three (3) were females and two (2) were males. The principal and vice principal have been with the school for two (2) years, the guidance counselor, eight (8) years, the senior school clerk thirty four (34) years, and the education counselor four (4) years.

## **Findings**

The international students at GCHS are a very tight and proud community. The international students are very outgoing, and willing to get involved in any opportunities that may benefit the student body and/or the school. Students overall have a positive attitude towards the school and their community. Teachers noticed the strengths of the student population were in terms of good work ethics, respectfulness, and discipline, which one teacher attributed to the traditional backgrounds of the students. In addition teachers said that the students in the International House get along.

The administration, staff and teachers identified many strengths of the school, one of which is diversity. The diversity of the students and the staff is viewed as an advantage to the school. One teacher stated, “The diversity of the staff here parallels the diversity of the students, which means that each student will be heard no matter where they come from”. Strengths of the teachers stem from dedication, interest in and concern for the students. “The teachers here get the job done; they don’t slack off,” was a comment of one of the teachers. For example, the teachers are given small allowances to buy materials, yet they are willing to pay out of their own pockets to get needed supplies for their students. The fact that there is a good support network with the teachers in the International House was also discussed as a strength. Other institutional strengths affirmed by the teachers, were the school’s house system, full bilingual program and the fact that they can group students by ability. The administration also felt that even with limited resources they are able to work wonders.

## Concerns/Needs

### From the International Students Perspective

International students at Grover Cleveland have a variety of needs, wants and concerns.

The international students expressed a need for more help with:

- ✓ **English and Math classes**, especially as it relates to homework and class work. The parents of these students are often unable to help with homework because they are struggling with the English language as well.
- ✓ **Learning computer skills**. The school has a computer lab with many new computers as well as computers located in the library. However, there are no working printers for the students to use in the lab or the library. Many teachers do not take their students to the computer lab or library because they are unable to print out any information.
- ✓ **Assuring safety**. For the most part all the students interviewed said they felt safe but that fights do occur regularly. Many fights occur due to tension between the international and other GCHS students, as well as tension between black and white students.
- ✓ **Cultural customs**. The international students who identify with their cultural customs, for example, holidays, are not accommodated because school is in session on many if not all of their holidays. Therefore many students are forced to miss school days due to important cultural holidays not being recognized in our current school environment.
- ✓ **Healthcare/Employment**. Students and their families need help obtaining more knowledge and access to healthcare and employment.

- ✓ **Other needs.** Help with obtaining a driver's permit and/or license; access to more Americanized clothing, more of a variety of sports at Grover Cleveland, and uniforms for their soccer team.
  
- ✓ **Otherism.** The international students expressed that they, "...feel like prisoners," when they wear the required ID lanyards. Apparently the non international students are not required to wear them.

### **From the Teachers Perspective – The Needs of Students**

The teachers were able to generate an extensive and wide-ranging list of student needs. One major concern seemed to be that of language. Students enter the classroom not knowing how to speak English, but also many are illiterate in their native language. This deficit in written and oral communication creates hurdles for both the students and teachers and complicates the learning process. Students lack time management and organizational skills and the teachers see a need for the students to have more one-on-one contact with teachers.

Students lack knowledge of western culture and are not fully prepared for the American lifestyle. Students are not being exposed to a variety of American cultural experiences and only learn about America from what they experience at home or at school. Another observation of the teachers was the fact that many of the students seem to excel in either education or social and emotional skills. A teacher commented, "It seems that if student is getting good grades they are less social, and if a student is socially mature their class work is not as important. We need to help them have more of a balance".

Other student needs stem from cultural and family commitments. Some of the students travel and miss school because of visiting families, and/or participating in cultural holidays and customs. There are also those families that have to relocate a lot when they are unable to pay rent, thereby requiring the student to switch schools.

Students in the International House also have a penchant to assume adult roles. They act as translators for their parents, are responsible for taking care of younger siblings or for some, their own children. Also, some of the students work at night and are therefore tired in class.

The many needs of the special education students were discussed. A major concern in this area is the large class size of 30-45 students. Teachers expressed a need for more special education teachers, as there are currently only three. Other topics of discussion included the question of all-inclusion classrooms, Individualized Education Plans for the special education students, and the fact that re-evaluations of students educational plans are not allowed.

### **From the Teachers Perspective - The Needs of Families**

The needs of the families of the students are abundant. First are basic needs such as housing, work, food, and clothing. Child care is also a major need of the students and their families. The families also need opportunities for socialization, as they have a tendency to stay within their own culture. One teacher stated that many families are stigmatized because of their accent and people think they are “all on welfare.” Many of the families do not know where to go for information and resources. They also are not aware of the fact that they cannot get turned down from a job because of their ethnicity. A real concern is what students have shared with the teachers in terms of staff at the Department of Social Services telling students to drop out of school when they turn 18 so they can get a job.

### **From the Teachers Perspective - The Needs of Teachers**

A unanimous need among the teachers was smaller class size. The teachers would like time to work with students either one-on-one or in small groups. Another concern voiced during the interviews was the way student progress is identified and reported. When reports are released from Albany about GCHS, the fact that over half of the population is international students who are just learning English is not a factor when assessing and

comparing student's abilities with students from other high schools. The teachers state this misrepresents the actual academic abilities of the students as well as the quality of their teaching.

Teachers want to have a better understanding of their student's culture. One teacher said, "I know where my students are coming from, like what country and what language they speak. But I don't know what their situation was there or much about the culture." The teacher further discussed the fact that having such an understanding would help her to relate to her students better and she could use it in her teaching. For example, many math word problems use American sports, such as lacrosse or polo, which the students have never heard of. If she knew about the sports, or other customs, in their own countries, she would incorporate them into the class work. This teacher suggested having in-services at the school, where speakers from the countries represented by the students come and speak about their experiences.

In addition to having more understanding of the student's culture, teachers said they would like to foster better relations between the teachers of the International house and the teachers from the other five (5) houses. A concern was expressed that the teachers outside of the International House do not see or understand the needs of the International students.

### **From the Teachers Perspective - Material Needs of the International House at Grover Cleveland High School**

The teachers would like to see more books for the library and printers in the computer lab. It was also noted that the copy machines and phones do not always work. There is also a need for educational materials, such as textbooks, paper and pencils. Lastly, teachers would like a refrigerator to keep lunches in.

## **From the Administration/Staff Perspective - Needs of the International House at**

Needs identified by the administration included:

- ✓ More staff including teachers, attendance officers, and counselors  
There is also a need for teachers that meet all of the requirements for the curriculum of the school
- ✓ More integration in the teaching curriculum  
The administrator felt that the curriculum which teaches from a white middle class American perspective does not pay attention to the 95% minorities.
- ✓ Better attendance through the prevention of students unauthorized leaving of the school/building
- ✓ More interesting electives for the students to take
- ✓ Stronger disciplinary measures
- ✓ Specific information regarding referrals; where to get food, insurance, and other needs
- ✓ People who could sit down and talk with the International students, especially those who are new to the United States
- ✓ Publicize the good things happening at GCHS thereby promoting a better reputation for the school
- ✓ Physically the school needs a lot of remodeling, but because the building is historic there are challenges to improving the actual structure of the building

## **Recommendations**

This initial assessment of the International House of GCHS provided a wonderful opportunity to view the many strengths and needs of the GCHS community. Based on the findings discussed in this report several recommendations and potential program development ideas are posed.

1. Regardless of these austere times GCHS has a special mission which requires a willingness on the board of education's part to allocate special resources to support special forces aka MORE STAFF.

More staff is needed in terms of teachers, attendance officers, security, counselors and social workers. There are currently no bilingual counselors and as such, even now some students are not able to receive much help from the guidance counselors. More security officers could help with the discipline issues of the entire school. They would be able to better monitor the school as a whole and could help to implement a prevention model developed by the school.

2. Conduct in-services seminars for all teachers, staff and administration. Individuals from countries represented by the students should be invited to speak to the experience of that culture. It may be even more beneficial to allow the students to put together presentations about their experiences. This not only informs the teachers of what their students are going through, but gives the students a forum to share of themselves. This could bring about more of a bridge between students and teachers than a speaker from outside the school. Also, speakers from multi-cultural organizations or individuals who have experience and skills in working with diverse populations could be an effective training technique for the GCHS community.
3. Re-establish the program called Academic Intervention Services (A.I.S.). This service was designed to help those students who were struggling in one area or another.

If the student failed a final exam they could enroll in this service over the summer in order to study and retake the exam in January. Because the final exams have been discontinued, this service is no longer in effect. We strongly recommend bringing this program back. This program gives students a second chance to complete and pass their courses. For students attempting to learn the English language and acclimate to the American school system, it is almost unconscionable to not provide academic intervention services to students starting with a deficit perspective.

4. Adopt a Language Academy model for the International House at GCHS. Many of the international students have not had “formal education” prior to entering school in the United States. The Language Academy could be designed to provide international students a six month to a year experience centered on learning Basic English in a structured classroom, and acculturation/socialization workshop/classes to help buffer the cultural shock/cultural loss experiences of the international students. Upon the completion of this academy, students could then be assessed for proper placement within the educational system.
5. Offer more electives in the curriculum. With more staff more classes can be taught. If there were more art, home economics, shop, and band classes the students may be more interested in attending class, and do well. This is especially true since these topics fit well with many of the cultural needs of the international student body.
6. Incorporated into the curriculum field trips in an effort to give students a well-rounded view of American culture.
7. Open a school store in order to provide students with much needed supplies. Some larger chain stores have a community focus and might be willing to sponsor a school store. The store could offer such items as pencils, pens, erasers,

notebooks and other academic material at inexpensive prices. This would help ensure that students come prepared for class and decrease the cost that many teachers pay to provide these supplies.

8. Re-open the daycare-type service for students once offered at GCHS but cut for various reasons. Interviewers were told it was removed in an effort to increase abstinence. However, that intervention did not take into account the needs of international students. Take for example Somalian culture; it is customary for marriage to occur at 13, 14 or 15 years of age. These individuals are likely to have children. Providing day care in the school allows for these individuals to gain an education and also uphold his or her own way of life. Both teachers and students see the need for this program to be restored as it would impact retention of the students and create an atmosphere of understanding and cultural competence relative to this student body. Many international female students drop out of school when they have children because they cannot find or afford proper daycare. In order to combat this occurrence, it would be necessary for the school to aid students and provide a place for their children to be during the day. Creative staffing and support of this program can be explored.
  
9. Provide culturally sensitive birth control education classes to international students. In the classrooms of the United States one can typically find sexual education being addressed in middle and high school, however, many of the international students did not attend school in their home countries. This leaves these students with little exposure to proper sexual education, and limited knowledge about birth control methods. There is a need for this, but it requires a culturally-competent/sensitive response. For example, the concept of women's rights is seen differently throughout the world. One cannot simply tell a married Afghani woman or female adolescent that she should abstain from sex if she does not want to have children or if at this time children would be an inconvenience.

She should be provided with information about birth control that is pertinent to her situation. Sexual education is needed yet without a culturally-sensitive focus it is likely to be lost on the students who need it most.

10. Provide a course in American ways to help buffer the shock for international students who have recently moved to the United States. This introduction to American society could cover a broad range of topics including hygiene education, proper season attire, their rights as U.S. citizens, how to go about finding resources and proper behavior in different situations. With this knowledge, international students would be able to better comprehend “foreign” American habits
11. Improve the technology at GCHS. Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to have exposure to technology, vis a vis computer skills. There should be computers in all the classrooms, with ESL software which: can assist students with honing their English language skills and gain computer proficiency at the same time.

### **Program Development Ideas:**

In addition to the above recommendations, the junior social work class would like to get more Daemen College students involved in working on the following initiatives:

- ❖ A computer tutoring class which could hopefully be supplemented by an actual computer literacy class.
- ❖ Exploring available options for securing computers and printers for each classroom in the school.
- ❖ Setting up tutoring in English and Math and the sciences
- ❖ Establish a clothing donation center to provide the students with the articles of clothing they would like more of, i.e., jeans and T-shirts.

- ❖ Finishing the display of flags on the first floor at GCHS that represent the countries the students come from
- ❖ Finding a major corporation, bank, or other organization(s) to adopt GCHS thereby providing specific support of the schools identified needs

Overall Grover Cleveland High School has tremendous potential. There are many dedicated and committed administrators, staff, teachers and students very eager to help facilitate changes in the school. In looking at the school as a whole there many areas that would benefit greatly from change. Everyone has to work together to make these changes. . Through everyone working together the school is capable of many more great things. We do hope you will allow the faculty and students of Daemen College to partner with you in this endeavor.

Respectfully submitted

The Junior Class of the Daemen College Social Work Program