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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the non-academic impact of a program for at-risk students within an urban alternative high school. The Jefferson County Public Schools, Kentucky, work on the premise that prevention is a key part of safety net strategies for at-risk students. Liberty High School is an alternative safety net high school intended to develop a community of learners who demonstrate acceptance, leadership, and academic success through a caring, collaborative, and engaging learning environment. Liberty includes such features as a program for 9th graders at risk of dropping out, a high school prep program for 8th graders, and a life skills/learning habits program. This study evaluated the characteristics and numbers of student participants, characteristics of the scope of service in the program, and differences in participating students' attendance and suspension. Data were collected on attendance and discipline from a district database and program activity logs. Results indicate that the program was able to help high school students who exhibited attendance, behavioral, and social problems that limited their ability to succeed in the regular school environment. The program improved attendance in participating students and helped decrease behavioral problems. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Alternative Schools: Providing A Safety Net In Our High Schools To Cope With The At-Risk Student Challenge

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Abstract

The high school dropout rates are growing nationwide. This critical problem requires school districts to assess their strategies in place for coping with this challenge. In this study, an alternative high school from a large urban school district was analyzed to study the impact of their programs in non-academic measures such as attendance and suspensions. The findings of this exploratory study indicated that the safety net, alternative school program has provided assistance to at-risk students overcome attendance and behavioral problems. Implications for alternative schools models and recommendations for restructuring the schools on the basis of at-risk students needs are discussed.

Keywords: Alternative Schools, At-Risk Students, High School, and Dropout Prevention

Alternative schools: Providing a safety net in our high schools to cope with the at-risk student challenge

Nationwide, the high school dropout rates are alarming figures that point to a significant problem in our educational system. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1997) reported that high school dropout rates have risen for the past years. Several theories attempt to explain this complex phenomenon. Researchers have identified frameworks for discussing general categories associated with the identification of at-risk students and their influence in dropping out. For example, LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) report the existence of (a) pupil-related factors, (b) school-related factors, (c) constructed factors, and (d) macro-system factors. These researchers argue that the experiences and characteristics that students bring to school include economic, familial, and socio-cultural pupil-related factors. School-related factors vary across schools, educational staff, and central office administrators. Constructed factors include both pupil- and school-associated categories that influence the attitudes and perceptions that students have about schooling. The macro-system factors are related to the social, political, and economic contexts in which school systems are embedded.

Another conceptualization, alienation theory, states that some students fail to connect with the goals of the schools, develop a detachment from the schooling process, and eventually leave high school (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995). This theory argues that students consciously reject the norms and values of schools and dislike the demands placed on them by the mainstream culture. Alienated students often have feelings of inadequacy and develop poor attitudes and relationships toward peers, authority, responsibility, learning, and achievement.

From a more practical perspective, Roderick (1993) identified reasons given for dropping out of school. Both male and female groups reported similar reasons, namely "did not like school" and "poor grades." Males emphasized the attractiveness of going to work and females gave emphasis to the appeal of getting married. The general findings of the Roderick study were that school, economic, pregnancy, and marriage factors were the major reasons related to dropping out of school.

Another well-known reason affecting dropping out from schools is that the traditional organizational structures of high schools across the nation do not always satisfy the needs of our students, especially in the urban areas (Schargel & Smink, 2001; Wilensky & Kline, 1989). Students often attend large high schools that prevent them from receiving the attention they need from school personnel and their peers. Individuals are not able to identify with the larger social systems because they cannot exercise their own powers or express their own personality. Addressing the challenge of meeting the urban students' needs, alternative strategies have emerged in the arena of public education. The American educational system is becoming more perceptive of our students' educational needs.

Our educational system is failing to meet the real needs of society. Our schools constitute the most traditional, conservative, rigid, bureaucratic institution of our time. It is the institution most resistant to change. While these statements are accurate, they do not describe the whole situation. There are new developments: alternative schools, creative classrooms, opportunities for independent study, all kinds of adventurous enterprises being carried by dedicated teachers, administrators, and parents. (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, xxi).

Though change on many fronts is still necessary, it is important to recognize the programs that are utilizing innovative techniques to improve every students' educational experience.

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) is the 26th largest school district in the United States. The school district serves more than 96,000 students from preschool to grade 12. JCPS has a vision for long-term student achievement. The vision entitled "Beyond 2000" was designed to assure that every student will acquire the fundamental academic and life skills necessary for success in the classroom and workplace. JCPS vision commits the school system to educate each student to the highest academic standards while ensuring attention to non-cognitive measures such as attendance and discipline.

In JCPS, the idea of prevention is a key element of the safety net strategies. The district has been moving from short-term, individual-focused interventions in the school classroom to a long-term, comprehensive interventions expanding beyond the school to include the families and the community. Prevention strategies and programs are based on research and a concerted effort is made to identify the underlying risk factors for problems. The challenge that JCPS is trying to address is the implementation of prevention strategies that strengthen protective factors in the schools, families, and communities. The concept is that, to be successful, prevention interventions must focus on enhancing and creating positive environmental contexts in the schools, families, and communities that, in turn, reinforce positive behaviors. JCPS will facilitate the achievement of the attributes of social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose in all children.

Program Description

Liberty High School is an alternative, non-traditional, safety net school whose goal is to develop a community of learners who demonstrate acceptance, leadership, and academic success through a caring, collaborative, and engaging learning environment. The goal is to make students successful in their education experience. Liberty enrolls students voluntarily, from throughout the district, who have the following characteristics:

- Have been in high school for at least one year and has less than 5 credits.
- Have been in high school 4 years and have less than 14 credits.
- Are frequently absent from school.
- Has failed 4 or more classes.
- Are 16 years of age.

In order to apply for the regular program at Liberty High School, the interested student along with their parent(s) must attend an information session, complete the application and return it to the school. Liberty High School expects it's students to abide by the Six P's: prompt, prepared, participate, produce, positive mental attitude, and be polite. Each student will perform at the Apprentice level on the annual CATS assessment. Each student will meet or exceed the JCPS district's outcomes in literacy and mathematics assessments. Finally, each graduate will complete a senior project, a service-learning component, and a writing portfolio. The school does have a small number of special education children but has no capability or capacity for self-contained classrooms.

The school's capacity is 450 students and accepts and intakes new students every 9 weeks. Most of the students attending Liberty are in the regular or comprehensive program, but the school also operates 2 other programs. The first is the *Crossroads* program aimed at 15 or 16 year old students in the 9th grade at-risk of dropping out. The maximum capacity for this program is 40 students. Each high school in the district is allocated 2 slots to refer these students to Liberty. The principal of the referring school forwards the application to the JCPS pupil personnel assessment counselor. That office then reviews the students record and makes a determination of whether the student is a candidate for the program. The student must have a current assessment by the Safe/Drug-Free Schools unit. An interview is scheduled with the Liberty High counselor and a final decision is made as to enrollment.

The second program is the *High School Prep for 8th graders* who are at least 15 years old. This program has a maximum capacity of 60 students. A retained 15 year old or older 8th grade student, recommended to the Middle School Liaison or the Middle School Office will be considered for open slots based on age. The program administrator and the Middle School liaison reviews and selects participants for the High School Prep program. The student must agree to maintain a 90% or better attendance rate.

At Liberty, due to the nature of the students in this school, classes are normally limited to 20 students each. Liberty is in its' fifth year of operation. Its' inaugural year was 1997-1998. It began in the old Male High School building with 60 students, and was moved to its' present location at the old Bruce Middle School for the 1998-1999 school year and has rapidly grown to its' present day enrollment of 400+ students. The High School Prep program was also added for the 1998-1999 school year. The Crossroads

program was added in second semester of the 2000-2001 school year. Last year Liberty High School had 47 graduates, its largest class to date.

Another project that is considered unique to Liberty High School is its' *Discovery* program. During the first 9 weeks of school, students will participate in this program designed to teach life skills and learning habits. This program strives to build a strong sense of community, in and out of school, by developing multiple support systems for students. It teaches the students and gives them practice opportunities, and gives them feedback on communication and life skills. Essential components of the program include the following:

- Effective groups and team-building
- Anger management
- Transactional analysis
- Assertiveness training
- Problem solving
- Conflict resolution
- Chemical dependency
- Career exploration

Evaluation Objectives and Questions

The evaluation objectives are to conduct an outcome evaluation of the program. Outcome evaluation will help to assess the impact of the program on participants. The overarching evaluation questions that will guide the study are the following:

- What are the characteristics and number of the students participating in the program?
- What are the characteristics of the scope of service in this program?
- Are there differences in participating students in attendance?
- Are there differences in participating students in suspensions?

Evaluation Model

The Management-Oriented Evaluation Approach

Daniel Stufflebeam (1983; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985) is one of the most reputed leaders on the management-oriented approach. According to Stufflebeam, the evaluation is a process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives. The Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) Evaluation has different objectives, methods, and relation to decision making in the change process depending on the type of evaluation emphasis. The JCPS education leaders have to satisfy their informational needs to make decisions.

The management-oriented rationale is that the evaluative information is an essential part of good decision-making and that the evaluator can be most effective by serving administrators, policy makers, boards, practitioners, and others who need good evaluative information (Worthen et al., 1997, p. 97).

Method

Participants

As displayed on Table 1, the participants were mostly 9th and 10th graders (55%). In reference to race, it was a very equally balanced group in terms of White and African American (50% and 48%, respectively). Most of the students were males (58%) and on free/reduced lunch status (61%). The descriptive analysis showed a significant percentage of students not living in a dual parent home (82%). Based on the high number of students on free/reduced lunch status and living in single parent homes, the population of students receiving the services can be characterized as in high need condition.

[Table 1 goes about here]

Data Collection

The data collected was essentially focusing on non-academic measures. The non-academic measures include attendance and discipline data. The information was collected at the beginning, during, and at the end of the program implementation.

The evaluator used different data sources to obtain the information. First, the computerized database of the District provided individual student data, including identification number, race, gender, attendance, and behavioral related measurements. Second, a program activity log was kept to have all the services documented. All the staff providing the services had to fulfill the requirement of having a complete file for all the participating students.

Data Analysis

The project coordinator work with the program evaluator to collect, analyze, and disseminate the information on program operations and outcomes. The standards for conducting program evaluation were utilized as a guide in this study (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994). The evaluation design is pre- and post-measurement using reflexive controls (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999). The data analysis will include descriptive statistics such as measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994).

Results

Process Evaluation

- What are the characteristics of the program scope of services?

The program was available to assist high school students who exhibited attendance, behavioral and social problems that limited their ability to succeed in the regular school environment. The program provided a variety of school services and supports.

As a 'bridge builder,' the Home-School Coordinator (HSC) developed a close relationship with the student, school staff, parent/guardian(s) and other involved parties. The HSC worked with the student, school and family on an outreach basis to identify needs, develop and implement intervention strategies, provide support and monitor progress.

The HSC served as a transitional mentor and support person for the student with whom they maintained routine contact during the course of their participation. The HSC focused on building a relationship with the student to foster pro-social skills, self- control

and positive interactions with peers and adults at school. HSC was also responsible for convening initial service and after-care planning meetings to ensure a 'team approach' to student success is maintained.

Outcome Evaluation

- Are there differences in participating students in non-academic measures?

Attendance, a non-academic measure, was analyzed in this program evaluation to assess the impact of the program. The time frame for the analysis was a four-month period.

Basic descriptive statistics were performed. As shown in Table 2, when compared against the baseline year, the students showed a higher average attendance percent in the treatment year than last year's average attendance percent.

[Table 2 goes about here]

- Are there differences in participating students in behavior-related measures such as suspensions?

To examine significant differences, basic descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to assess the difference in number of suspensions by grade at the baseline year and after four months of treatment. As presented in Table 3, the changes from the baseline year when compared to the time after receiving services show significant positive decreasing numbers of suspensions in most of the grade levels. When compared to the school year 2000-2001, the 2001-2002 shows more than 60 percent decrease in suspensions in the assessed months.

[Table 3 goes about here]

Discussion

The program is improving the percent of attendance in the participating students. Absenteeism has been listed among many factors that lead to a student's decision to drop out of school (Lunenberg, 1999). The program is also decreasing the behavioral concerns of the participating students. As result of this exploratory study, it can be stated that the Liberty High School program has provided assistance to at-risk students overcome attendance and behavioral problems. These non-cognitive components are considered the basis for success in school (Coie, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, Ramey, Shure, & Long, 1993; Lunenberg, 1999).

A significant body of research indicates that over time a number of economic, demographic, social, and physical risks can harm children's development, contributing to problem behaviors, failure in school, and poor mental health (Cole & Cole, 1993). Such risks may include (a) low socioeconomic status, (b) overcrowding or large family size, (c) low maternal education, (d) limited employment skills by the head of the household, and, (e) welfare status (Garmezy, 1993). While many children surmount individual risk factors, children who endure several risks simultaneously are more likely to develop serious problems (Garmezy 1993).

Research suggests that, for children who are exposed to risk factors, negative effects can be reduced by altering children's exposure to risks or by changing their perceptions of risks and helping them develop coping strategies (Smith & Carlson, 1997). At Liberty High, given the socio-demographic characteristics of the student population, the challenge is to help the students develop coping strategies with a strong in-school support system. Courses such as the one developed in the Discovery program, help the

students in their process of learning about real life issues such as life skills, conflict resolution, career exploration, anger management, and learning habits.

As suggested by previous research on at-risk issues (Coie et al, 1993), there are certain protective factors that may strengthen children's resiliency and help them cope with socio-demographic risks. These could include personal characteristics, such as temperament, disposition, and behavioral and cognitive skills, as well as environmental characteristics, such as social support from the community, parental warmth, adult monitoring and supervision, and positive role models (Coie et al., 1993). Liberty High School is trying to apply all this needed components in their school-based programs developed to target their needed student population. Examples are the Discovery program, the 8th Grade Prep program and the Crossroad program.

Limitations and Future Research

Research related to students placed at-risk is a number one priority for high poverty urban school districts. The study of processes and outcomes in the arena of dropout prevention will facilitate the process of replicating successful strategies in similar school contexts. There is no such thing as the perfect research (Freeman, Rossi, & Lipsey, 1999). This is the case of this study of Liberty High School. Further research needs to address other issues to make more conclusive decisions about the effectiveness of the program. This will include the development of clearer eligibility criteria; furthermore, on the basis of the aforementioned eligibility criteria, establish a comparison group. Although difficult to achieve due to the nature of the program, the comparison group will certificate the program. The evaluation research design will be stronger and will address some of the multiple threats to internal validity that are present in this study.

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Table 1

Profile of the Students Participating in the Program (N = 372)

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Frequencies</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Grade		
8 Grade	55	14.8%
9 Grade	104	28.0%
10 Grade	102	27.4%
11 Grade	70	18.8%
12 Grade	41	11.0%
Race		
Black	178	47.8%
White	186	50.0%
Other	8	2.2%
Gender		
Female	158	42.5%
Male	214	57.5%
Lunch Status		
Free	202	54.3%
Reduced	24	6.5%
Pay	146	39.2%
Parents		
Dual parent home	68	18.3%
Single parent home	304	81.7%

Table 2

Comparison of Attendance Rates of Previous School Year with Current School Year

<u>School Year</u>	<u>1st pupil m</u>	<u>2nd pupil m</u>	<u>3rd pupil m</u>	<u>4th pupil m</u>	<u>Mean</u>
00-01	84.5	78.4	77.8	73.1	78.8
01-02	85.6	82.0	79.2	80.0	82.8

Table 3

Grade Level Comparison of Number of Suspensions of Previous School Year with
Current School Year

<u>School Year</u>	<u>8 graders</u>	<u>9 graders</u>	<u>10 graders</u>	<u>11 graders</u>	<u>12 graders</u>	<u>Total</u>
00-01	34	54	18	3	7	116
01-02	5	18	10	8	4	45

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