DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 302   UD 029 065

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TITLE   Retaining Hispanic Youth in School: An Evaluation of
                a Counseling-Based Alternative School Program.
PUB DATE   Oct 92
NOTE   9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
                Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association
                (Stillwater, OK, October 1992).
AVAILABLE FROM University of Texas at El Paso, College of Education,
                El Paso, TX, 79968 (free in single copies).
PUB TYPE   Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) --
                Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/P_'1 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Academic Achievement; Computer Assisted Instruction;
                Delinquency Prevention; *Disadvantaged Youth;
                *Dropout Prevention; *High Risk Students; High
                Schools; High School Students; Hispanic Americans;
                *Nontraditional Education; Program Evaluation;
                *School Holding Power; Self Esteem; Student
                Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS   *Hispanic American Students; *Project Reach TX;
                Socorro Independent School District TX

ABSTRACT
                A study was done of the efficacy of Project Reach, an
alternative school program for seriously at-risk students attending
the Socorro High School in the Socorro Independent School District
(Texas). Program participants were those who had reached the
pre-expulsion stage prior to admission. The program goals were to
prevent dropouts or expulsions and to facilitate the reintegration of
stur'_nts into mainstream programs. Data for the evaluation of
academic and administrative aspects of the project were gathered from
the project proposal, classroom observations, attendance at special
events such as plays, interviews with project staff, and analyses of
internal evaluation data. The program served 7th through 12th graders
with a self-concept development approach somewhat like a "Tough Love"
or "Boot Camp" strategy. Traditional curriculum was delivered by
computers linked to a satellite network; and the balance of the day
was spent on health and drug education, drama, and personal log
writing. Evaluation found dramatic improvements in student retention
and reclamation from 1990 to 1992, and in student perceptions of
program helpfulness, increased academic achievement, and increased
self-respect. Suggestions for program enhancement and future research
are included. (JB)

Retaining Hispanic Youth in School: An Evaluation of A Counseling-Based Alternative School Program

by

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A Paper Presented
at the Annual Conference of
The Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association

Stillwater, Oklahoma

October, 1992

Abstract

An alternative school program for at-risk students, Project Reach, who had reached the final stage prior to expulsion from school, was assessed. Funded from several state and federal sources, the project curriculum was a blend of group therapy, health education, drama, and computer assisted instruction. The goal of the program was to (1) prevent drop-outs, and/or expulsions, and (2) facilitate the reintegration of students into mainstream programs. The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the program's strategy. Suggestions for program development and research agendas are included.

Descriptors: Alternative programs, At-risk students, Counseling

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Introduction

This paper reports on <u>Project Reach</u>, an alternative school program for seriously at-risk students, who had reached the pre-expulsion stage prior to admission to this program. Initiated by the faculty and administration of Socorro, Independent School District, Texas, the goal of the program was to (1) prevent drop-outs, and/or expulsions, and (2) facilitate the reintegration of students into mainstream programs. The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the program's counseling based strategy. Conclusions and recommendations regarding the program will be discussed. Implications for the at-risk research agenda are also discussed.

Data for this paper were gathered from the project proposal, classroom observations, attendance at special events such as plays, interviews with project staff, and analysis of internal evaluation data. The report covers the academic and administrative aspects of the project. The report does not cover financial, legal areas, or central office implementation of administrative aspects of the project. The assistance and openness of <u>Project Reach</u> staff, the school site administrators, and of Project Co-directors, Mitch Ferguson, and Keith McCellan is appreciated.

The Setting

<u>Project Reach</u> is located in Socorro High School, and is an alternative school within a school. Socorro High is the elder of the two high schools in Socorro Independent School District. The district is a transitional area east of El Paso, Texas, which was rural but is rapidly becoming suburban in its northern areas. Even with suburbanization, the district remains approximately 95% Hispanic and has a median family income of approximately $15,000.

Prior to surbanization, the only population in the district was in the Rio Grande river valley where irrigated agriculture has been feasible for many years. This area consisted of the small town of Socorro and farmsteads until, in the last quarter century, small scale developers began selling lots without water or sewer. The buyers of these lots were largely lower income Hispanics who often build their own homes on a cash basis. Consequently, "colonia" conditions emerged. Colonias are Mexican suburban communities lacking in water, sewer, paved roads and other amenities. Certain US - Mexican border communities are also called colonias when they are more typical of Mexico than of the United States.

Although one might expect such conditions to result in hopelessness, a previous study of this large high school (n=3000 plus) has shown a remarkable 84% holding power; i.e., 84% of entering 9th graders either graduate on time or continue enrollment into a fifth year of study (Klingstedt, 1989.)

It should be noted that the faculty and administration of Socorro
Independent School District, under the leadership of Dr. Jerry
Barber, are ready, willing, and able to try new approaches.
Rather than worry that something might not work out, the Socorro
team understands that one learns from successes and failures, and
failures in innovation can and will be overcome in the next
program revision.

Project Reach

In spite of other successes, the school faced an important
population of severely at-risk students, including gang members,
and substance abusers. Project Reach was designed, implemented,
and redesigned for this population. The second year of this
program became the subject of this evaluation. The first year of
the project was funded by traditional sources. A grant from the
Governor's task force on substance abuse (Texas Commission on
Alcohol and Drug Abuse - TCADA) began with the second year,
adding $180,000 in new resources and several staff members,
including a counselor and a social worker. In addition, the
project curriculum was refined and enriched.

Although the program was housed on the high school campus,
program hours were non-traditional. The day began at 11 a.m. and
extended into the early evening. A summer program was also
provided. Admission into the program was for an indeterminate
period. Several stages were set up in the program and when the
student had progressed through all stages, readmission to the
mainstream occurred. The pace of student progress was completely
individualized.

The psychological part of the program was based on materials
developed by Craig and Michele Borba aiming at self concept
development. The approach could be described as a bit like a
"Tough Love" or a "Boot Camp" strategy. The traditional
curriculum was delivered on MacIntosch computers linked to the
Nova-NET satellite network. The balance of the day featured
health and drug education, drama, and a large amount of personal
log writing.

Participants ranged from upper elementary through high school
grades, although age levels were restricted to the normal range
of grade 7 and up. All participants had a history of difficulty
in school. Often, participants had multiple problems, including
gang membership. A majority had been sexually abused and had
poor role models at home. Of those admitted for multiple
reasons, 80% involved gang activity, and another 80% substance
abuse. These two groups were not isomorphic, i.e., were not
always the same people.

Table 1

During the 1991-1992 period, specific reasons for admission to
Project Reach were as follows:

Truancy, or "ditching"	20%
Fighting	20%
Gang involvement	17%
Multiple reasons	17%
Socialization skills deficits	13%
Substance abuse	10%
Voluntary admissions	3%

Results

It should be emphasized that Project Reach is aimed at the hard
core of at-risk students: pre-expulsion students who are in
serious trouble. The project aims to accomplish much more than
merely holding students; it has therapeutic aspirations and aims
at a broad and general reclamation of people who may seem doomed.
Due to the serious problems of the clientele, and because this
report covers the first year of the project in its present form
one would normally expect something less than perfection.

As it happens, the project was a success. It was a success to
the point that the research agenda can more from what makes
someone become at-risk to what works for formerly at-risk
students. It is this opportunity motivated this author to
propose this paper and is motivating current investigations.

The progress in student retention and reclamation, at least on a
short term, from 1990-1991 to 1991-1992 could hardly be more
dramatic. (Table 2)

Table 2

Reach	1990 - 1991		Reach	1991 - 1992	
Enrollment	250		Enrollment	412	
Exit to mainstream	4		Exit to mainstream	382	
Retained in program	36		Retained in program	18	
Expelled	210		Expelled	12	
84% annual attrition rate			2.9% annual attrition rate		

This improvement shown in Table 2 was reflected in periodic
student survey of opinion. A sampling of the results of the late
Spring, 1992 administration of that survey are in Table 3.

Table 3

Almost 86% of the students report that the program is helpful or very helpful:

	N	%
Not helpful	4	5.6
Little help	4	5.6
Somewhat helpful	15	21.1
Helpful	27	38.0
Very helpful	19	26.8
TOTAL	69	97.2

Approximately 76% report better grades:

	N	%
No change	7	9.9
Improved a little	16	22.5
Improved	38	53.5
Got somewhat worse	7	9.9
Got worse	2	2.8
TOTAL	70	98.6

About 94% of students report that they "act" better in this program:

	N	%
No change	3	4.2
Improved a little	13	18.3
Improved	47	66.2
Got somewhat worse	4	5.6
Got worse	3	4.2
TOTAL	70	98.6

Progress in self respect was reported by more than 77% of the students.

	N	%
Not at all	3	4.2
Seldom	10	14.1
Some of the time	17	23.9
Most of the time	16	22.5
All of the time	22	31.0
TOTAL	68	95.8

To determine whether length of time in the program affected
student opinion a cross tab analysis of all items by length of
time in the program was conducted. Generally, length of time in
program did not significantly affect opinion. The notable
exception was that the longer the student was in the program, the
more helpful they though the program was to them.
(Chi Square = 24.8592, df = 16, $p \leq 0.07235$)

Problems identified and reported to the school district involved
adequate housing, acceptance by regular school staff, and a few
minor administrative issues. The program was housed in a new
section of the high school and in portable buildings on the
opposite side of the campus. Housing was mentioned in the report
because the norm for school facilities is something other than
portable buildings. The truth is likely to be that no one really
minded because the facilities were roomy and the entire El Paso
region has a large number of portable buildings. Housing was not
administratively convenient, but students and staff did not mind.

Strengths of the program were its design, staff, and execution.
Many staff members came from non traditional backgrounds.
Faculty included a drama teacher and a retired major. Most of
the rest of the faculty had decided to become teachers after
graduating from college and trying other occupations. Not all
teachers were fully certified, although most had graduate credit
hours. All faculty had some prior experience, however minimal,
in assisting people in areas beyond the traditional curriculum.
It should be noted that Far West Texas has a continuing teacher
shortage.

This was not a media rich program, except for the resources of
Nova-NET. By some standards, the program was short of
instructional materials. That is, the rooms were relatively bare
of books, media materials, laboratory equipment and so forth.
But, this situation was exactly typical of nearly all of the
schools of Far West Texas, an is one of the reasons that Socorro
I.S.D. is among the plaintiffs in the ongoing school finance law
suit.

It was recommended by this evaluator that, although students did
a great deal of log writing and peer editing, the faculty might
consider a logical extension. Increased writing and role play in
class could be accomplished by having students can write short
play scripts - individually, and/or in pairs. If needed, the
scripts could address a pre-agreed upon theme. The scripts could
be edited with the assistance of peers and then placed in
periodic internal competitions which would lead to production as
presentations for a variety of audiences.

It was recommended that the program could be better integrated
into the regular program, and the students reentry into the
mainstream could be assisted, if a certain project faculty
positions were reserved for rotating faculty, i.e. people on
sabbatical from mainstream programs. It was also recommended
that a precursor program should be created. The clientele in the
existing program are really the over-the-hill gang; they are so
seriously at risk that it is almost too late. Earlier
intervention would help more students, more quickly.

Conclusion

Project Reach is a success. The concept of this program is
unique and worthy. The program errs on the side of over
ambition, but also produces at a level higher than might be
expected.

Future Research and Evaluation Directions

Current practice is to identify students who are at-risk and to develop interventions. Two research avenues need to be pursued with respect to this issue. The first concern is that the at-risk indicators are not locally validated and are likely to be overly broad, or misleading. Of what use, for example, is an indicator that says minority group member are at risk in a district which is majority minority and which has a high retention and completion rate? Of what use is it to label someone at-risk after they have been shot or convicted of a crime? The .:dicators need to be location specific and need to be aimed at early identification.

The identification of at-risk students cannot be directly helpful in improving positive aspects of school productivity, because identification of at-risk people does not address solutions. Such identification only says that a solution is needed. Neither is the flip side, a very low at-risk rate helpful. One can have a Happy-Air-Head school in which no one drops out and no one learns.

What the profession, in general needs is a positive set of indicators so school leaders will know what makes a positive difference. Rather than base an intervention on what makes one become a drug dealer, positive indicators might permit us to able to learn what made Jaime Escalante successful. That would be a suitable basis for intervention design! It would also be helpful to learn why people like those in Project Reach, who would be on the streets or in jail under other conditions, make progress.

In past, school productivity research seldom asks student directly for affective indicators. Like so much of educational research, data sources have typically been adults giving expert opinion about what causes a student to be at-risk.(Fitzgerald, J. or Frymier, J. and Gansneder, B. or Klingstedt, J.L.) Can one go beyond that level and get information from students which relates to this issue?

One can conjecture that, for successful students, school is providing a sense of empowerment and belonging. Which students have that sense? How can this sense be given to other students? Similarly, for former at-risk students, what charged? How can the change be replicated?

The research approach to this area is likely to be a slow search through a wide variety of personal, psychological, and social factors for factors which are effective in identifying how successful and unsuccessful students are similar and different.

To begin the investigation, a questionnaire was developed and
field tested in a not-at risk population of 6th graders (n=60).
Of these students 96% spoke Spanish in the home, and 40% had been
born in Mexico. Based on these results and input from area
teachers, the questionnaire has been extensively revised and
expanded and will be given this Fall to a stratified sample of
non at-risk students, at-risk students, and Project Reach
students.

So far the experience has been instructive. It seems valid to
say that the anticipation of some results being transportable,
while others will be border specific is likely to be correct.
But getting the information one really wants is difficult. An
example of this sort of difficulty is developing a validated
indicator on criminal activity.

During the analysis of the pilot study data it was discovered
that 6% (n=3) of the non at-risk sample had been arrested. That
seemed shocking and made little sense to the author and teachers
involved until the matter of the Border Patrol (La Migra) came
up.

We did not want to know about immigration problems. We wanted to
know about criminal activities. But, in El Paso, city
police and Border Patrol officers ride in the same car!
Moreover, the Border Patrol now has drug interdiction duties as
well as immigration issues. One can be "arrested" by La Migra
for shop lifting or immigration. One can also be arrested" by a
city officer shop lifting or immigration. How then, does one
develop items which sort out these differences while remaining in
language 4th graders understand? One cannot ask if they were
ever indicted for a 3rd degree felony!

This line of inquiry is proceeding with the revision and
expansion of the questionnaire and a Fall, 1992 administration of
the questionnaire to project participants and to a stratified
sample of El Paso students.

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