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ABSTRACT

A pilot vocational exploration program in the Pocono Mountain School District (Pennsylvania) was conducted for students who were at risk of dropping out of school after failing eighth grade. The program, conducted as a ninth-grade class, allowed at-risk students to receive concentrated, personalized help in basic academic skills while exploring vocational areas of their choice. Close home-school alliances were also set up to help the students with problems. The program was voluntary and required students' attendance and effort. The program proved successful in preventing failure on the part of many of the students in the pilot program. Many of the students tried harder and achieved with smaller classes and personalized help. Instead of dropping out, they were able to continue in school and enter the technical program in 10th grade.
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IT WORKS !

Vocational Exploration as Drop Out Prevention

by Dale Titus

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The student standing listlessly before my desk epitomized the legions of students who have frustrated our best teaching efforts. Body language and academic performance record told the too familiar story of apathy, low confidence level, and limited aspirations brought on by a lack of success in school. The profound and positive vision of the future so eloquently articulated by Joel Barker as a predictor of student achievement had been dimmed. Bright hopes, wonderful dreams, and power of purpose were succumbing to continuous failure. It became obvious that yet another youngster had given up on the idea of earning a high school diploma and was planning on marking time until the years of compulsory education were past. At age fifteen and faced with a second retention in eighth grade, the student exuded a negative attitude. The prospect of attending the same classes with younger students while peers went on to high school was repugnant. At best this student would do nothing for the next two years and then drop out, at worst the frustrations would be vented in the form of school disruption and self-destructive behavior.

The student's dilemma crystalized as I probed for answers for the academic failures. "I am good working with my hands and doing practical

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things; I like to build and fix things," the student related. One glance at the report card on my desk confirmed the self-appraisal, "outstanding" in the practical arts. "I really want to go to the Vo-Tech," was the next response. I asked, "do you know that you have to make it to the tenth grade before you can enroll in a vocational program?" As I pondered my own question I was struck by the absurdity of the system. We were forcing youngsters with aptitudes for vocational technical careers to drop out of school before they were given the opportunity to study what they liked and what they were good at. Although Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences had identified seven ways of knowing, we emphasized only verbal and logical intelligence. We failed to recognize the spacial and kinesthetic intelligences of students gifted in the practical arts.

The eyes brightened and other nonverbal communication improved as I asked the magic question, "How would you like to be placed in a ninth grade expository vocational program for next year?" I explained carefully that this was a conditional placement rather than a promotion. Conditions for continued participation in the program included regular attendance, strong effort, continuous progress, and good school citizenship. If these conditions were not fulfilled, the student understood that the consequence would be a return to grade eight. Successful completion of this program would earn the opportunity to go on to tenth grade and to a chosen

vocational area. Enthusiastically the student accepted the challenge of a new beginning in a unique drop out prevention program.

Out of the familiar dilemma of so many at-risk students, their parents, and their teachers, a personalized approach to student success was born which combined the family atmosphere of the one-room school with the mentoring of vocational education. With the support of Pennsylvania drop out prevention funds a pilot project between the Pocono Mountain School District and the Monroe County Area Vocational Technical School (AVTS) was conducted in 1990. The program was expanded in 1991 to include the other county school districts of Stroudsburg, East Stroudsburg, and Pleasant Valley. Monroe County AVTS students constructed a one-room school adjacent to the AVTS to house the half-day academic component. The other half of the school day is devoted to vocational-technical exploration.

Eligible students are invited to participate by their home school counselors and/or administrators. Criteria for selection include one or more of the following characteristics: academic underachievement, low self-concept, poor social skills, unrealistic life expectations, and negative attitude toward school. In addition to addressing these concerns, goals focus on improving attendance, study habits, communication skills, problem-solving, and career awareness. Students with legitimate

vocational interests are selected for this drop out prevention program. It is not a special education program or a dumping ground for students with behavioral problems. Since participation is voluntary, a student who no longer wants to continue or who fails to make satisfactory progress is returned to the home school.

In the exploratory vocational program students are placed at the center of the instructional process by organizing instruction around their individual needs. Profiles which identify the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student are developed from the Apticon test for vocational interests, academic diagnostic/prescriptive information, aptitude tests, and inventories of learning/homework styles. To help each student succeed instruction is personalized and a support network is established which includes both home and school environments. The quality and quantity of time together fosters a close student-teacher relationship in small classes of fifteen or fewer.

Academic curriculum for the Ninth Grade Exploratory Vocational Program meets Pennsylvania requirements which include mathematics, language arts, social studies, science, and health/physical education. Classroom teachers have professional autonomy to adapt curricula to meet student needs, and basic academic skills are emphasized. Instructors have encountered difficulties, however, when they have attempted to teach

too much content and too many subjects. In-depth concentration on basic academic and learning skills has paid the greatest dividends. General academic skills useful in every vocational area are taught to all students, and specific applied curriculum is taught as needed for application in certain shops.

With advisement students select four vocational clusters for exploration. During the four nine-week marking periods they are rotated among chosen vocational shops. While exploring a vocational area they are integrated into the class and graded by their vocational instructor. Career awareness is enhanced through field trips sponsored by area employers.

Problems encountered provide pitfalls to be avoided by those who may pursue a similar effort. Instructors in vocational areas were reluctant to fully accept exploratory students initially but changed their attitudes as the students sold themselves. A few instances of social promotion tended to undermine instructor authority and credibility. Students not receiving effective transition programs into tenth grade and/or continued academic support throughout high school often have ended up as drop out statistics, usually because of failure in the high school academic program. To counter this problem instructors have offered additional academic support to current and former students as a pull out from shops.

From their successes instructors have learned many valuable lessons

which are helpful for replication at other sites. They believe strongly that students should enter with a clean slate and that their exploratory vocational experience should mark a new beginning which is not prejudiced by prior academic performance. The most effective instruction has been in small groups with individualized follow up and extra instruction as needed. Computer assisted instruction using "Skills Bank" and other software also has been effective. Close cooperation with families, cultivated through parent-teacher telephone conversations at least weekly, has been a key element. Instructor professional autonomy and the flexibility to meet individual student needs are seen as prerequisites by instructor Jerry Sernak. Class rule number one for instructor Maria Katimaris is "positive thinking only" as she builds self-confidence and social skills. Instructor Lori Stetzar attributes success to the one-on-one relationship with students and to the "personal touch which students thrive on." Her colleague, Brian Williams, emphasizes the instructor's "critical role as role model" and sends a "consistent message that students are going to become something." He recalled, "our students never believed they could be recognized for anything."

But recognized they were by The Pocono Mountain Chamber of Commerce, which has supported the Exploratory Vocational initiative by providing mentors for students and by recognizing the achievements of

students. At their 1994 Youth Appreciation Day, two students from the Monroe County Area Vocational Technical School Exploratory Program were presented achievement awards by the chamber. Student Dan Harrison, who won an award for his good grades and overall improvement, expressed surprise and felt honored. At the Bartonsville, PA Holiday Inn ceremony Harrison said, "a couple of years ago I flunked out of the seventh grade. There's been a big change since I enrolled in the exploratory program."

Now Harrison plans to enlist in the U.S. Army after graduating from high school to pursue a career related to his vocational and technical training. Dan's mother, Denise, said, "He's ecstatic; I'm ecstatic. He did so well this year. He was a kid who would have slipped through the system, now he's getting 80's and above."

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