Achieving Student Success in a Regional Public Alternative School Setting Through a Consequence-Based Model

Sue M. Burkholder and Marti Merritt

Sue M. Burkholder, Principal/Project Director, Genesis Alternative School
Marti Merritt, Clinical Psychologist, Genesis Alternative School

Abstract

Genesis Alternative School is a regional, public alternative school setting for middle and high school students from four participating school divisions. It serves 1 rural county school division and 3 small city school divisions. Students are placed at Genesis for disciplinary reasons. Genesis is unique among alternative schools in Virginia because of the nature of it's therapeutic program (a project director with a school psychology background and a full time clinical psychologist), the variety of outcome options for students (regular education credits, special education diplomas, GED program, cooperative vocational training at a nearby facility, work-release program), and the staff training model (consensus decision-making, extensive psychological staff training). This program has worked with over 1000 students over the past 10 years with 62 seniors completing their high school experience at Genesis with a high school diploma. An additional 75 students have earned their GED while enrolled. This is a dynamic, "in-the-moment" program which directly addresses social decision-making, personal responsibility for choices and consequences, as well as academic preparation for program completion.

Introduction

Adolescents have always presented unique challenges for therapists. What teenager doesn't have angst that sometimes makes it difficult for parents, teachers, and school administrators to separate those who need intervention from those who do not? Too often, individuals have approached adolescents from a single perspective and have tried to fit teenagers into one paradigm or another. The reality is that adolescence is a difficult period of life during which young people are trying to achieve adulthood, while, at the same time, hanging on to childhood and the lack of responsibility that childhood implies.

Genesis Alternative School began as an outgrowth of a funding initiative from the state level, encouraging school divisions within a given region to pool their resources in order to serve students who were not being successful in their home schools. Early in the Genesis program's history (1995-1996), it became apparent that, without a basic foundation and a vision as to the school's mission, there would be little chance for success.

Beginning in the fall of 1996, the staff began to develop a program that was based upon sound psychological foundations and grounded in the day-to-day reality of working with at-risk adolescents. The basic model developed 9 years ago continues to serve as the foundation for today's program.

Program Development

The Genesis program has had the full support of the four participating school divisions and the communities they represent. An advisory committee, consisting of a high-level administrative representative from each school division, as well as the Genesis principal and assistant principal, set policies and overall procedures for the program.

Those policies have helped to maintain important, consistent procedures. For example, each school division is responsible for transporting it's own students and for determining when bus transportation services need to be altered or when they are no longer appropriate for given students. Each school division purchases a certain number of "slots" in the program and then determines which students fill those slots. In some cases, those decisions are delegated to local principals; in other cases, students must be referred to a central school division committee in order for placement at Genesis to be considered.

Through common agreement, students can be sent to Genesis at any time; however, students can only re-enter their local school at the end of the spring or fall semester. Genesis does not have a screening committee; therefore, we accept those students who are sent to us. However, there is also an agreement that Genesis cannot be a "dumping ground" for students. If students are not being successful in spite of all efforts to intervene and influence behavior change, Genesis staff work with home school personnel in making a determination as to whether

a student may remain in the program or whether a different direction/consequence is warranted. At such times, the home school division may use long-term suspension and/or expulsion.

Students who are requesting permission to return to their home school must first have the support of the Genesis staff and a behavior record which demonstrates that the student has maintained a positive pattern of attendance, academic achievement and behavior for at least 9 weeks prior to the requested return in order for the local school division to consider their request. Over time, the local school divisions have come to trust that Genesis will not support a student's return unless it is felt that the student has learned the skills, both academic and social, which will be necessary to achieve success following their re-entry into a regular school setting. Three school divisions allow students/parents to request a return to Genesis if they are not successful following re-entry; one school division does not permit a return following a re-entry into their local school setting.

While many communities have developed "zero tolerance" policies toward students who exhibit a pattern of unacceptable school behaviors, these four communities continue to support a program that strives to help students reverse these patterns and regain control over their academic careers. Genesis does not exclude students who have been adjudicated or incarcerated by the juvenile courts or who have committed juvenile offenses in the community or at school and whose charges are being held under advisement. Over 60-70% of students may be on some level of probation at any given time. Genesis represents a student's last opportunity to find success in a public school setting, an opportunity which many communities do not provide.

That community support goes beyond words on paper. Strong financial and administrative support enables Genesis to provide a quality program for students. When the initial building was found to be inadequate, a search continued until a suitable facility could be

secured and designed to meet school standards for safety and efficiency. The current facility contains 11 classrooms, a gym, a cafeteria, 4 student restrooms, 3 staff restrooms, administrative offices, and a large conference room for meetings. There are adequate computers and other forms of technology in each classroom.

Even more important is the community's commitment to students. Sufficient staff is funded to allow for class sizes of 10 or fewer students per class. Current staff include: principal, assistant principal, clinical psychologist, 8 full time and 1 part time licensed teachers, 2 instructional assistants, 1 secretary/administrative assistant and 1 custodian. Staff development is a high priority, both in terms of the philosophy of the program, but also in terms of the day-to-day policies and procedures that are vital to a program such as this. Staff development has allowed all staff members to develop an understanding and awareness of the multiple factors which may underlie student behavior choices as well as their own role in the interactions with students and staff in any given situation. All staff members are involved in training sessions that begin with Bowlby (1988, Bretherton 1992)) and Ainsworth's (1973) theories about attachment and the ways in which early relationship patterns impact later development and build toward real solutions with students in the classroom.

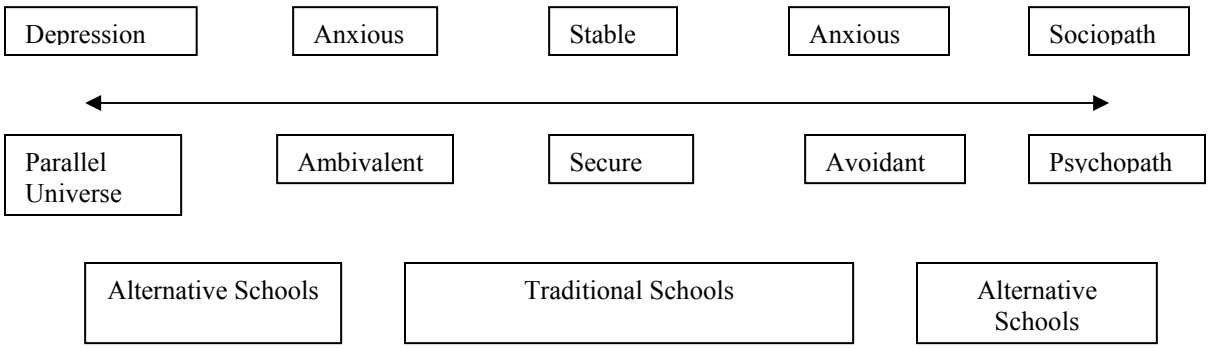
What has evolved from this mixture of practical and theoretical experience, is an understanding that the ways in which relationship patterns are formed early in life impact either the success or failure for students, not only as adolescents but also as adults. This pattern can be seen in the ways students approach decision-making, academic achievement (or lack thereof), social relationships, perspectives on jobs versus careers, and life partnerships. How students handle anger, anxiety, and uncertainty can also be predicted, based upon the pattern of

relationships they have formed and the way they have handled their unique "angst." Finally, there also seem to be two major patterns into which most at-risk adolescent behaviors fall.

Psychological Basis: Attachment Continuum

At-risk adolescents seem to separate themselves primarily into two distinct trends at opposite ends on a continuum. If one places "healthy" adolescents in the middle of that continuum, then at-risk youngsters behave in ways consistent with Bowlby and Ainsworth's theories of attachment, as either forming ambivalent or avoidant relationship patterns. Many, if not most, of these students remain in the regular mainstream of any public school where we use different labels to describe them: truant, acting out, troublemakers, drama queens, etc. The list could go on and on. Most regular education settings, especially at the secondary level, do not have the time, training, or resources to intervene with these students in a way that ensures greater academic success. In this era of NCLB (No Child Left Behind legislation), schools have to focus on academic success, as measured by a series of high stakes tests, often leaving these youngsters on the fringes and, in fact, far behind. We have found that the success of one's approach with these students often depends upon having decision-makers whose understanding of those patterns enables them to intervene with a sound therapeutic approach. We believe that one cannot separate educational success from behavioral success. Based upon our experiences, we feel that these two major arenas go hand-in-hand and are part of the same whole.

Attachment Continuum



Students at the opposite ends of the above continuum often find themselves out of the public school setting because of their more extreme behaviors, although many sociopathic students can be very successful in a school setting if they choose to do so. Students operating toward the left side of the continuum frequently find themselves in treatment settings. Those operating more toward the right side of the continuum tend to be more likely to engage in anti-social and/or criminal activities in their communities.

One important distinction between these two groups is seen in the way students handle anger. Ambivalent youngsters tend to view anger thru the lens of unfairness and a need for revenge. Thus, their anger often has a feel of manipulation and drama that is not seen in other students. Every incident is a crisis where there is a need to seek support from others, regardless of the cost to themselves. If that support is sought from adults, and the response is perceived to have been inadequate, students will often go to great lengths to make their point, even if it means significant, negative consequences for themselves. Students feel justified in their reaction

because of the failure of the adult(s) to understand their situation as they see it and to respond in the "right" way.

For avoidant adolescents, initial anger acts to flatten their affect and initiates a period of coldness and withdrawal from contact with others. However, if pushed beyond their emotional limits, these adolescents will react in an offensive anger style, where anger becomes a means to an end. In this situation, students react aggressively to "settle" a situation since the adult, obviously, did not resolve the issue in a way that met the student's expectations. These youngsters often have a deep-seated distrust of adults in general and in the community systems (school, court, etc.) in which adults play a dominant role. Because of this, they are more likely to use offensive anger against adults more quickly than with their peers. Ultimately, the student will experience relief when others have backed away and given them the space to withdraw into their safety zone. Approaching students during this process will greatly escalate the situation, possibly with dangerous consequences.

How students handle anger is not the only way in which these two groups differ or are similar. The primary way in which both groups are similar can be seen in their inability to develop long and trusting relationships with others. Students may be "friends" one moment and rivals or enemies the next. While they often share intimate information, it is usually about other people, not about themselves. Their ability to sense rejection and betrayal is heightened and it is this common characteristic that underlies the inability to develop relationships based upon mutual trust and respect. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why adult relationships and lasting partnerships are often difficult to achieve for those operating at either end of the continuum.

The differences between the two groups, however, are even more striking than their similarities. An over-riding characteristic of ambivalent youngsters is their lack of personal boundaries. This is manifested both physically and emotionally in their interactions with others. Ambivalent youngsters share everything they know. One of these students described himself as "AOL" (Always On Line). If information is missing, they will fill it in and treat it as fact. They

want to know intimate details about the lives of everyone they know and see no reason why others do not share their point of view.

It is easy to see why these youngsters always need to be the center of attention. However, this often manifests itself in interesting ways. We frequently describe these students as those who engage in a variety of conflicting communications: "Notice me, notice me, notice me. . ." However, when the teacher goes to offer assistance, they will often respond, "Why are you looking at my paper?" As soon as the teacher moves away, their demand for assistance begins again. At other times, they will demand teacher attention in order to keep the teacher from assisting other students, even when the assistance is no longer needed.

Another common characteristic of ambivalent students is their histrionic, crisis-to-crisis lifestyle. Each day brings a new crisis which is in need of immediate attention and which needs to be shared with anyone who will listen. Because of this, their friendship pattern tends to be one of intense, but momentary relationships. During the life of the relationship, students will often try to spend time together 24-7 (24 hours a day, 7 days per week). Clothes and other personal articles are exchanged with little thought as to ownership or cost. The pattern can be male/female, male/male, or female/female and is not always sexual in nature. When the relationship is over, much time and energy is spent blaming the other and trying to recover personal belongings.

In sharp contrast to this is the avoidant adolescent where the over-riding characteristic is that of a loner or one who operates on the fringe. The students have built a wall of emotional defenses which prevents them from sharing themselves with others and which acts to keep others from becoming close to them. The need to defend and protect self from insult and emotional injury underlies their approach to peers, adults, and community systems.

This does not mean that these students avoid crises in their lives. The difference here is that stressful situations are often kept to themselves out of their distrust and unwillingness to share information with others. One often has the sense of a "smoldering" crisis when dealing with these students; however, the nature and extent of any given situation is often hidden from

view. The difficulty here is that one seldom knows what will cause these students to react in an unpredictable and over-reactive manner. Since they tend to go quietly about their day most of the time, teachers and administrators are often unprepared for the intensity of their anger when they are provoked. In addition, their anger may be focused upon one person while the true reason for their anger lies elsewhere.

For avoidant adolescents, social relationship patterns are more one of acquaintances rather than mutual, trusting friendships. However, the few friendships that are formed are closely guarded and often compartmentalized. Friendships are formed around specific interests and needs rather than having friendships which transcend these compartments. One might have "friends" with whom one "hangs out" and others with whom one shares a hobby or interest. The two "friendships" may be mutually exclusive of each other. In this way, walls, and the protection they provide, can be maintained.

These style differences, and the ways in which adults respond to those differences, will determine whether students grow emotionally and move toward the healthier center of the continuum or whether they are pushed further and further into their well-rehearsed dysfunctional patterns of relationships. This is true whether the arena is a school building, a home/family relationship, or a community setting.

Interventions

Karpman Drama Triangle

What has made Genesis more successful in dealing with a wide range of at-risk students than many other institutions is the way in which interventions are designed to address the relationship patterns discussed earlier. We have also borrowed and adapted concepts from other

programs when those techniques have been found to fit comfortably within the attachment continuum framework.

A case in point is the concept of the Karpman Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968). In any potential conflict between individuals, persons take one of three positions on a triangle: Persecutor/bully, victim/loser, or rescuer.

Persecutor Rescuer

Victim

No two persons in conflict can occupy the same role at the same time and persons may shift from one role to another during any given set of interactions. Finally, Karpman believed that any "Win-Lose" situation will always turn into a "Lose-Lose" situation and that any "Win" in the drama triangle is temporary. These are basic tenets in using the Drama Triangle in settings with at-risk adolescents. Karpman further explained the intensity of the drama triangle as follows:

> Drama can be analyzed as switches in role and location on a time continuum. The intensity of the drama is influenced by the number of switches in a time period (Script Velocity) and the contrast between the positions switched (Script Range). Low velocity is boredom. The time for each switch varies independently, from surprise through suspense. (p. 39).

One addition to Karpman's concept which we have added at Genesis is the concept of moving outside the triangle by using a series of steps: (1) Depersonalize the situation. (2) Go to neutral. (3) Give choices…follow through. (4) Read behavior, not language. (5) Place yourself in non-threatening posture and location. During staff training, these steps are actively taught and modeled. With students, staff members model this practice in a variety of ways and on a daily

basis so that students also begin to understand that conflict does not have to result in a physical altercation.

A brief scenario will illustrate how the triangle works and how it is used at Genesis.

> Several boys are playing basketball and the score is tied. As one boy shoots, another loses his balance and falls into him, causing the ball to bounce off the rim and out of the basket. The monitoring teacher recognizes what has happened, steps in and gives the ball back to the shooter. This time, the shooter misses the shot just as the bell rings, ending the game. The shooter then turns on the student who had bumped into him and blames him for losing the game. That student responds by taunting the shooter for losing the game and the situation becomes heated. The shooter pushes the other student, pinning him against the wall as the teacher calls for assistance. Both boys are escorted from the gym by an administrator. After being given time to cool off, the boys meet with one of the administrators to discuss what has just happened. Initially, each of the boys maintain their own position, with one boy blaming the other and the second boy taunting the shooter for the loss. The administrator then reminds the two boys that the school's policy on physical altercations is to suspend both of the students involved and points out that one of the boys shoved the other but the other boy had been taunting the boy in front of his friends, so both share responsibility in the outcome. The boy who had been taunting the other boy quickly recognizes where

> the situation is headed and changes his approach. He tells the administrator that he and the other boy are the best of friends and that the situation in the gym was a momentary thing where they got caught up in the heat of the moment. The "shooter" picks up the other boy's cue and quickly agrees that they are, in fact, the best of friends and that there is no need for a suspension because the situation is over and the animosity is gone.

Several interactions have taken place in the above scenario. Initially, the two boys were vying for the role of Persecutor and trying to push the other one into the role of Victim. Since both cannot occupy the same role at the same time, the situation escalated rapidly (Script Velocity) . When the teacher intervened the first time from a neutral position, both boys stepped out of the triangle and allowed the game to continue. Had the teacher chosen to side with either student, the game would, most likely have ended there with the students siding with one student or the other and the situation would have escalated.

However, when the game ended without a win for the shooter's team, the boys stepped back into the triangle at a heightened level and the situation escalated to the point of a physical altercation. When the two boys were separated and escorted to the office, each had the opportunity to try to convince an administrator that the responsibility for the situation rested with the other student. Had either administrator stepped into this trap, the situation would have continued to escalate. In this case, both administrators remained neutral and did not allow themselves to be drawn into the triangle in the Rescuer role for either student.

When the two boys were brought back into the room together, each maintained his original position (vying for Persecutor role) but at a lower level because time had elapsed and

their anger had lessened. The administrator's reminder of the school policy on physical altercations (suspension), was a triggering event. In this case, neutrality and depersonalization were essential elements. This stance allowed each of the boys to look objectively at his role and to decide whether to pursue the Persecutor or Victim role. When one of the boys stepped out of the triangle by suggesting that they were best friends, the other boy also had to make a choice. He could have maintained his Persecutor role and ridiculed the suggestion that they were best friends or he could pick up the cue and agree that another solution was possible. The administrator had to make a choice also: stay with an obvious outcome (suspension) or use a teachable moment to arrive at a different solution. In this case, the administrator went with the teachable moment. The suspension was put "on hold" and both boys lost gym privileges for a period of time on the condition that they continued to be "best friends" in their interactions with one another and did not return to their Persecutor/Victim triangle.

Consequence-Based Decision-Making

One of the common characteristics of our students when they first arrive is their inability to make reasonable choices and then cope with the consequences. Many of them have been given *carte blanc* as youngsters and given choices beyond their developmental capabilities. In many cases, youngsters have been able to alter consequences by escalating their demands until parents and other adults give in to them. In time, threats to escalate are enough to achieve the results they are seeking. Many of our students tell us when they first arrive, "You don't want to make me mad." They are expecting us to give in to them in the same way other adults have done in their past.

A primary task, then, is to teach students how to make responsible choices and how to live with the consequences they have chosen. We do this in a variety of ways. One of the first things we stress to incoming staff is the importance of verbalizing choices, not giving ultimatums

or making threats when dealing with students. For some staff members, this is an awkward stance and one with which they struggle, especially if they have come to us from a more traditional setting where the teacher is the authority figure and students are expected to comply without questions.

Our approach is to use a series of narrowing choices. For example, if a student is off task in class, a teacher might give the student the choice of moving to a different seat or working quietly where he or she is presently sitting. Since either of these choices is "okay" for the teacher, if the student chooses either of these, the situation is typically resolved. However, if the student says that he will work quietly where he is seated but then begins to socialize with neighbors, the teacher will remind him of the other choice and ask him to move, since he has not chosen to work quietly. If the student refuses to move, the teacher will remind him that he needs to move or an administrator will be called. Again, either choice is acceptable. If the student continues to refuse to move, an administrator will be called and the situation will be briefly explained. In most cases, the administrator will give the student the choice of completing the work in the room as requested by the teacher or completing the work in ISS. Once a student has been with us for a time, he or she will usually agree to work cooperatively with the teacher but some will elect to go to ISS. Failure to follow thru at this level means that the student will then be assigned to ISS and will need to remain there until the work is completed.

If this becomes a pattern for a specific student, an additional level of consequences will be added. This level of consequences will involve the use of ISS time during lunch and recreational periods, parent conferences, as well as suspensions and/or charges. Persistent non-compliance can ultimately result in a request for removal of the student from the program. However, at each step along the way, the student will be asked to make choices and will be given information regarding consequences so that outcomes are not a surprise. Having an administrator discuss with a student whether a suspension will be given and when it will happen is a new experience for many of our students. They expect adults to act out of their own feelings rather than having decisions based upon choices which they (the student) have made.

All of this requires a great deal of written documentation. A discipline log is kept for each student so that it can be recalled and reviewed at any time. Students frequently ask to see their discipline log, especially when they question whether a consequence for their actions is fair or not. Being able to see that this is the 3rd or 4th time they have violated a particular rule and having a pre-planned consequence helps student to begin to understand and accept the concept of choices and consequences. They also begin to understand how their choices, not adult emotional reactions, influence and control outcomes in a way which they have not understood in the past.

One of the interesting phenomena which we often observe is that, when we are giving choices to a particular student, his or her friends will often encourage them to make a more positive choice with statements such as, "Just do what they are asking you to do, don't be dumb." Statements such as these demonstrate that students understand that their choices influence outcomes and they are advising their friends to make better choices as well. Another example of this is seen when two students become upset with one another and stand toe-to-toe with each other, challenging the other to "Do something about it." Friends of one potential combatant or another will step in, throw an arm around the shoulder of his friend, and lead him out of the situation, all the while explaining to them that they just need to walk away because they are about to make a bad choice and the known consequence is "not worth it."

A third way students demonstrate the development of this internal locus of control can be seen in the hallways between classes. When a student is about to engage in an unacceptable behavior and is aware that an adult is nearby, these students will typically smile and walk away, often telling the adult, "You don't even have to say it, I'm leaving." When we can see these behaviors as a pattern for a given student, we know that this student is ready to leave our program because he/she has learned to accept responsibility for his/her choices and is able to adapt to situations as they occur while making positive decisions in a responsible manner.

Anger Management Options

Most students bring with them an inability to manage their anger in socially acceptable ways. Genesis uses a variety of techniques to help students learn, first, to recognize their anger and, second, to make responsible choices in dealing with their emotions. When students arrive at Genesis, they and their parent(s) meet with our assistant principal for an orientation meeting. Students are told that they have the option of leaving a classroom when they are angry. However, the manner in which they leave will determine the outcome of this choice. When they leave the room, the teacher will notify the office over the intercom or thru use of a walkie talkie that the student has left the room. How the student left the room will determine whether it will be treated as a disciplinary incident or not. If the student was able to get up and leave quietly and appropriately, no disciplinary action will be taken. However, if the student cursed someone or created a classroom disturbance in some way, then some disciplinary action will be taken.

Once a student has left the room (appropriately), several choices will be available. They are expected either to meet immediately with the on-site clinical psychologist or with one of the administrators. Another option is to go to one of the ISS rooms and use it for a place to calm down and re-compose himself. Students need only to indicate that they need a place to cool down. Whether they talk with someone or not is their option. Some students only need a place to sit quietly for several minutes and are then ready to return to class. When they are ready to return, they indicate this to someone in the office who will notify the teacher that the student is returning to class.

If a student asks to talk with someone, the most likely candidates are the clinical psychologist or one of the administrators. However, at times, students have asked to speak with a particular teacher or with one of the instructional assistants who work in the building. At times, they will ask to call home to speak with a parent. Provided that the exit from the classroom was appropriate, the student is allowed to decide which strategy will work for him/her.

When another student or the teacher is involved, there are times when conflict mediation will be requested. This is usually done immediately or as soon as possible in order to achieve

maximum effect. The objective here is to help students recognize what triggers their anger, how to respond appropriately and responsibly, and how to achieve resolution so that they can return to class and concentrate on their work.

Most of the time, students do not abuse this process. However, when a student begins to have a need to walk out of each class or to walk out on a regular basis, then he/she is confronted with the pattern and the system of choices and consequences is applied. Typically, the number of times a student is allowed a "free pass" out of class is limited and the number of passes is then reduced over a period of time until the behavior is under control.

Behavior Level Systems

When the program at Genesis was first developed, it was decided that a level system would be used with certain privileges and/or restrictions attached to each level. It was also decided that we needed to keep the system as simple as possible. The primary level system used at Genesis is comprised of 3 levels: On Level, Off Level, and Honors Level.

All students enter the program "On Level." We assume that they will come to school regularly, report to their classes promptly, and cooperate with their classroom teachers. Students who meet these expectations have certain privileges, such as; a choice of where to eat lunch and where to spend their recreational time, ability to use the school computers for their personal use when their work is finished, and permission to listen to their music (using headphones) after the lesson has been completed and they are working independently or while they are waiting for the end of the period. Students are not permitted to share their music with others and must keep the volume level low so that others do not hear it. Students who are On Level are also permitted to use the school phones during lunch to make one telephone call. Teachers vote each week on the students they have in class and these votes are then used to determine a student's level for the following week. On Monday's, each student receives a color-coded level card, informing him/her of the level for that week and listing any warnings or restrictions on the back of the card.

Parents are encouraged to ask for this card each week in order to be fully informed of their son/daughter's progress on a weekly basis.

Students who are receiving write-ups for misbehavior or who are engaging in inappropriate behaviors will receive a "warning." If the behavior continues during the next week, they will lose their On Level status and will be placed Off Level for the following week. A student can be placed Off Level for behavior or attendance reasons, or for both attendance and behavior. When students are Off Level, they are restricted to the lunchroom for the lunch period, they lose music privileges in class, and they are not allowed to make their own phone calls. Students may face other specific restrictions, based upon their own discipline record. Again, since votes are taken each week, levels can change from week-to week.

Students who are displaying exemplary behavior for a period of 3 consecutive weeks can earn Honors Level. Honor student get to go to lunch several minutes early and have their choice of eating locations. However, the primary reason student strive to achieve Honors Level is that they have the opportunity to have Friday off, so long as they have parental permission and all of their work is completed by Thursday afternoons. An administrator signs off on the permission form and a copy is sent home so that the parent knows that all expectations have been met.

Several years ago, our middle school population began to increase and we realized that the weekly system was not always meeting their needs. A middle school point system was developed so that these students would receive feedback on their behavior at the end of each period. The number of points which they accumulate, less any points they lose due to write-ups or time in ISS, is then calculated and is used to determine levels for the following week. It takes 4 weeks of appropriate behavior (and accumulated points) to earn one's way off of the middle school point system and back onto the regular, weekly system. While on the middle school point system, students lose music privileges in class, hallway privileges, and cannot change the location of their assigned recreational period. Students can be On Level or Off Level, depending upon the number of points they accumulate, but they cannot earn time toward Honors Level while they are on the middle school point system.

Support for Staff and Students

Because of the intensity with which staff is expected to interact with students, a number of strategies are used to provide both emotional and administrative support. Having a cohesive team is essential in maintaining both staff morale, consistency in working with students, and school safety.

Before school each year, a two-day staff retreat is planned. The last several years, this has included an overnight stay in which teachers and administrative staff are expected to participate. Support staff are expected to participate in the day sessions but are not required to stay overnight. The content of the day sessions is determined by the number of new staff and the specific needs which had been identified the previous year. Each retreat includes an overview of Bowlby's model of attachment as well as the strategies and interventions which have been discussed previously in this article.

Staff development time throughout the year will focus on specific needs of the program at the time and is designed to meet the needs of the staff, both instructionally and emotionally. In addition, time is spent each week in a staffing-style meeting where the progress of each student is reviewed. In this setting, teachable moments with staff often occur and time is taken to explore the dynamics of the situation or event. Staff members are encouraged to give feedback to one another and to learn from each other.

A consensus model for determining policies and procedures for the program is used. Each staff member is expected to express their opinions and to explore possible options. A frequent question which Dr. Burkholder often poses for the group is "What can you live with and what are you willing to support?" Decisions which are made in this manner tend to result in staff support because they have been an important part of the decision-making process.

A concern which new staff members often express is support in the classroom. At Genesis, teachers also have walkie talkies. These are not reserved for administrators. There is also a call button with direct access to the front office in each classroom. This means that

teachers have immediate access to administrators and the front office at all times, whether they are in the classroom or whether they are in another part of the building. The code word, "Now" imbedded in a call means that the teacher needs immediate assistance. Administrators stop immediately and respond to these calls. As noted earlier, administrators are also available to support teachers as they provide choices and consequences for students on a day-to- day basis. Administrators also visit in classrooms frequently as they walk through the building and are available to stop and help students or to provide feedback on the positive choices students are making. Teachers and substitutes frequently verbalize that they feel more safe and supported in this building because of the level of administrative support.

A major support for both students and staff is the presence of an on-site, clinical psychologist. Dr. Merritt's role during the school day is primarily directed toward support of students. However, her role also expands to include staff support for both personal and professional issues.

Many of our students have had the experience of being required to see a counselor, either because of a parental decision or because it has been ordered by a juvenile judge. A major difference at Genesis is the fact that Dr. Merritt is on-site and has the opportunity to see students in class and to see the interaction between students and staff. She is often able to intervene "in the moment" when a conflict or crisis situation is happening and does not have to wait for a weekly appointment time to help a student resolve the issues which are important to him/her.

All students participate in a weekly group meeting with Dr. Merritt. Other times are the result of either self referral or a referral from one of the administrators. Dr. Merritt also assists with conflict mediation, whether this is between two students or between a student and a staff member. In these sessions, students can see, first hand, that there are positive alternatives in resolving conflicts and that confrontation and physical altercations can be avoided when they are willing to work things out verbally.

One of the interventions which Dr. Merritt uses is to involve community agencies in the weekly sessions with students. Agencies include Office On Youth, the health department,

students from James Madison University, probation officers, law enforcement officers and military recruitment officers. The purpose is to introduce students to services and opportunities which are available to them in the community and to assist them in securing needed services on a case-by-case basis. These sessions can also serve to help students relate in a positive setting with agencies and personnel with whom they may have had negative encounters and/or generalized distrust based on hearsay and street lore.

Conclusion

Schools, especially public schools, are often the last formal setting where communities have the opportunity to teach societal norms and expectations before adolescents enter adulthood. For those students whose early school experiences have been less than successful, alternative schools offer one more chance to teach responsibility and to prepare students to enter adulthood with the tools they need to be successful, both in the workplace and in their role as parents themselves. We believe that Genesis offers a setting where students have that opportunity and where students and staff work together to achieve the goals which the communities they serve have identified. In this article, we have tried to outline the ways in which we strive every day to help students achieve positive goals and outcomes for their lives.

References

Ainsworth, M. D. S. The development of the infant-mother attachment. In B.M.Caldwell and H. N. Ricciuti (eds.), *Review of child development research*, vol. 3.Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Bowlby, J. *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. London: Routledge Publishing, 1988.

Bretherton, I. The origins of attachment theory. *Developmental Psychology*. 28: 759-775, 1992.

Karpman, S. Fairy tales and script drama analysis. Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 7(26), 39-43, 1968.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy