

## Building A Way to Connect with High School Students

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### Program Introduction

In spite of adults' recognition that a good high school education is a key to a productive future, many urban adolescents continue to do poorly; skipping classes, failing courses, and showing many other signs of apathy toward academics. Teachers and administrators are searching for new, effective ways to motivate students to care about their education and take steps to plan constructively for their future. Lawrence Steinberg, a prominent education researcher on motivation, has written that as many as 40 percent of American students of all social classes are disengaged with school. This apathy translates to the poor performance on international tests and other well known signs that indicate our high schoolers are ill-prepared to meet the challenges of adulthood. Poor motivation is a formidable barrier to learning. There is an urgent need to develop effective interventions that prompt students to invest effort in their education. Academic engagement has also been identified as a critical protective factor against adolescent violence, therefore, this is a promising prevention strategy.

### Breaking the Cycle of Adolescent Disengagement

Researchers Eccles and Midgley have critically analyzed the precipitous decline in performance as students move from elementary to high school. Two factors are known to limit student motivation: low confidence in addition to a belief that one's ability to learn is predetermined. Students who believe that they are incompetent may decide that academic success is irrelevant rather than accept the belief that they are inadequate. The cycle begins when these same students fail to invest effort in their class work, avoid difficult classes, and redirect their energies to nonacademic activities. This guarantees failure and only confirms their lack of confidence and helplessness. Researchers and writers, including Lisa Delpit, Louise and George Spindler, and Carol Gilligan have also documented extensive evidence that adolescent minorities and girls are especially at risk for failure or mediocre performances in high school.

Research has demonstrated that, in general, learning is enhanced when relationships are built between students and adults in a school. In small, alternative high schools, well planned advisory programs have made a difference in outcomes for these at risk populations. However, larger advisory programs in public systems have not been consistently executed or



sufficiently evaluated to guarantee similar success. There exists a serious gap in our knowledge and understanding of how teacher-student connections in an advising program can effectively translate into increased motivation to learn, especially on a large scale. Yet, many public high schools in our country have large student populations of over 1,000 students. I have started an academic advising program that seeks to fill this gap in knowledge.

### Starting an Advising Program in Cambridge

Since 1995, I have worked as a mental health director at the Teen Health Center at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS) in Cambridge, Mass. The student at CRLS is decidedly urban and international: Of its population of roughly 2,000, approximately 60 percent are racial or ethnic minorities, over half are eligible to receive free lunches, and one-third speak a first language other than English. As part of my job, I consult with four of the six assistant principals and with many guidance counselors about troubled adolescents who are failing. Often, poor academic performance is only one of many problems confronting these teenagers. Teen pregnancy, substance abuse, broken homes, and numerous detentions and suspensions are all part of their troubled lives. The number of students at CRLS who are failing is alarming: 30% of all students fail at least one class every semester. The percentages for minorities are even higher: 47% for African American students and 38% for Latino students. It is not uncommon for failing students to be ignored and allowed to move to the next grade unless they provoke some disciplinary action. Many are suspended or expelled.

A year after I began work in the high school, I began to discuss with the principal and other administrators how to systematically support students without ignoring or stigmatizing them. In the end, we decided to tackle two major systemic problems: Failing students needed more consistent adult contact to encourage and help them get the most from school, and the high school's aging staff needed help to understand the context of these students' lives and to help increase student motivation levels.

Six months later, we implemented a series of small group discussions over a five-month period that teamed all 2,000 CRLS students with 200 adult volunteers from the school staff. Each group at CRLS consisted of twelve students who met with one or two advisors weekly for four months. Advisors were instructed to encourage discussion on topics that students thought were relevant to their education. Thus, the initial program was built on a simple idea: a small group of students meet regularly at school with an adult who tries to make a connection with them. At the

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end of this initial phase, we coordinated a qualitative and quantitative program evaluation.

*We learned that even if students feel supported by school discussions, they do not necessarily perceive a link between this supportive environment and academic performance.*

Often in the mental health model, we are more focused on how a child feels as reflected in measurements of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Educators are much more invested in performance. In order for a school system to justify putting staff resources into an advising program, there needs to be concrete efforts to engage the students. Thus, in a revision of the program, we encouraged advisors to review the progress reports of students, to reinforce effective ways of negotiating with teachers, and to encourage time management which hopefully would translate to better performance.

The initial format where the adults met to provide a connection with the student was awkward for some teachers. They were accustomed to emphasizing content in a more traditional way and were uncomfortable with inviting open discussions. It was threatening to have students talk about other teachers or to question authority. Encouraging students to talk about their feelings as a way of decreasing self-sabotaging behavior seemed of limited utility. Since initially the students were silent and somewhat suspicious of the adults, well intentioned teachers often felt frustrated and unprepared. However, this shifted for the better as the program progressed. In redesigning the program, we tried to give more structure to the meetings and equip the teachers with a greater security and purpose by providing activities and content. Eighty-five percent of teachers and students of the initial program said that they thought the groups were going excellent or good. Because the initial program was stopped at the end of the year (because of logistics with the teachers' contract), we didn't have time to see the impact on the students' academic performance, attendance, and suspension rate. The intervention covered only four months and given this

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short time span, it was unrealistic to expect a major change in behavior.

For the school year 1997-98, an advising period was adopted by the school system to begin with the ninth grade class. We restructured the original groups to include only teachers who, in exchange for a lighter course load, meet weekly with two groups of ten students. In 1998-99, this same group of teachers will work with the incoming class of ninth graders until the program expands to include freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classes in the high school.

As the consulting director of the advising program, I have spent the past year addressing teachers' expressed need for instruction in how to run the groups by writing a formal ninth grade advising curriculum with my colleague, Lee Reynolds, M.D., at Cambridge Hospital. I have also worked with advisors on strategies for motivating teens, identifying different learning styles, and facilitating productive discussions within their groups.

### Work to be Done

To judge the program's effectiveness, we will be using objective standards (i.e. detentions, suspensions, absenteeism, and grade point average, etc.) to identify the impact of the advising program on various student populations. In addition, we will chart the progress of individual students with similar backgrounds to identify the most important factors contributing to change within these selected populations. This objective analysis will be supplemented by information gathered from questionnaires and focus group discussions.

In evaluating the CRLS program, we will be looking at these essential questions:

- Which parts of the curriculum are most effective?
- How do we establish that the program is executed as planned?
- Which parts of the advising program need to be modified?
- What types of groupings are most effective?
- How can advisors be most effective in engaging students, and conversely what factors inhibit this connection?
- What kinds of skill development is most effective in helping teachers to increase motivation among urban adolescents?
- How is staff performance monitored and evaluated?

### Conclusion

The data strongly suggests that urban high schools such as CRLS can do much to combat disengagement with the proper infrastructure (i.e. an advising program) that provides the kind of connection to adults that is critical to motivate students. It is my goal to construct such a program that can also be replicated in other urban high school settings. By providing crucial links to caring, supportive adults with high expectations there is a greater chance for adolescents to make successful transition to adulthood, and to make constructive choices rather than pursuing destructive behavior that limits their future options. ♦

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