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Using a Team Approach in High School to Increase Student Achievement

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GRADES FOR PROGRAM: Grades 9 and 10

ENROLLMENT AT HIGH SCHOOL (9–12): 1,700

PROGRAM INITIATED: September 1990, as a pilot program to attempt to raise student achievement

FUNDING: No additional funds needed besides paying for substitutes on two nonconsecutive days (winter 1989) when the team met to put the program together and for two summer workshop days when the team met to plan for the beginning of the school year (1990)

RESULT OF PROGRAM: Two years later, all incoming freshmen would join one of six teams (each team consisting of a science, English, and social studies teacher)

Background

A few years ago my older daughter's third-grade teacher asked me, "What do you think happens to some of these (sweet) third graders by the time they reach high school?" She had heard too many stories about her former students falling on their faces socially and/or educationally. I nodded my head in understanding, and, before offering her a fuller version of my world view—a diatribe about the breaking

up of the traditional American family and about the need for elementary school districts to hire more counselors and social workers—I uttered, “Something goes wrong, something.”

Indeed “something” was happening to student attitudes and achievement at Elk Grove High School. The teachers had seen “it”; the administration had heard about “it” and had seen “it” documented in the form of student grades. A frightening proportion of teenagers at the school were doing poorly—and didn’t seem to care; at least, they pretended they didn’t care. Pointing the finger of blame began, although not fruitfully: the junior high schools, the lack of at-home, after-school supervision, the general disintegration of the American family—all of these received some of the finger pointing.

However, no matter how far one looked for causes or how deeply one placed the blame on one factor or another, something else needed to start happening so that students could lead themselves away from the direction in which they were headed—toward an adult mindset of mediocrity and malaise.

Getting the Program Started

Dr. Jack Elliott, an assistant principal at Elk Grove, saw interdisciplinary teaming and writing across curriculum (WAC) movements as worthwhile approaches around which to structure a pilot program to improve student achievement at the high school. During the spring of 1989 Dr. Elliott gathered six teachers—a math teacher (Marianne Rosenstein), a social science teacher (Robert Koralik), a biology teacher (Mary Beth Khoury), two Spanish teachers (Suellyn Gates and Linda Ashida), and an English teacher (Barry Gadlin)—to come together to work on a pilot program in which the group would take responsibility for about 105 (of the 350) incoming freshmen for two years. Dr. Elliott gave us the power to organize the program on our own as far as would be physically feasible for the school. We began meeting a little more than a year before initiating the program. We received release time to meet early in the school year prior to implementation, so that any problems that did arise in our planning could receive attention before deadlines closed in. Given the unknown effects of this new program on a fairly traditional building and staff, we decided not to try to mold a pilot program too different in appearance (with regard to scheduling and curriculum) from what was already in place. So one of the first “givens” was that all of us would have five classes, not four as we had considered earlier. Eventually, our wide-ranging of discussions of the program’s strengths and our questions about its structure and curriculum helped us mold the program into one suited to and workable at Elk Grove High School.

Structuring the Program

The Selection and Scheduling of Students

The team wanted to fill five average freshman classes to allow each teacher to focus on the program. The teacher makeup of the team would be based both on the required freshmen classes (English, math, and science) and approximately 120 students per year in previous freshman classes signing up for Spanish and social science. So one afternoon the six interdisciplinary teachers looked through the incoming freshmen's course selections to find the 105 students who could meet the criteria for entering the program. The next step would involve coordinating the teachers with the students over an eight-period schedule. We solved four problems before proceeding. First, we decided that we did not want five groups of students traveling around together. (Group A might have English first hour and math second hour while Group B might have history first hour and Spanish second hour). We wanted students to experience as normal a school day as possible. Second, we did not want to section off part of the building as our sole territory. That would mean displacing other teachers from their classrooms—not good for PR.

The final two problems related to curriculum and school-day flexibility. Could we organize a schedule that would allow any interdisciplinary teacher the flexibility to keep a group of students an extra period or more without interfering with other teachers? And *could* we have four larger classes instead of five smaller classes to make possible visiting each other and being each others' aides? Again, our desire not to disrupt the traditional program helped us resolve these dilemmas. As mentioned above, we would have five classes, and, no, we wouldn't be able to devise a system where the six teachers could take students without affecting other teachers. (However, many of the students opted to take a business, music, journalism, or gym course, with the result that decisions of the interdisciplinary teachers did affect teachers not in the program.) We chose our class schedules, we selected a common planning time, and we decided to monitor an interdisciplinary study hall in order to help our students during the required study hall to keep them more on track.

Planning the First Weeks

Our first weeks of planning during the summer involved getting to know each other, dividing up responsibilities, and deciding how we wanted to proceed as the semester opened. With regard to the division of responsibilities, for instance, we decided on some study skills

strategies to incorporate into our classes: Mary Beth would introduce methods of reading a textbook in biology, and the rest of us would reinforce these methods in our own classes; Marianne would take the responsibility for administering a learning styles survey; Barry would provide results from a reading/vocabulary inventory. Our willingness to help each other learn about our students became apparent. To ensure a good start in our individual classes, we delayed any cooperative thematic units until November. However, as the next few sections will demonstrate, the students began to sense connections among their classes when the teachers began to develop an interdisciplinary program focused not on thematic units but on integrating skills.

Implementing the Program

Adding to the Interdisciplinary Concept

During the summer, unbeknownst to the team members, Dr. Elliott had added another dimension to the program—a dimension that would greatly add to its success. Charles Widlowski and Barry Brown, two counselors, split the program's students between them (maintaining their other counselees). Elliott's rationale was simple: If one of the strengths of the program was supposed to be the improved communication among the staff, then having only two counselors for the teachers to contact not only would seem consistent with the program but also would benefit the counseling process. For example, once a week the two counselors would join the teachers at their team meetings to share information about students and to hear from the teachers about problem students. The two counselors also helped resolve scheduling problems.

Gathering Student Information

We decided to spend the first two weeks of the semester with two purposes: to get our classes off to a smooth start and to gather student information that would help paint the fullest possible picture of each student. Because only the English, math, and biology teachers saw all the students daily, their classes became the ones to introduce and gather information and to give surveys. After Barry gave the students a reading inventory and got several writing samples, he listed the consistent writing problems for each student and shared the results with other team members. After Marianne gave students a learning style survey in math class, Dr. Elliott went to their biology classes to explain to the students how to read the results. Finally, we all observed student behavior and motivation to discuss during our team meetings.

The Shift from an Interdisciplinary Model to a Student-Support Model

Team Meetings

With the above information, the teachers spent their fourth-hour team meetings during the first few weeks getting really clear pictures of the students. We looked for the following:

1. Who seems to be having trouble in all or most classes?
2. Who might be misplaced with regard to skill level?
3. Who is having attendance problems?
4. Have any parents or students spoken or written to any of the teachers giving additional information about the students (e.g., hobbies, family problems, illnesses, attitudes toward self or others)?
5. Who are the class leaders?
6. Do students have any study-habit problems that we need to focus on?

After only a couple of weeks, we had identified students needing immediate attention. One student, for example, was continuing a truancy problem that had begun years before. At one of the team meetings one teacher related that when this student returned to class after missing several days, a classmate blurted out, “Just like junior high school, eh, Joe?” Another student exhibited immature and disruptive attention-getting behavior in almost all her classes. She would screech, not take her seat when asked, and talk across the room. In both cases the counselors talked with the students, and the teachers called the parents. Only a month later, teachers, counselors, and social workers began meeting with the parents of students like the ones above if their behaviors hadn’t improved. By the end of a few weeks then, we knew the program was already reaping benefits: We were helping students adjust to high school, we were able to act quickly to remedy classroom problems, we were involving parents faster when their teenager was having problems, we all felt less “picked on”—that is, we saw that a student’s misbehavior was usually showing up elsewhere—and we felt that as a team we were more effective in promoting change.

With regard to study skills, Chuck Widlowski and Barry Brown helped bring parents into the program. In late September they asked teachers to tell students to bring home a flyer seeking more active parent involvement. That same month they met with their first “Parents as Partners” group to discuss how parents could help improve their teen’s study habits. Chuck and Barry held two meetings—the first attended by twenty-three parents, the second attended by over sixty. By June

parent responses to the program were incredibly positive; these initial study-skill meetings had made parents feel confident that the entire team wanted their teens to succeed.

The Semester Begins: The Interdisciplinary Concept and WAC

Although we had agreed not to concern ourselves with building any thematic units early in the year, we were able to support each other's classroom efforts in smaller ways. Because the entire group reviewed various writing activities, all the teachers included more writing assignments in their classes. For example, after Barry taught students how to write a biopoem in English (Gere 1985, 222), Bob reviewed this format in history and had the students write a biopoem about one of the distant cultures the class had studied. Introduced to process writing, Bob also had students produce several projects: an interview with a historical figure, and journal writings following the life of a fictitious person born at the turn of the century (to show how historical events through the 1970s could have influenced his or her life).

Barry also reviewed *admit slips* and *exit slips* (Gere 1985, 222–24) with the other teachers to illustrate a couple of ways for them not only to include more writing in their classes but also to check student learning and generate class discussion. Suellyn had her Spanish students keep spirals in which students would write reactions to stories, keep a log of lessons, list information they learned from class or their readings, and write questions about parts of a lesson or reading. Mary Beth had her students write exit slips as reactions to films: What did you learn? or What were some of the more important bits of information in the film? She also had students write up more labs so that the students could practice the scientific method informally but more frequently. She included more report writing—one assignment on part of the digestive system and another on two women's experiences bearing and delivering children. (For the second topic, students chose their interviewees and wrote up summaries of their discussions.) Team members would help each other as problems arose. For example, when Mary Beth became dissatisfied with the quality of newspaper article summaries (due every other Friday for Biology), Barry discussed with the students how to paraphrase, summarize, and use quotations for their science articles.

The teaching team had other activities to help the students see connections among their teachers. First, on the opening day of class in English, Barry had the students memorize a short poem ("We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks) for the next day. However, he told the students that if they could recite the poem for any of their other teachers before the end of the day, the students would receive extra

credit. A couple of weeks later, students would be able to earn extra credit if they taught one of their teachers how to write the teacher's name in hieroglyphics. In math, Marianne reviewed some formulas to prepare students for writing a biology report. In English, Barry asked students to write a classification-division paper related to a class topic soon after the students had studied classification and division in biology. And, as mentioned earlier, we helped each other teach study skills. These examples were but a few of many that helped give the students the mind-set that their teachers were, indeed, working together and that helped create an integrated curriculum. Although we didn't put together an extended thematic unit until mid-November, in small ways we were letting the kids know that we knew what was going on in their other classes.

Beginning an Extended Thematic Unit

During the thirteenth week, one of the interdisciplinary units began. It didn't begin with any fanfare: instead it developed organically. The unofficial topic of this five-week span was "Accepting Differences and Making a Difference." Students in English received the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The English teacher spent a great deal of class time talking with students about how characters in the novel prejudged others on the basis of rumor or physical appearance. Much later in the unit the students attended an all-day, activity-based workshop at school sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'Rith. All 104 students spent the school day in the library divided into small discussion groups; the workshop leaders focused the students' attention on ways people today wrongly judge each other based on the color of skin, height, physical appearance, disability, and occupation (among others). Between the beginning of the novel and this final activity, all the interdisciplinary teachers involved the students in a minunit on homelessness. Teachers received materials from the HUD office in Chicago to use in their classes and had students look at the issue from different angles.

Activities that developed parts of the unit included the following:

1. In English, students read a couple of short stories and articles about homelessness.
2. Teachers and students sponsored a clothing drive to donate to a local shelter.
3. Teachers tried to solicit parent volunteers (via a flyer sent home) to work at a shelter.
4. Bob analyzed newspaper and magazine articles about homelessness as part of the classes' current-events discussions.

5. Marianne gathered some statistics about homelessness and shelter attendance and had students apply graphing and other math skills to see the rise in homelessness.
6. Linda and Suellen created skits in which students used new vocabulary in their speech and writing to describe a homeless couple and to ask questions of a homeless couple newly arrived at a shelter.
7. Mary Beth talked to students and had them write about their own nutritional needs and about the proper diet a homeless person would need to stay healthy, especially during the cold Chicago winters (looking at inexpensive sources of nutrition).
8. All the students met in the school auditorium during third period to listen to Mrs. Frankie Walters, who helped organize the Public Action to Deliver Shelter (PADS) program in the suburbs, talk about what the PADS program does and about her own experiences as a homeless child.
9. A free-writing activity in the form of an interior monologue in which students described what their lives would be like as a homeless teen (later turned into a polished piece), a persuasive essay about the need for people to feel concerned about the homeless, and other class discussions centering on both understanding homelessness and accepting individual differences added to the unit.

Findings

Statistics

With regard to the program's immediate effect upon students' grades, we stepped back from comparing our grades with grades of students outside the program; we weren't sure how valid the results would be. What seemed more valid, however, was to look at each teacher's class grades before and during the program. In one case a team member had had between thirteen and sixteen failures each semester for the previous two years. As a member of the interdisciplinary team he had six failures one semester and eight failures another semester. And we're as much interested in what will happen over the next two years: How effective will these students be as learners during their junior and senior years once they leave the program?

Team Member Attitudes at the Year's End: The eight interdisciplinary teachers and counselors discussed two questions: How do the teachers involved feel about the program's success? What was the effect on teachers of having had the opportunity to share ideas and problems with other members of the team? Summaries of their responses follow.

Teachers' Opinions of the Effectiveness of the Program

Adding counselors to the team made a big difference. Often, students wouldn't respond to their teachers' concerns about achievement, and having a nonclassroom staff member talk to the student proved valuable. Additionally, the counselors could initiate staffings and parent meetings easily. In short, their presence simplified and sped up the counseling, staffing, and problem solving. The teachers felt that the counselors were keeping better track of kids with the interdisciplinary teams. Meetings three to five times each week kept each member up-to-date about student progress. Sharing across the curriculum writing ideas and teaching techniques proved valuable to the team members also.

Effects of Interdisciplinary Team Sharing

Teachers in the program felt more a part of the total school environment. First, the team was more aware of what goes on in other courses and in departments. Writing Across the Curriculum activities aided in this area. Admit and exit slips and other informal writing activities (those that help students think through an idea and generate class discussion, those that check students' understanding, and those that express what's on the students' minds) have become part of all team members' classrooms. Second, and as a result of the first, the teachers felt less cut off from other division teachers. Third, the program gave each team member a better sense of what kids do during the day. Fourth, because teachers talked about the same students and quickly identified troubled kids, each team member felt less "singled out" by a disruptive or problem student. Fewer teacher "why me's?" occurred during the year. Finally, team members became more aware of student achievement in athletics and in school organizations not only because four team members coach but also because teachers shared overheard stories about students' successes.

Parents Respond Favorably at the End of Year One: We received parent feedback in a number of ways—(generally) during phone conversations with parents, during the study-skills sessions early in the first year, during sophomore course registration with the counselors, and through comments made on a survey filled out by parents at the end of September during the second year.

Counseling sessions during October 1990 helped create positive attitudes among many parents toward the interdisciplinary program. Parents who felt helpless about guiding their teenagers in schoolwork really appreciated the study-skills and coping-skills information given to them at two separate parent meetings. During the year and during the following summer, when parents talked to counselors about course

selection and schedule, parents offered thanks for the close tabs that teachers and counselors had kept on their kids.

Early during the second year, at a parent night in late September, we asked parents to help us document our successes and failures. Anonymously and voluntarily, parents filled out a survey seeking their feedback about the program. Questions related to our communication with them, the value of the homework assignments, the effect of the program upon the teen's enjoyment of school, and the effect of the program on their teen's growth. Responses are detailed below:

1. *Overall, teachers communicated as well as or better than expected.* With regard to communication, eighty-seven and a half percent felt that we communicated within or above their expectations. Comments include the following: "They were there when we needed them (the death of husband/father) and also after, when it's so important"; "Everyone was very supportive and willing to communicate and advise"; "Excellent!" In contrast, twelve and a half percent rated communication below expectations. One comment in this group was telling: "I did not completely understand the program's emphasis and goals." Looking back on the year, what we may have forgotten to do was to tell parents more about the shift in the program from an interdisciplinary one to a counseling one.
2. *Parents saw homework assignments as having a positive effect on their teen's growth.* Ninety-seven percent felt homework assignments were about right (sixty-three percent) or became a positive influence in the teenager's growth (thirty-four percent). Some parents saw specific growth in certain classes; others saw across-the-board growth. Of the six percent who felt homework came too frequently, one parent commented that the student was having adjustment problems to high school.
3. *The majority of the parents polled felt that their teen's enjoyment of school improved because of the program.* The most positive results came with the question about enjoyment of school. Ninety-four percent saw their teen's enjoyment of school remain the same or improve and fifty-five and a half percent felt their teenager's enjoyment of school increased. Positive comments included the following: "Much more self-confidence by the end of freshman year"; "[He] really was helped last year by his teachers' understanding; this year he is able to talk [about problems] and is getting it together." In contrast, six percent felt that their teens' enjoyment of school lessened, although as noted earlier, one of the parents felt his son was having general adjustment problems and saw some improvement just before responding to the survey.
4. *Parents were cautious but felt the program made a difference.* Some parents responded as the teaching team would: "In some areas it's

too soon to tell.” However, other parents who responded to this question were most complimentary: “[They] being a new freshman, I think the unity was a good idea and helped them grow together as a class”; “Tremendous! It was just what he needed. The core made for an easier adjustment and more of a unified approach”; “The personal attention was an asset. Being part of a smaller group in a large school was also a plus”; “[The program] made a tremendous difference because the teachers were so caring and, he felt, ‘friends.’”

How Students Felt at the End of Year One: At the end of the school year, interdisciplinary students evaluated themselves in terms of how much they had grown and in terms of perceived weaknesses students needed to pay attention to the following year. What most students said reflected the values and attitudes that the teachers had tried to convey all year:

“[One] way I have matured is the way I feel about school. Now . . . I have to take more responsibilities and be conscious of how I’m doing so I won’t slip. . . . Before I could have cared less.”

“Getting good grades is important to my future, and I really opened my eyes to that this year.”

“I remember the summer before starting Elk Grove. I used to hate getting involved in school [activities], but this year I’ve been . . . enjoying a lot of clubs and sports to keep me busy. I also take my school work and my teachers very seriously, for I know that if I don’t accomplish something in high school, I can forget about going to a college altogether.”

“I need to stop [making excuses] and start getting my [homework] done.”

“For homework I need to improve a lot. Homework is there to help understand the subject better, not to make my life more difficult.”

“I’ve learned more, not just about school but [about life in general]. I’ve learned all the bad things not to do, and all the things I can do. School is what made me learn these things. . . . I like math; it’s just that I need to be better at it if I’m going to be an architect.”

“I used to think that all my teachers hated me because they were always yelling at me. But now I know they were just there looking out for me and trying to help keep me on track.”

“Since I’m in a special program, I’m in class with the same people. This helps a lot. Being around the same people all day builds my ego also. I seem to speak out more and answer questions that the teacher asks.”

“In junior high I always liked to work alone while everybody else was working in groups. I just couldn’t get along with the other people

in the groups. But in high school I tried to have a different attitude towards it. Now I really like working in groups with other people. I like to see how other people get some of their ideas.”

“I used to study while watching TV. Now I study at my desk in my room without the TV and the results are better.”

“When my teacher gives an assignment and gives me a time limit, let’s say two weeks, I now know I should start it when he gives me it instead of putting it off till the last minute.”

“School also helped out with some of the problems I was having at school and home. My grades were slipping, so my parents and I went to the school counselor who put me on a green (assignment) card that I had to (have my teachers) fill out every day. I would get it signed by my teachers, parents, then bring it back to my counselor.”

“I’m in the program where the teachers care more.”

Teaching Teams for the Future

All freshmen would join a team for one year beginning with the next school year. The second year of the pilot program went extremely well, but scheduling problems made teaming all freshmen and sophomores impossible in an otherwise traditionally structured high school setting. A speech instructor needed to join the team during the sophomore year to teach the required oral communications course, further complicating the schedule. What does remain, however, are the beliefs that teachers and counselors working together do make a difference and that the model described above helps to better keep track of students. Did some students fail? Yes. Did the failure rate go down significantly? Yes.

Additionally, writing has become an important activity in all classrooms across the curriculum. The sharing of ideas within teacher teams and the building leadership’s commitment to provide writing ideas to teachers and writing help to students have led to acceptance of writing to learn and writing as thinking at Elk Grove High School.

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