

Create a Positive School Culture that Stresses Personalization in Relationships

THIS ARTICLE IS THE THIRD IN A YEARLONG SERIES THAT WILL MORE CLOSELY EXAMINE THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN ACTE'S HIGH SCHOOL REFORM POSITION STATEMENT AND HIGHLIGHT BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTING EACH OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS.



THE THIRD RECOMMENDATION IN ACTE'S high school reform position statement is to create a positive school culture that stresses personalization in relationships. In many communities, traditional social bonds are weakening, and today's youth need positive adult role models to encourage success.

According to a study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, there are fewer adults in families today, more than one in four children are born into a single-parent home, and half of the current generation of children will live in a single-parent household during some part of their childhood. Considering these statistics, family and youth support becomes a critical component of helping students succeed during their high school years.

Schools remain one of the best opportunities for connecting youth and adults in positive ways, giving students the sense that they are valued and cared for, and reinforcing the message that whether they succeed or fail actually matters to someone. A system goal must be to help every youth become involved in structured activity that strengthens positive relationships with peers and adults and encourages the student's sense of confidence and belonging in school.

These activities could include advisory periods, smaller learning communities, co-curricular interest-based activities such as career and technical student organizations (CTSOs), or other activities that provide a positive adult relationship.

Positive relationships have long been a hallmark of many successful CTE programs, and many career and technical education programs from around the country are leading the way toward expanding personal relationships to all high school students.

Creating a Sense of Community

In an urban school district, just over 850 students may not seem like a large number, but in rural South Dakota, the 870 students enrolled in Sturgis Brown High School come from a geographic area that covers more than 3,200 square miles. Administrators and counselors were concerned about students who came to school but were not engaged in any activities and were not a part of the school community. They saw that this lack of engagement often led to increased dropout rates and lower student success.

As part of the High Schools that Work Initiative, school leaders had been exposed to the concept of advisories – a program that involves students being divided into small groups and assigned to a teacher that serves in an advisory capacity to those students during all four years of high school. In February of 2005, Sturgis Brown implemented advisories to help students feel more connected to the school. Coleen Keffeler, school-to-careers coordinator, said, "Advisories were started with the goal of helping students be more successful and better plan their high school career."

The schools' advisories, known as "Scooper Time" after the school mascot, meet every two weeks for 35 minutes. Students are grouped alphabetically by grade level, and groups of about 15 are assigned to each teacher and counselor. Administrators serve as substitutes and assist where needed during the program.

The mission statement for Scooper Time is "To facilitate personal and social growth through the integration of lifelong skill-building activities." Activities during each session focus on personal growth, academics, or careers and the future, and are geared to each

Alisha Hyslop

is ACTE's assistant director of public policy. She can be contacted at ahyslop@acteonline.org.



▲▲ Scooper Time

Curriculum for Scooper Time is developed, left, by a group of teacher advisors. Students, right, work on a banner during their Scooper Time session.

groups' grade level. For example, freshman spend more time on study skills and test taking strategies, while seniors spend time getting ready for postsecondary education and gaining independent living skills that will be essential to life after graduation.

Engaging Teachers, Students and Parents

In addition to grade-specific activities, other Scooper Time sessions are focused primarily on engaging students. Goal setting activities take place at the beginning of each year, and team building and school spirit competitions are held between groups of students. For example, one activity that was a huge hit with students was a boat building competition using straws and masking tape. It got students excited and engaged with their peers in ways that traditional classroom activities often did not.



A "grade check" is included in the advisory period every six weeks. Teachers take time to review grades in each class with students in their advisories and offer encouragement or arrange extra help. This part of the advisory program is particularly appealing to parents, Keffeler said. "Parents have really liked the idea that there is someone at school that is checking on

students, and making sure they are on the right path."

While some staff and older students were reluctant participants at the beginning of the program, the positive results have generated increased support. Teacher-advisors can be seen talking to students in the hallway about grades, participating in more IEP meetings, and coming up with additional activities they think would be helpful for their students. While original advisory activities were generated by a survey to students, parents and staff, an advisory board has now been appointed to develop curriculum that includes more options that can be tailored to student and teacher needs for each Scooper Time session.

The school has also seen a surge in the number of seniors applying for scholarships because this has become a focus of advisory sessions, and hopes that efforts to begin portfolios and planning with ninth-graders will allow more students to complete advanced career diplomas that are recognized by the school and state.

When asked about keys to the success of the advisory program, Keffeler emphasized

professional development and training for teachers serving in this new role. "Providing guidance, advice and mentoring for students may require additional skills and knowledge about the entire high school curriculum that every teacher must gain." Reducing additional burden on staff

by providing plenty of time for transition into the program and prepared lessons and activities is also helpful. Many schools have developed structured advisory activities that can be easily shared and adapted, and numerous other resources are available.

A Critical Role for Mentors

According to James Comer at Harvard University, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." In Illinois, CTE programs have been able to increase the high school graduation rate and improve student achievement by developing these significant relationships, especially among special populations such as individuals with disabilities, individuals from economically disadvantaged families, and individuals preparing for nontraditional fields.

Through the dedication of funds from the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois Community College Board, Special Populations Coordinators are provided. These professionals establish relationships with students who meet the criteria of "special populations" as defined in the Perkins Act. They provide supportive services, like funding for books, and special programming on topics like improving study skills.

In addition to these coordinators, the NTO Look project, which was recognized by ACTE in 2006 for preparing students for nontraditional fields, and has now been expanded to the New Look Project focusing on all special populations, provides additional support for students. Lynn Reha, co-director of the Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support, adds, "Recipients utilize the well-documented

practice of providing role models and mentors to recruit and retain students to classes leading to nontraditional careers. Also, participants in NTO and New Look sought methods of contacting and involving parents in career decisions.”

These projects, such as a mentoring partnership between the College of DuPage and the Technology Center of DuPage, help to form critical relationships between students and adults that ensure student success. The DuPage project supported the formation of a mentoring program between high school and community college students and nontraditional role models in industry.

“If They Can Do It, So Can I”

In the September issue of *Techniques*, ACTE highlighted another award-winning program that has used mentoring as a key component of increasing student achievement. The High Tech Girls Society (HTGS) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, embodies the recommendations made in *Reinventing the American High School for the 21st Century* related to building personal relationships.

Minneapolis Public Schools launched the HTGS in 2003 to increase representation of girls in traditionally male-dominated courses of study, such as aviation, engineering and information technology. One of the key components of the HTGS is mentoring and counseling for the girls involved. This is provided in cooperation with colleges, universities and employer partners, and focuses not only on in-school relationships, but on engaging students with community leaders and future employers.

Project Manager Greg Hendricks shared why the relationships formed as part of HTGS were so important. “Many students



High Tech >>

Members of the High Tech Girls Society are exposed to “tech” careers and meet women successful in those careers.



have not had any type of professional relationship before with an adult. We have a large immigrant population, and many of our students have no ‘pathfinders’ to help them navigate through the education system, even though they are incredibly smart and intelligent.” By building relationships between the high school students involved in the program and caring college students and industry professionals, the HTGS is able to provide those “pathfinders” for students.

Hendricks cited a critical example of visiting a construction company’s corporate headquarters where students were able to meet and interact with four female engineers. That experience not only provided the students with hands-on experiences in the engineering industry, but the engineers were able to share with the students about how to gain entry into the field, what to study in college, and how to go about finding a job.

The relationships built that day were able to continue by e-mail as the students had questions about their future career choices. The students look at the engineers as role models and say, “If they can do it, so can I!” Hendricks adds, “When it is other successful women, it has much greater credibility than the teacher in the classroom or the counselor down the hallway. There are fabulous role models in corporate America—my job is to make those connections.”

Creating a culture that stresses significant relationships will require significant change in many high schools around the country, but these programs are well on their way. More information on another element that can help to create personalization in relationships can be found in the January issue of *Techniques* magazine. The theme of the January issue will be “Career Academies, Where Smaller is Better.” In a country where bigger is often considered better, just the opposite is happening in today’s schools. States and districts are looking at the career academy and the small learning community environment as another way to personalize education. Look to the next issue of *Techniques* to analyze these models and get information on how to start. **T**

What about Your Program?

ACTE is very interested to learn about other CTE programs and initiatives that strive to build positive relationships. In addition, we are looking for information about CTE programs that work toward achieving the remainder of ACTE’s high school reform recommendations. If you teach or administer such a CTE program, please send information to Alisha Hyslop at ahyslop@acteonline.org.