



Community Schools Transition Support Project

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A Grade 7 and 8 teacher was concerned about the difficulties that many of his students appeared to have when they entered high school. Most of his students had Aboriginal ancestry, and they reported feeling isolated and intimidated by the number of students and the size of the school. He noted that most programs seemed to focus on how high schools could ease their transition without exploring the contribution that elementary schools might make. He developed an action research project to determine whether or not a continued connection between at-risk students and a prominent figure from their elementary school would help these students experience greater academic success, a smoother transition, and a feeling of belonging in high school.

Research Methodology

Preparatory work was done to develop understanding and support for the research among the six students making the transition to high school, their parents, administrators from the high school, the high school counsellor, and the high school learning assistance teacher. A change in teaching assignment changed the research plan somewhat, but actually made the project economically feasible for most elementary schools to consider by lessening the number of days the researcher spent in the high school. In all, the researcher needed four or five substitute days to carry out high school visits connected with the project.

The visits were made at regular intervals with the students and staff members involved in the project. Meetings with teachers and staff from the high school focused on identifying students who were having difficulties and discussing strategies to assist them. Meetings with his former students focused on discussing their feelings about how school was going, their personal achievement, and the goals they had set for each semester. As well, the researcher helped the students identify and connect with supports available to them within the high school. Twice the students also met as a group to share their experiences and reconnect with one another.

Impact on the Students

A year after the conclusion of the project, four of the six students involved were still attending the same high school. One had moved and was attending a high school in Victoria, B.C., and one had dropped out after completing Grade 9 with honours in Calgary, Alberta. Some of the students had already surpassed their parents' level of education. It proved impossible, however, for the researcher to compare these students' attendance data with those for students who had made the transition from his Grade 8 classes to high school in previous years. Virtually all earlier students had either dropped out of school or moved away.

Whereas none of the earlier students had passed all their Grade 9 classes, and many had

failing averages, only three of the students involved in the project failed a class in the first semester and only one failed a class in the second semester. Two of the students had averages above 80%.

Moreover, as the year went on, the researcher heard less and less from the students as they made connections within the high school to receive the help and support they needed.

The researcher states:

I firmly believe that these six students would not have adjusted to high school life as successfully as they did had I not stayed in contact with them. Through my contact, the students reported that they felt someone cared about how they did. When other students would ask them who I was, they would tell the students that I was their old grade eight teacher. The students would often reply that they wondered why their grade eight teacher never came to see them; it was easy to see the pride in the face of my students. My presence at the high school also gave these students a guide and an assistant in knowing how to and who to approach for help.

Impact on the High School

The following observation was made about the impact of the project on the staff of the high school:

Personally, I felt that my ability to come to the high school greatly increased staff and teacher awareness of particular students. I was also able to act as a resource for teachers, who would often ask

me about how these students were doing and how they might help. I felt that a bond was beginning to form between the elementary and high school that had not previously existed. It was a wonderful way to help build vision and partnerships between the elementary and high school. As well, many teachers mentioned that they wished that they had the type of background information about other students that I provided about the students involved in the project.

Final Thoughts

The researcher suggests that the project's importance comes from the fact that it built on strengths that were present in the students' lives before they went on to high school, and it built bridges for those strengths to accompany them into high school. This project also combined effectively with other programs that work from the high school level to the elementary level. In his view, further exploration is necessary into how elementary schools can become increasingly involved in the transition process in order to increase the ability of at-risk students to succeed in high school.