

Leadership

association of california school administrators  november.december 2007

Closing the gap
the bigger picture

Changing Hearts and Minds: dropout prevention

At-risk students must be able to imagine and internalize possibilities for themselves that are different from what they may be living.

It was first period. The case counselor had taken note of the fact that Jose hadn't picked up the daily report he always circulated. That Jose's daily report was still in the folder taped to her wall was surprising. In fact, she had just been thinking about "weaning" Jose to a weekly report because he had made great progress and stabilized both his attendance and classroom performance during the last two months.

With a small sigh, the counselor reminded herself once again that the path is forward, but it is also up and down. She felt encouraged by the belief that despite setbacks, defeat would not be an option.

Jose was a participant in the ALAS (Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success) middle school dropout prevention program that had targeted about 100 of the highest risk students in Jose's high poverty urban school.

This foggy morning, the case counselor was more surprised about Jose's absence than his accomplishments. He had turned 100 percent failing grades into 100 percent

passing grades, including a B in math. The counselor had seen this kind of turnaround in many other students — students, like Jose, who had achieved these transformations despite unstable lives and learning challenges.

Jose's father had been killed in gang violence when Jose was a preschooler, his stepfather was in prison and his single mother, who was only 15 years older than Jose, was abusing drugs. Jose lived in the homes of various relatives with his mother and three younger siblings, all of whom had different, uninvolved fathers.

Jose had a history of school absenteeism in prior years. The counselor remembered that there had been a crisis several months back, but the crisis had passed and Jose's handsome grin reflected what his prevention counselors believed was Jose's newly budding belief that there existed for him a possible positive future.

By Katherine Larson

Jose, like many of the other students in the ALAS dropout prevention program, seemed to be finally internalizing a belief in his ability to control his own destiny. He seemed to be able to interpret adversities in more empowering ways, and view his missteps as setbacks but not defeats. Thus, Jose seemed willing to dare to embrace the counselor's own mantra that "failure is not an option." The counselor had seen Jose's efforts toward school requirements increase, and felt that for the first time he was nearly ready and willing to take the risk of trying to play full out.

Yet, having learned from experience that success is fragile, the counselor dialed Jose's home to check on his whereabouts with some anxiety. She would dial six other students' homes that foggy morning as part of her continuous monitoring regimen.

Educators as dream builders

Positive action requires intentions and intentions require imagining possibilities. Every accomplishment, every invention, every achievement by humankind began with imagining a possibility. One cannot feel hopeless and imagine life-affirming possibilities. One cannot feel hopeless and sidestep fears and limiting beliefs. One cannot feel hopeless and make transformational changes in one's life trajectory.

Yet, we ask — no, we require — our highest-risk students to do just that. We ask them to make transformational changes in their lives and school achievement while paying little or no attention to their ability to envision and embrace such possibilities.

School reform and dropout prevention efforts have essentially ignored or failed to understand that students must believe that success is possible in order to embrace the change required to succeed. Our minimal success in increasing graduation rates of high-risk students reflects our narrow emphasis on WHAT we do in schools instead of HOW we do it and WHO we are. Unfortunately, we have overlooked the connection between changing student test scores and changing their hearts and minds.

From the outset, the ALAS intervention counselor knew her job was to help Jose change his thinking patterns and outlook

on life to reflect optimism and a belief in his own abilities. She understood that her leadership for Jose's personal transformation would be a reflection of her own practice in living her dreams and desires! To help Jose, the counselor realized she had to know the way, go the way and show the way of personal development, setting aside fears and replacing limiting beliefs.

To help students build dreams, the ALAS program assumes that motivation, engagement and achievement grow out of a student's optimistic and empowered belief in his or her own future. This requires that the highest-risk students begin to imagine

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and internalize possibilities for themselves that are different from what they and even others around them might be living. Thus, ALAS is a comprehensive intervention that works to reach the hearts of students as well as to instill new behavior patterns and build support within their contexts of influence: their family, school and community.

Who benefits from a program like ALAS?

ALAS addresses the needs of students who manifest the least motivation, the poorest academic skills, and the greatest need for teacher supervision. The students in ALAS were primarily Latino, but the author and colleagues have since used the strategies with highest-risk students from various cultural and racial backgrounds. ALAS is geared toward students who can be considered comprehensively at-risk because they are at risk not only for school failure but also at risk for delinquency, substance abuse, mental health problems and early teen parenting.

Two-thirds of students in ALAS scored below the 25th percentile on California state tests, while the other third scored below the 50th percentile rank. Ninety percent of ALAS students participated in the federal school lunch program; 50 percent spoke Spanish as a first language, 60 percent of their parents did not graduate from high

school and 66 percent were boys. Additionally, most of the ALAS students exhibited poor school adjustment in overt behavior such as lack of productivity, withdrawal, depression, truancy, verbal abuse, physical fighting, pranksterism, failure to follow instructions, chronic rule-breaking and vandalism.

Importantly, this comprehensively at-risk group of students does not represent a small minority of students, but appears to represent 30 to 40 percent of the high-risk student population. Despite their substantial numbers, these are the students found to be the least positively affected by general

school reform and helped the least by traditional dropout prevention programs.

What is the ALAS program?

In a simplified description, there are four components to the ALAS program, and all involve partnership:

1. The adolescent component focuses on social and emotional cognitive training, including training in optimistic thinking, student recognition and affirmation, and active enhancement of a student's sense of school affiliation.
2. The school component includes frequent and continuous teacher feedback to students and parents (Jose's daily report) as well as intensive attendance and classwork monitoring.
3. The family component includes use of community resources and training for parents in school participation as well as in guiding and monitoring an adolescent.
4. The community component focuses on enhancing collaboration among community agencies providing youth and family services, as well as enhancing service providers' skills and methods for serving youths and families.

ALAS believes that:

- The highest-risk student has developed a core belief of self as failure, and educators must continually work to help the student

reframe this perception and replace it with the expectation of success.

- The power of positive thinking, the energy of possibility and the healing influence of compassion must characterize student-educator interactions.

- Each student's needs are legitimate and schools must find solutions that work for each student.

- Discipline teaches, while punishment coerces and demoralizes. It is more empowering to help students focus their efforts toward what they want rather than away from what they don't want.

What are the beliefs about educators underlying the ALAS program?

ALAS believes that:

- It is necessary to accept what the student CAN do, not what one feels the student SHOULD be able to do.

- It is critical for educators to nurture a sense of well-being and continuous personal growth within themselves in order to create effective schools. Educators need to

be encouraged and supported to live their own dreams in order to teach students to live theirs.

- Ongoing gratitude for the opportunity to serve and for the successes achieved provides crucial momentum to the educator.

- Educators must hold themselves accountable for their goals for each student while holding the student accountable for specific behaviors on the path to success.

Did Jose and his ALAS peers succeed?

Yes, they did! ALAS was evaluated in a federally funded project at an urban middle school in Los Angeles and found to be significantly effective (Larson and Rumberger, 1995; Gandara et al., 1998). Two outside evaluations have also positively reviewed the methodology and results (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006; Slavin and Fashola, 1998). Both evaluations classified ALAS as a recommended program.

Participating students received the intervention program in a seventh-ninth-grade middle school in conjunction with the regu-

lar school program as long as they remained in the target school. The comparison group received only the regular school program during middle school.

In the Gandara, Larson, Mehan and Rumberger (1998) study, at the end of ninth grade ALAS students significantly outperformed the comparison group in both school enrollment and credits accrued. The comparison group received about twice as many fails as ALAS students during the ninth grade. Seventy-five percent of ALAS students were on track to graduate in four years, whereas only 44 percent of the comparison students were on track.

The new behavior patterns and achievement of many ALAS students were sustained one year after intervention support was terminated when participants transferred to the local high school, where they were expected to cope independently in a large, traditional environment (the year was 1993 and few traditional high schools offered interventions to struggling students).

At the end of the 10th grade, 86 percent of the ALAS students were still enrolled in school, compared to 69 percent of the comparison students. In terms of credits earned, although the number of students who were on track to graduate within a four-year time frame was low for both groups at the end of 10th grade, twice as many ALAS students (44 percent) were on track to graduate compared to comparison students (22 percent).

Nevertheless, these findings also tell another story. By the end of 12th grade, after intervention support had been withdrawn for three years, ALAS participants had essentially thrown in the towel. A mere 32 percent graduated from high school, not much more than 27 percent of the comparison group.

In summary, ALAS shows us that adolescence is not too late to significantly impact achievement of highest risk youth, but that these students need support throughout their secondary education.

Strategies that change behavior

A multidisciplinary action plan that prioritizes student goals and lists sub-goals leading to each goal provides a roadmap to success. A set-date for accomplishment

of each goal and identification of possible roadblocks and plans for overcoming these challenges should be clear. The action plan should list roles and actions of each stakeholder and track follow-up meetings with the flexibility to call an earlier meeting if the student is not moving forward.

Assigning each student a case manager to create a behavior plan in partnership with the student and hold him or her accountable is essential. The case manager must continuously monitor the student's attendance, class performance, homework and school behavior. Daily, weekly and monthly student-carried reports provide necessary data to prevent the student from devolving into a pattern of failure. It is effective for the case manager to create opportunities for student choice in every request they make, even if they only offer small choices within the context of telling the student what to do.

The case manager also needs to actively engineer success by prompting other adults to reinforce specific behavioral goals. If the behavior plan is not immediately successful, action needs to be taken to stop, reevaluate and change the plan so that continuous success can be achieved. The case manager and student cannot work to fix every problem at once, and should take the time to celebrate success no matter how small. Celebration builds the credibility of the program as well as buy-in, and works to build an expectation of success in the student.

Living and teaching dream-building

The methods and strategies developed by the author for helping highest-risk students create dreams and act on intentions cannot be fully explained in this space. However, it is clear to the author that educators' own confidence levels and their sense of positive possibilities can provide an essential scaffold of support for the highest risk student before the student is able to build his or her own belief in a positive possible future.

When an educator is able to convey an absolute belief in his or her own ability to help a student succeed, the student will begin to internalize that optimism. Creating and maintaining this type of professional attitude is challenging to anyone working in today's schools. Fortunately, research in both

neuro and social psychology and business offer techniques that educators can apply in order to maintain optimism and manage stress on the job (Begley, 2007; Charlesworth & Nathan, 2004; Seligman, 2006).

ALAS is only one possible model that has been empirically evaluated. Its message tells us that school administrators, policy makers and legislators are on the right track to implement adolescent programs and to utilize research-based interventions. ■

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