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EDUCATION WEEK

Schools Explore Benefits of Peer Counseling

By Evie Blad



Tony Manly, an 11th grader at the Academy for College and Career Exploration, watches while Kierra Gibson, a senior at Mergenthaler vocational-Technical Senior High School, coaxes Tristan Smith, an 11th grader at the academy, to participate in a scavenger hunt. The game was part of a Peer Group connection weekend retreat for students from the two Baltimore schools at Camp Letts in Edgewater, Md.

—Matt Roth for Education Week

When Daymar Frank was in the 9th grade, his principal knew him as a feisty troublemaker who teased her about not making enough money to afford a nice car.

“Daymar’s the reason I drive a Cadillac now,” joked Quinhon Goodlowe, the principal of the Academy for College and Career Exploration in Baltimore.

So Ms. Goodlowe was a bit resistant when, at the end of his 10th grade year, Mr. Frank’s teachers recommended that the school train him as a peer mentor. But, two years later, the same tenacity that made the lanky teen talk back to adults his freshman year has made him a strong leader to his fellow students, she says.

Along with another senior, Mr. Frank leads a group of a dozen 9th graders in a program called Peer Group Connection, which is designed to aid in the transition to high school. Because he’s assertive and aware of

his past mistakes, Mr. Frank isn't afraid to ask group members about their grades or why they weren't in class that day, he said. Every 9th grader in the school participates in Peer Group Connection. Some groups are led by students who are perhaps more predictable leaders, like student council members; others are led by students who are often overlooked for leadership roles.

Schools in Baltimore, New York City, New Jersey, and North Carolina have used the program—created by the Princeton, NJ-based **Center for Supportive Schools**—to boost attendance, academic persistence, and graduation rates.

At a time when schools are increasingly recognizing the **important role social and emotional factors can play in academic success**, leaders are wasting a valuable resource if they don't enlist energetic students to help their peers, said Daniel F. Oscar, the president and chief executive officer of the Center for Supportive Schools.

“It becomes a very positive feedback loop where, by the act of helping the school out, that older student is in fact deepening his or her own education,” Mr. Oscar said. “Leadership is increasingly something that we don't only expect from the person who has the top title in an organization. It's something we expect from everyone.”

A study by researchers at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ published in the *Journal of Educational Research* found that Peer Group Connection **had notable success raising graduation rates** for Latino males.

Promising Signs

In a randomized control study, researchers tracked four-year graduation rates for 268 participating students at a high-poverty, mid-Atlantic, urban high school that is not named in the study. Of the program's participants, 77 percent graduated high school in four years, compared with 68 percent of their nonparticipating peers. Latino males in the experimental group had an 81 percent graduation rate, compared to 63 percent in the control group.

Peer Group Connection is more successful than some other peer-mentoring efforts because it is integrated into the school day, incorporates several meetings with students' families to reinforce lessons and supports, and requires buy-in from principals and teachers before a school implements the program, the researchers wrote.

The program employs a “train the trainer” model under which juniors and seniors complete a yearlong, credit-bearing leadership course where they practice group exercises and discussions. Older students also meet once a week with younger students to complete the exercises they practiced in class.

The class is led by teachers who received extensive training on the program, primarily through an 11-day course and a retreat with Center for Supportive Schools' staff.

That training helps prepare teachers for a level of honesty they might not typically experience with students, said Sherry Barr, the vice president of the organization.



DeMetris Henry, an 11th grader from the academy, searches for items on his scavenger hunt list during the retreat.

—Matt Roth for Education Week

“When they go through it themselves and experience what it means to them to break down some of those barriers, that’s a very powerful experience,” Ms. Barr said. “They sort of leave transformed in the sense that they really want to have that experience with their students.”

As those teachers work with peer mentors in training, those discussions—often centered on experiences that can form hurdles for school completion and persistence—can be emotional.

On an April afternoon in Baltimore, peer leaders at the Academy for College and Career Exploration practiced how they would react to various text messages from peers, including nude photos and an angry message from a friend. Would they forward the photos to others? Would they respond to anger with anger?

“Keep it real,” teacher Candice Boone told senior Jada Davis, urging her to avoid simply telling adults in the room what she thought they’d want to hear about how she would respond to the hypothetical angry text message.

“You know I am,” Ms. Davis said, admitting that she “most likely would be going back and forth” with her friend if she got such a message.

Students also discussed the way girls are bullied and teased if they send a nude photo to a boyfriend, only to have it circulating on social media the next day. It’s a side of students teachers don’t always see, Ms. Boone said.

“Children have back stories,” she said. “We know this as teachers, but I don’t think we always fully digest this.” Recently, Baltimore City Schools’ administrators visited the Academy for College and Career Exploration to observe a peer-group conversation. They were looking to see if the program could be successful in other schools.

A Useful Tool

In the 85,000-student district, about 20,000 students have missed more than a month of school, a problem that may be remedied in part through strong in-school supports, said Beshon Trusty-Smith, director of the office of attendance and truancy.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism & School Engagement used Peer Group Connection **as part of its multi-pronged effort to combat chronic truancy**. Those efforts also included “rapid responses” to every absence, usually a phone call home, to show students school leaders were paying attention; providing gift cards to places like Starbucks as incentives for improved attendance; and a citywide awareness campaign that included advertisements and wake-up calls recorded by celebrities.

Researchers from the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University, who tracked the effects of the efforts between 2010 and 2013, found that students who were mentored through Peer Group Connection or through separate programs run by teachers and community members showed the greatest attendance gains. Chronically absent students, at a high risk for dropping out, were 52 percent more likely to remain in school the following year than equivalent comparison students who did not receive mentors, researchers found.

Researchers further reported that peer mentors were as effective at combating poor attendance as their adult peers.

Participating Baltimore schools have recognized peer leaders’ ability to lift attendance levels, said Ms. Goodlowe. At the Academy for College and Career Exploration, peer leaders check in with their 9th grade students after repeated absences, direct them to after-school programs if they are struggling with their grades, and even send them to the office if they are being disruptive during group sessions.

“They are empowered to do what they need to do to get the results they need,” Ms. Goodlowe said.

The Center for Supportive Schools hopes to do further research about the program’s effectiveness. The organization has applied for several federal research grants, including an Investing in Innovation grant, which would allow it to study multiple academic effects in racial and ethnic groups across nine New York City schools and several rural communities in North Carolina.

Ms. Goodlowe said she’s seen the effects of the program firsthand, both on 9th grade participants and on older students, who often surprise her by maturing as they fill leadership roles.

“Students will rise to the challenge as long as you set it before them,” she said.

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