Helping Urban Schools High Schools Help Themselves

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This project shows how a university and a failing urban high school collaborated to find resources within the school’s structure to provide tutoring services for their at-risk students by utilizing students in their own Future Teachers of America club. This high school faced a problem of finding ways to improve the academic achievement of large numbers of at-risk students, many of whom are reading on Level 1 or 2, without receiving adequate support from parents, businesses, and other community members. Collaboration between the high school and university created a model tutoring program that provides a win-win solution for all participants.

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Schools in the oldest sections of large cities experience the effects of poverty that impacts many in the surrounding community. Poverty marginalizes populations and makes many in the community vulnerable to myriad morbidities - drugs, physical and psychological abuse, crime, destructive environments, and individuals without the ability to earn a living wage. Research shows that poverty also can negatively affect physical, psychological, and mental growth, cognitive reasoning, and academic achievement as well as create or exacerbate health and behavioral problems (Kirylo, 2006; Payne, 2001). Urban students have more than double the chance of living in poverty as students in the suburbs; students in urban schools generally perform below the national reading and math
averages of their suburban peers and are at greater risk of school failure (Education Commission of the States, 2003).

Currently, more than 40% of all non-white students in America are enrolled in urban schools, and more than 30% of all students from low-income homes are educated in these same schools (Education Commission of the States, 2003); in many metropolitan areas, the numbers of non-white student populations in public schools can now exceed 80%. Projections for the composition of America’s population show a continuing increase in the non-white segment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). The implications of these statistics do not bode well for the future of America as a superpower, with a major proportion of its future workers being prepared in urban schools where there is a higher propensity for school failure. In general, urban schools, particularly secondary schools, experience problems getting parents, as well as businesses in the community, to become involved in school activities; yet, these schools are held accountable by law to produce students who are able to pass the state’s competency tests in the different content areas.

Parental involvement has been shown to be critical to student success (Manning & Lee, 2001). Yet, many schools on the secondary level in these communities, in particular, experience lower parent involvement. Often, due to higher rates of poverty in urban communities, families have fewer resources and less time to spend with their children, especially when they are older. Moreover, some parents express feelings of helplessness in assisting their children; this is particularly true of parents who are immigrants and unable to speak English. However, even American-born parents frequently experience difficulty with the advanced concepts and skills needed to help
their children succeed in the content-rich high school curriculum. In addition, parents from many cultures have not been accustomed to the active parental participation in school activities that is a standard of American education; in their native lands, education is the purview of religious orders or state-run systems that prefer little parental involvement (Manning & Lee).

Environments found in these urban cores are not conducive to attracting large corporations with foundational funding. Most of the businesses in these areas are small service industries that provide for the families in the immediate community. These small businesses have neither the funds nor the time available to devote to helping the schools in their communities.

Federal laws, such as No Child Left Behind (2002), and the high stakes testing created by many states have resulted in increased accountability and system-wide ratings of school achievement efforts. In Miami-Dade county, a school rating of “F” from the state of Florida is determined by the large percentage of the students in the school who have been unsuccessful in passing the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) in reading, math, and writing as well as Science as of 2007; these schools, all located in the centralized urban core of the city of Miami, have been designated as ‘zone schools’. These schools draw their students from communities where there are large concentrations of recent immigrant populations, many of whom are not only poor but ill-prepared to deal with the challenges found in urban America. Many of the students in these ‘zoned schools’ are English Language Learners (ELL) and/or read at a level one or two; these at-risk students need intensive remediation to successfully pass the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). To help schools plan for this remediation, ‘zoned schools’ are
required to structure a longer school day by adding an additional period (8th) to the class schedule.

Problem

Faced with limited outside assistance from parents and the immediate business community, yet impacted by the legal mandates of accountability, schools that service these urban communities need to investigate more diverse avenues to find resources within their structures that are cost effective and provide win/win solutions for all concerned participants. This article will describe an innovative model program developed by a ‘zoned’ high school in Miami and a university in their community. It demonstrates one of the ways that urban schools can build on existing structures within their schools to find resources to provide tutoring services for their at-risk population, using one of the student clubs within the school – The Future Teachers of America – and the professional development partnership (PDS) that exists between the school and the university.

Initially the ‘zoned’ high school petitioned this university in their community for help in finding college students to coach at-risk students to help raise their FCAT scores. However, there were no college students available as most of the students have jobs to offset the financial burden of obtaining a college degree. Several of the professors, upon hearing of the request by their PDS school, volunteered time each week to tutor the students in reading, with the support of the school’s reading coordinators who provided both the curriculum to be used and arranged for which groups of at-risk students attended. It soon became evident, however, that there was still a need for more tutoring support than the university could provide. These circumstances led to the creation of a peer tutoring model using students in The Future Teachers of America (FTA) club.
Benefits of Peer Tutoring While there are many permutations of peer tutoring, it has been essentially defined as “any approach in which one child instructs another in material on which the first is an expert and the second is a novice” (Damon & Phelps, 1989, p.11). Peer tutoring has long been recognized in the literature as a highly effective strategy to increase benefits not only to the at-risk student, but also to the student tutor. The benefits of peer tutoring extend to all involved students as it provides opportunities: to model and practice appropriate social skills, to build rapport and develop cross-cultural understanding, and to enhance self-esteem for all participants. Peer tutoring creates a supportive environment that is less threatening than that of the classroom and where the pace of the activity can be better adapted to the needs of each individual (Benard, 1990; Garcia-Vazquez & Ehly, 1995; Kalowski, 2001).

Theory and Peer Tutoring The professors used the research of Vygotsky in providing tutoring techniques to the FTA students. Vygotsky’s concepts of the ‘zone of proximal development’ and scaffolding were introduced to the FTA students. The ‘zone of proximal development’ includes all competencies and activities that learners can perform only with the assistance of a more knowledgeable individual. The person who intervenes in the scaffolding process could be an adult (parent, teacher, caretaker, language instructor) or a peer, FTA student, who has already mastered the skill to be taught (Snowman & Biehler, 2006).

Elements of a Peer Tutoring Model

Clearly Outlined Staff Responsibilities. Implementation of a successful peer tutoring model requires cooperation and collaboration of both the professionals on staff and those on the university level. Outlined below are the types of personnel who were
actively involved, and how each contributed to the successful implementation of the model program.

Administrators. Administrative personnel are needed to build staff and community support for the peer tutoring program; they must find resources, such as rooms, materials, and personnel, within the existing structure to support this program. Critical to this peer tutoring model was the agreement of the school’s administrators to provide scheduling support by using the extra 8th period for peer tutoring and to allow tutors to use their participation in the peer tutoring program as part of the 50 community hours required for each student for high school graduation.

Teachers. Teachers on staff volunteered to facilitate the process by allowing students involved in the FTA club to tutor their at-risk students during the 8th period one or two days a week, depending on the tutor’s scheduling requirements. Teachers provided materials, engaged in general training, acted as models of what teaching entails, and provided opportunities for the tutors who had expressed a desire to choose teaching as a career. A key teacher in the development of this model was the coordinator of the FTA club; this teacher was instrumental in introducing, planning, and facilitating the club’s students in the peer tutoring process during the club’s scheduled meeting times. Further, she was the immediate contact for the parents of the students in the club and assuaged their concerns by showing the opportunities for hands-on experiences that tutoring provided for their children. She obtained permission from each of the club’s students and their parents to engage in the peer tutoring program. In addition, in conjunction with professors from the university, she wrote several grants requesting funds to provide
traveling monies for the club’s students to view various college campuses in southeast Florida.

FTA Students. Students in this club, with career goals of becoming teachers, tend to do well in school and generally have successfully completed all the milestones required for their grade levels. These students were enthusiastic about providing tutoring to at-risk students; many of them have friends who are unable to pass the FCAT and they are aware of the implications of not acquiring a high school diploma in today’s global economy. Some expressed curiosity while others expressed concern about their abilities to implement teaching strategies; after the initial period of contact, students gained confidence in their abilities to effect academic change in their tutees. Most expressed a satisfaction with teaching but also expressed a growing awareness of how difficult teaching could be.

University Professors. Several professors at the university provided training support for students in FTA involved in the peer tutoring project. In addition, they offered to evaluate the effectiveness of the program at the end of the year. Pre- and post-FCAT scores in reading of at-risk students involved in the peer tutoring program will be compared to see if there is a significant difference.

Training of Tutors. Both the teacher coordinator of the FTA club and the university professors collaborated on the training of the tutors. There are certain core tenets of all successful peer tutoring programs that were incorporated into the training of the FTA students: thorough training, limited tutoring activities that supplement teacher instructions, and student mastery of the skills needed. These skills include providing proper behavioral expectations for tutors, practicing giving positive praise to tutees, and
understanding how to use the two reading strategies of paired reading and ‘listening while reading’ that increases tutee fluency. Research notes that both of these strategies increase reading fluency because they provide rehearsal techniques with corrective feedback. The National Reading Panel (2000) reported that … “these practices that encourage repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance leads to meaningful improvements in reading expertise for students – for good readers as well as those who are experiencing difficulties” (p.3). Teachers that provide modeling for the tutors in their classrooms also monitor that tutors continue to provide the prescribed tutoring format (Thomas, 1993; Wright, 2004).

Win-Win Outcomes for All Participants

The peer tutoring program is one of the ways that schools in urban areas can address their needs for more individualized instruction to help raise the reading scores of their at-risk students. In utilizing entities that were available within the structure of the school, this program provides win-win situations for their at-risk students, the FTA students, the teachers, parents, and the university.

At-Risk Students. Students who have difficulties in reading receive additional time to practice rehearsal strategies that increase fluency which is known to increase reading scores. The greater their reading increase, the greater their increase in self-esteem. In addition, they have opportunities to ask questions of the tutors who also provide the tutees with role models of effective readers. A concomitant benefit of this peer tutoring model is it provides time for all students to interact with other cultures.

FTA students. Students enrolled in the Future Teachers of America club are given hands-on experiences to investigate their desired future career choice - teaching. In
addition, tutors are credited with time earned toward completion of the 50 hours of community service required for graduation. From the FTA coordinator and university professors, students in the club also receive information on possible immediate future job opportunities that are available on their career path (e.g. school aides, paraprofessionals) that can help them to defray their college costs.

*Teachers.* Volunteer teachers have the opportunity to help their profession by mentoring future teachers. They also serve their profession by acting as role models and advisors to their assigned tutors. In addition, they gain extra instructional support in their 8th period classrooms as the presence of the tutors allows teachers to provide greater differentiation of the lessons.

*Parents.* Both the parents of the at-risk students and the parents of the FTA students appreciate the peer tutoring program. The parents of at-risk students are supportive of their children receiving additional tutoring; it is their hope that their children will be able to pass the high stakes tests required to get a diploma. Parents of students in the FTA club are supportive of the peer tutoring program because their children are receiving training for their future teaching careers. They are also appreciative that the administration is allowing their children to complete their 50 required hours for graduation by tutoring in the school.

*University Professors.* The professors are supportive of the peer tutoring program as it presents them with opportunities to provide service to the community, and allows them to fulfill the university’s mission as well as its commitment to one of their PDS schools. The professors are also mentors to these future teachers and provide training and support for the peer tutors. Also, the professors are able to fulfill their recency of
experience requirements while developing research and evaluation opportunities. Additionally, they will conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of this program model by assessing the satisfaction of all stakeholders with the program as well as its efficacy in raising the academic achievement of the at-risk participants.

Summary

This peer tutoring model resulted from the collaborative efforts between a failing urban high school in Miami designated as a PDS school and its university in the community. Together, they developed a program model that offers this urban high school the opportunity to provide tutors from within their own school population to help their at-risk students become more academically successful. It has created a win-win situation for all who are involved and it provides an innovative answer to providing more support for their at-risk students. It is a program that could be replicated in any urban high school that is facing similar challenges.
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