

Chapter 5

Implementing the Student Assistance Center

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As a nation, in all aspects of society, the significant rise in violence has been at the forefront of the many issues facing our country. Schools, as a microcosm of society, have not been immune to this increase in violence and disruptive behavior that has interfered with the academic mission of our public institutions. Violence in our schools is undeniably one of the most challenging issues facing educators today.

In response to the increase in disruptive behavior, school districts have instituted get tough policies and a no-tolerance attitude toward acts of violence, weapons, and drugs. These punitive measures are necessary for the safety and well-being of the general student body and faculty. The National Education Goals 2000 mandates that all schools will be drug and violence free and will maintain an environment that is disciplined and conducive to learning (Caudle, 1994). Along with a strict code of conduct, districts must also establish pro-active programs that will both educate and provide positive alternatives for children.

In 1992, with significant increases in acts of violence, gang activity, weapons, drugs and other anti-social behaviors, the school found suspensions and expulsions skyrocketing. Although a number of programs were in place, they needed to be brought together and coordinated to better serve the student population. East Hartford High School in East Hartford, Connecticut, has established a zero tolerance policy by instituting strict rules and regulations that are backed by a comprehensive Board of Education policy. The philosophy at East Hartford High School is to look at prevention first and consequences second. An outgrowth of this philosophical position was the creation of the Student Assistance Center (S.A.C.).

The School

East Hartford High School is a culturally diverse urban school. The student population is in excess of 1,600 children of which 52% are students of color and 48% white. Students originate from over 70 different countries, and approximately 40 different languages are spoken at the school. The school truly represents a unique cultural mix that affords tremendous opportunity while at the same time presenting numerous challenges to both teachers and administrators.

The Problem

The emergence of gangs, increases in violence, drug use/abuse and tension among ethnic groups are all significant issues. In addition, an overloaded guidance staff, limited social work services and budgeting restraints all contribute to magnifying the problem.

The Goal

The goal is to establish a comprehensive program that will address these many negative issues facing the school. But it is a cooperative effort, Gary Heller stresses, that facilitates success:

Well disciplined schools are familiar with and use the resources of other organizations. The local police departments, court systems, child welfare organizations, and job placement agencies can also provide schools with additional intervention strategies and resources that can be brought to bear on the needs of students and their families. (Heller, 1996)

The combined use of resources provides a means for bringing a number of services, departments and agencies under one heading. This requires the joint efforts of the school, community, social service organizations, and area universities.

Documentation, kept from the inception of the program, tracks disruptive behavior and incidents of suspension and/or expulsion to determine the impact of the S.A.C. as one variable contributing to the reduction of such incidents.

The Program

After working closely with the police, adult and juvenile probation, youth services, local drug and alcohol agencies, and city officials, five areas were targeted for the program: (a) discipline, (b) drug/alcohol use and abuse, (c) poor academic performance (d) truancy, and (e) violence.

A director of the S.A.C. was appointed to oversee the center and to oversee the implementation of the program to address the needs.

Conflict Resolution/Mediation

Johnson & Johnson (1996) stresses the current impact of conflict in our schools:

Conflicts will not go away. Students are clearly fascinated by and drawn to conflicts, they like to start them, watch them, hear about them, and discuss them. In order to make schools orderly and peaceful places in which high quality education can take place, conflicts must be managed constructively without physical or verbal violence. (p. 11)

One component of the East Hartford High School S.A.C. is a mediation/conflict resolution program. Mediation is described by Nancy L. Kaplan (1996) as follows: "Mediation training conveys the concept that each peer is responsible for resolving disputes in a rational, peaceful manner" (p. 8).

Through three venues, East Hartford High School provides mediation for *peers*, *adults* and the *individual*.

Peer mediation involves student intervention in helping resolve conflicts with other students. The process requires that students apply to become peer mediators. Selection is based on a cross-section of the school's population. Kaplan (1996) suggests that mediators should include students with anger management problems, shy students, learning-disabled students, bright and bossy students, as well as students who are good listeners and natural problem solvers. East Hartford High School has expanded that criteria to include a balance of mediators representing different ethnic groups and grade levels. Each year both students and S.A.C. staff train new mediators. Students participate in an extensive three day training program that focuses on the teaching of conflict resolution skills. With peer mediation in place from grades 4 - 12 in the district, there is a constant flow of trained students. Some participate in refresher programs while others complete a full training program.

Students who are in conflict (depending on the circumstances) have the opportunity to select peer mediators to resolve their differences. Both parties must agree to this method of mediation. Next, three trained mediators will hear the dispute. The task of the mediator is to arrive at a peaceful resolution to the issue. Once accomplished, a written contract is prepared and signed by all parties.

During every mediation, an adult member of the S.A.C. is present in the room to take notes and guard against violence. The staff member does not speak or provide any input into the decision. After the mediation, the peer mediators and staff members review and critique the process. Mediation training is a pro-active means of helping children learn positive life skills (Kaplan, 1996).

On occasion, due to the nature of the dispute and/or the unwillingness of the feuding parties, *adult mediators* are required. As in peer mediation, a contract is completed which both sides sign. Adult mediators include certified staff, interns, police, counselors, and community personnel.

S.A.C. staff have found that *self-mediation* is the most effective means of resolving conflict. Self-mediation involves having the youth in conflict meeting on their own and reaching agreement. In such situations, students will use a mediation room in the S.A.C., and staff is available should the need arise. Experience has shown that self-mediation is the longest lasting and requires the fewest follow-up interventions.

Student Assistance Team (S.A.T.)

Another component of the S.A.C. is the Student Assistance Team (S.A.T.). The S.A.T. consists of approximately 30 teachers who forego their planning period to assist

students. Children are referred to the S.A.T. through the S.A.C. by any staff member, fellow student, or parent—for any reason—through the use of an in-take form. Upon completion, this form is then dropped off in one of the special boxes labeled as such and located throughout the building. Forms are reviewed on a daily basis. The S.A.C. staff then assigns a student referral to one of the S.A.T. teachers. That teacher then meets with the individual and evaluates the student's problem. Often the issue can be resolved by a brief meeting with the teacher and child. Some cases, however, require the teacher to make a referral depending on the situation to a more specialized professional (i.e., social worker, counselor, administrator). The S.A.T. teacher then completes a form, which is kept on file to establish a record of the action taken, and also fills out an "update form" that is given to the referring party.

Student Assistance Team teachers receive training prior to entering the program and are provided additional large and small group training throughout the school year.

Alcohol and Drug Counseling

Alcohol and drug counseling services are provided as a component of the S.A.C. As part of the "Drug Free Schools Grant," funding is available for a drug and alcohol counselor two days per week. The remaining three days each week are covered by a university intern.

East Hartford High School is the only public school in Connecticut that holds weekly A.A. and C.O.A. meetings. Other services include "insight groups" for at-risk students and drug and alcohol programs for students who are returning from suspension for related drug and/or alcohol involvement. In addition, a smoking cessation program is also available to students who are interested in quitting. These services often come from referrals forwarded to the S.A.T.

Probation

The S.A.C., working cooperatively with state and county agencies, has established a program with the local adult and juvenile probation departments. Probation officers meet regularly in the school with students on their case load and their respective assistant principals. This set-up provides for streamlined communication between the officer and school to better monitor and meet the child's needs. The child quickly realizes that the two agencies are working together. *The sharing of information and general cooperation has contributed to a reduction in repeat offenders.*

Police Outreach

Through a cooperative grant, the East Hartford Police Department and the school district began a police outreach program that focuses on community policing and, in turn, creates opportunities for police officers to work in the schools on a regular basis. Ten police officers are funded as part of the grant, each assigned to a different neighborhood in the community and then assigned to the schools in that neighborhood.

In the lower grades the officers teach two intervention programs, D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education And Training). At the high school, they assist in mediations, teach or provide valuable information to the various insight groups, lecture in classes and assist with the security/supervision of the building.

As a result of this program, the police are seen in a very positive light. The familiarity they have established and the relationships they have built with students, parents and faculty have resulted in a notable decrease in arrests.

Cultural Enrichment

One of the objectives of the S.A.C. is to reduce tensions among the many ethnic groups that are represented at the school. A pro-active component of the S.A.C. that addresses this area is the multi-cultural enrichment program. Students are randomly selected in groups of 25 by the S.A.C. staff to participate in a variety of cultural programs. Opportunities include both in-house and off campus experiences in cooperation with area colleges/universities and agencies. The program takes many forms, including speakers, presentations, panel discussions and informal small group sessions. The cultural theme of each of these activities is to gain a greater understanding and acceptance of different cultures and beliefs. In East Hartford, this has included visitation to the Asian, Hispanic and African Centers at the University of Connecticut and panel discussions on racism, sexism and homosexuality.

Career Beginnings

The Career Beginnings program is designed to encourage at-risk children who have the potential to qualify for a college program, but lack the parental or financial support. The S.A.C. staff, in conjunction with the Guidance Department, identifies potential candidates for the Career Beginnings program. Selected students become part of a consortium of high school children from area schools. Each student is paired with a mentor. Both the mentor and child attend monthly workshops during the student's junior and senior years. The workshops focus on topics relating to the college preparation process. Five area colleges participate in the program and each month the workshops are held on a different college campus.

S.A.C. Staffing

The S.A.C. is coordinated by one full-time director whose salary is funded by the Board of Education. The responsibility of the director is the day to day functioning of the center, along with data collection, staffing, program planning, and long range development. The director reports to the high school principal.

In addition to the director, the S.A.C. is staffed by:

- 30 certified teachers who give up their planning/conference period to maintain the Student Assistance Team (S.A.T).

- One full-time and one part-time intern from the University of Connecticut. These are graduate students fulfilling program requirements for their graduate work.
- One certified drug and alcohol counselor two days per week who is funded through the monies from the Drug Free Schools Grant. In addition, a graduate intern works in the center three days per week.
- Approximately 40 trained student mediators, who work in groups of threes, when peer mediations are used to resolve conflicts.

S.A.C. Funding

The Board of Education supplies funding for the director who is a certified teacher and is paid on the teachers' salary schedule. Beyond the director's salary, the district provides \$3,000.00 per diem for office supplies and incidentals. Office space and equipment are also provided by the district.

The drug and alcohol counselor is funded through the Drug Free Schools Grant. The remainder of the funding for the S.A.C., approximately \$20,000.00, is secured through a variety of local and state grants. When calculated on a per pupil expenditure, the S.A.C. is a very cost effective program to operate.

Results

Since its inception, the S.A.C. has contributed to an overall 45% reduction in student suspensions and a 700% reduction in student expulsions. These are dramatic statistics when one considers that the district has adopted a stricter code of discipline, and the student body continues to come from increasingly socio-economically deprived households. In addition to decreasing the incidents of violence and other educationally disruptive acts, the center has assisted in improving student performance and the academic climate in the high school. The many students who have reaped the benefits of the S.A.C. report feeling a greater connection with the high school, have improved peer acceptance and enhanced self-esteem. Trust was focused on by one high school junior: "It's nice to have someone you can trust. I've been in counseling since I was in like second grade, and I just started to open up in this group a few years ago." Another saw decided improvements in her anger management skills saying, she is less likely to let her anger control her because of what she has learned in the S.A.C.: "I wouldn't want to fight in school, it would take a lot to get me to fight." Similarly, the center helps local police officers in their interaction with troubled youth. One local police officer said: "If they didn't come here, we'd be getting involved in the streets or in the halls."

On a broader scale, the number of local, state and national inquiries in our Student Assistance Center is a testament to the growing concern in the many volatile issues our schools face and the pressing need to address them. Over 200 different school districts have requested information about the center and 75 districts have sent teams of

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administrators and teachers to visit the center. In addition, the S.A.C. has produced its own video on conflict resolution which has been forwarded to over 50 school districts across the country and Canada. The S.A.C. staff has put on workshops for numerous state and regional agencies. In April of 1995, *USA Today* recognized the East Hartford High School Student Assistance Center with a national award as an exemplary program for combining school and community to solve educational issues facing youth.

Much of the program's success may be attributed to its ability to identify student problems quickly and to construct programs to meet those needs. Programs are adapted constantly based on the on-going analysis of data which is collected biannually. Through data analysis, trends are identified then programs and objectives are adjusted. Success is hinged on the cooperative spirit among the school, community, and numerous outside agencies. This synergy cannot be over-emphasized when assessing those facts that have contributed to the undeniable impact of the S.A.C. and the hope that it holds in controlling the escalation of school violence issues. ■

References

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