

NYSCSS

New York State Center for School Safety

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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The “Come on Back” Program

A program designed to bring students with high absentee rates back to school with a focus on improving their attendance, grades and behavior.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

“Educators across the Nation concur that if students attend school regularly, they will have a much better chance of staying in school, passing their tests and increasing their positive behavior”; (National Dropout Prevention Center, College of Health, Education and Human Development, Clemson University, South Carolina, 2002).

In the Fall of 2003, a group of Proctor High School Principals and Guidance Counselors met with our organization, Youth and Family Connections, to brainstorm strategies for students who are out of school more than 60% of the time and were at high risk of dropping out of school. The majority of these high-risk students were failing most of their subjects, had poor attitudes and low self-esteem. They were often disruptive when they did come to school.

To address this problem, the Youth and Family Connections, a Division of the Business Training Institute Inc, partnered with students and school staff to develop an Extended School Day (ESD) Program called “*Come On Back*”. This after school ESD program was pilot tested from December 2003 through June 2004.

The overarching goal of “*Come On Back*” is to motivate targeted high-risk students to come back to school, improve their performance and rekindle their interest in learning.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY

The Youth and Family Connections staff began to develop this specific ESD Model by engaging target students, their teachers and counselors to find out what would bring high-risk students back to school. This model for planning and data collection was based upon a system approach that commenced with ideas and suggestions that were incorporated into the initial “*Come On Back*” Program.

The “*Come On Back*” Program focuses on three basic extended school day areas: academics, enrichment and recreational activities. “*Come On Back*” is built upon the

Principles of Effectiveness, New York State Learning Standards and the Utica City School District’s Safe School Plan.

The core competencies helped participants build new skills and fostered a sense of connectedness to school. This program increased the participants’ individual assets and self-efficacy.

The program offered activities four evenings a week. A full time coordinator implemented the activities with support from Dr. Laino and staff.

The major goals of the “*Come On Back*” Program were:

- To enroll high risk students who were out of school over 60% of the time,
- Implement a series of after school academic, youth enrichment and recreational activities, with at least 90% attendance during the day and
- Produce measurable positive outcomes including increased attendance, test scores and positive behavior in at least 90% of the high-risk participants.

STUDENT SELECTION PROCESS:

A team comprised of Proctor School Administrators, Teachers, and School Counselors selected the high-risk *Come On Back* Students.

Initially, fifteen high-risk students were recruited to participate in this new program. An additional fifteen “students-of-excellence” were selected to become peer partners to help mentor, tutor, and coach and befriend participating students. At the start of this pilot program, all students signed a *Come On Back* contract outlining goals, objectives, anticipated outcomes and expectations for participation in the program.

Rules for Participation

- If you do not go to school during the day, then you cannot participate in the after school “*Come On Back*” Program,
- At the completion of each five week block of school, you will receive a \$25 stipend, if you have no unexcused

absents,

- Students of excellence will also receive a stipend and
- You will be allowed to join any after school enrichment and recreational program of your choice after you complete your homework and career exploration activities. Other options are the Research and Entrepreneur Club memberships.

The high-risk students were paired with a student-of-excellence and both agreed upon this match. The program contents were intentionally made to be flexible and fun, with a great deal of youth enrichment added. This after school program is comprised of one hour of tutoring and mentoring, one hour of some type of youth enrichment and one hour of recreational activities.

The *Come On Back* Program was implemented with a focus on:

ACADEMICS

Every evening involved recording attendance, providing a nutritional snack, and allowing structured partner meeting time for homework assistance and / or mentoring.

ENRICHMENT

- From the onset of this program, as a group, students discussed their life and career plans and where they saw themselves in the future. Careers and life expectations were explored and discussed in both individual and group sessions.
- All students worked in pairs to develop their own individualized Career Portfolio, selecting at least two careers that they would like to pursue in the future.
- It was decided that next year, additional time would be dedicated for students to develop a brief Research Paper on one of their career choices and some service learning projects.

RECREATIONAL

Each evening, students had the opportunity to go to another after school recreational program that was operating or join the Research or Entrepreneur Clubs that included exploring new, exciting and innovative ideas in a group setting.

Anticipated Outcomes:

Increased attendance, test scores and positive behavior
Promoting and achieving harmony and diversity
Rekindling an interest in learning and school
Exploring life and career paths

2003-2004 Findings:

Student and Parent Surveys served as the basis for feedback regarding programming. Data revealed the following:

- This program was modified by the third week when the students of excellence stated that they could effectively work with two or three high-risk students, thereby opening spaces for additional high-risk students to join the program. This concept was presented to all stakeholders and was accepted and immediately implemented. An additional 13 high-risk students were

added in Week Three, increasing the total to twenty-eight.

- Classroom Teacher inquiries revealed that 93% of the high-risk students demonstrated positive changes in academics, attendance and behavior.
- *Come On Back* students were encouraged to work to earn money to go on a field trip to the Metropolitan Museum in New York City at the end of the school year. All students participated in car washes, cooked lunches that teachers paid for and took turns working in the school store.
- 100 % of the Parent Surveys were returned and indicated social and academic benefits with positive changes.
- 100% of the *Come On Back* parents rated this program very effective and would recommend this program to other parents.
- The *Come On Back* parents and teachers continuously stated that these students were very happy, enjoying school and all had become team players. Staff reported that students were less than eager to leave at the end of each day perhaps indicating a greater attachment to school.

Specific Outcomes for 28 high-risk students:

ACADEMICS

2004 English Scores

64 % improved by one grade level
22 % improved by a half grade level
* 7 % no significant change in grades
7 % remained at the A grade level

2004 Math Scores

43 % improved by one grade level
14 % improved by a half grade level
* 29 % no significant change in grades
14 % remained at the B or above grade level

****Denotes 50% high-risk students who were newcomers to this country and had multiple learning barriers.***

Additional Changes

97% of those involved in the program improved their behavior
97% of students that participated in the program-demonstrated improvement in attendance
97% of students stated that they wanted to stay in school
97% of the students surveyed indicated that they wanted to go on to higher education
97% of the students participated in volunteer and community service projects
11% of the students achieved A's in all subject areas
One student dropped out of the program. This student was immediately replaced

Unexpected Findings

There were unexpected findings that crossed all levels of the *Come on Back* Program activities. The needs of high-risk students were thought to be part of a complex system

of education, when in fact it was a matter of social acceptance, recognition, happiness and friendship. The *Come On Back* students viewed coming to school as secondary and peer-to-peer acceptance as their immediate need. Peer-to-peer and group acceptance was the high-risk students' number one priority to achieve resulting in this becoming the program's highest priority.

There were several students who achieved top-level test scores, but were unable to attend school during the day for various reasons. This led them to stay out of school and become high-risk students who could and did benefit from the *Come On Back* program.

Teachers play a vital role in raising a student's self esteem merely by knowing and using the student's name. It was also important to the majority of these high-risk students that their classroom teachers knew something about their family life, their likes and dislikes, and what they wanted to do after graduation in order for them to feel good. Being one of the decision-makers in the *Come On Back* activities gave these high-risk students "ownership," and they demonstrated visible pride. Currently, all of these students have a career concept and plan to go on to higher education.

Summary:

The *Come On Back* Program was deemed effective because:

- The targeted high-risk students, teachers and counselors identified the needs;
- Strategies were developed and implemented to address these specific needs;
- Participants were accepted by everyone and there were no more "loners";
- Everyone knew the student's "name", both in the classroom and after school;
- High-risk students were able to target one problem at a time, with the help of a support system;
- Participants experienced rewards such as monetary, acceptance, inclusion by peers, new and innovative learning experiences;
- Participants became excited about coming to school;
- High-risk students saw themselves as being part of a highly visible and worthy program;
- Peer to peer coaching, tutoring and mentoring resulted in new friends and acceptance;
- The opportunity to take a field trip to a place where they thought they could never go became a reality;
- Test scores, school attendance and positive behavior increased in over 90% of these participants.

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