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Students Create Healthier School Environment

New Approach to Youth Empowerment at Arturo Toscanini Campus

by Katherine Eckstein

"Mr. Eric," a young man calls eagerly as he is joined by three of his friends in the hall, "When are we going to see you again? Today?" Eric Camacho, a Children's Aid Youth Development Counselor, responds, "Unfortunately, not until next Wednesday." Later, Camacho says, "That's the best. I think we're really making a difference."

The youth were referring to a two-week study circles pilot project that Camacho and another CAS Youth Development Counselor, Melanie Negron, have been conducting with eight classes at New Millennium Business Academy Middle School (M.S. 328) located in the Arturo Toscanini Campus (ATC) in the Bronx. The project began in response to a conversation between school administrators and ATC Community School Director Denise Montes amid concerns about the tone and climate of the school and the role that youth could play in developing solutions.

A team from CAS thought of study circles, a method used all over the U.S. to bring stakeholders together around an issue. The approach is based on the belief that communities have the capacity to create and sustain meaningful dialogue and the ability to problem-solve challenging situations.



The leadership team at Arturo Toscanini Campus includes (from left to right): Denise Montes, Children's Aid's Community School Director; M.S. 328 Principal Melody Morgan, and two of Children's Aid's Youth Development Counselors, Eric Camacho and Melanie Negron.

Principal Melody Morgan supported the effort, believing that if youth take more ownership of their learning and feel more empowered, there would be fewer referrals, fewer suspensions and ultimately, higher student achievement.

Class leaders were introduced to the concept and taught how to facilitate study circles. The most common issues raised during study circles were: school safety, violence in the community and teacher/student relationships.

"It's hard to express how you feel in front of a lot of people. After a while, you let everything out," says Brandon Wildy,

a 7th grade student, facilitator and future scientist. Brandon also recognizes the importance of being a mentor. "A lot of the 6th graders aren't doing well. We have to step up and help them."

Amponsah Boakye, another 7th grade student/facilitator, highlighted self-confidence and resisting peer pressure. "If we have confidence in ourselves, we can change the school," Amponsah offers. Brandon adds, "It's up to us to make a change."

Already, the students, teachers and administrators at M.S. 328 notice a difference. Principal Morgan says, "Kids are thinking about the consequences of their behavior."

Ms. Sophia Collins, a 7th grade teacher who has two classes participating in the project reflects, "There was such deep insight from the kids. We often take for granted that they don't know how to express themselves and what it really means to take responsibility for learning. ... They understood. It was magical."

The youth are visibly excited about the possibility of making positive change in their school. There are discussions about expanding the project to the other two schools in the complex. "The challenge," says Director Montes, "is to make sure that this effort is sustained. CAS can help ensure sustainability." ■



Youth work together to learn and make their school a better place at Arturo Toscanini Campus.

Keeping Freshmen on Track at Manhattan Center Children's Aid Establishes Program to Prevent High School Dropouts

by Leslie Dayton



Members of Manhattan Center's Freshman Council work together to represent freshmen's concerns and promote community service.

A student's transition into high school is, in itself, a daunting experience. Factor in the size of New York City's schools and it's easy to understand why students often feel anonymous and disconnected. For students who struggle academically, the little help that may be available is often difficult to find. This is evident in the track record of New York City public high schools: only about half the students complete high school in four years, and in the city's low performing schools, fewer than 40% graduate. It is because the potential for dropping out is often foreseen during a student's first year that The Children's Aid Society designed the Freshman Seminar at Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics community high school eight years ago.

Freshman Seminar reaches all ninth grade students early in their first semester; it is an 18-week course that the school administration has made mandatory for graduation. Taught by teachers and the school's principal, Corrine Vinal, and overseen by Children's Aid's social worker, Alex McCarten, Freshman Seminar is a thoughtfully designed program that integrates academic achievement with emotional support, fostering a sense of connection for these kids so that they can access whatever services they might need both inside and outside the classroom.

Freshman Seminar is delivered through a creative, interactive curriculum that provides an orientation to the school and its many programs and services. It

covers topics such as goal-setting, communication skills, study skills, health issues and stereotypes. (An additional layer of support for freshmen is their ability to participate in the school's comprehensive after-school program, led by Children's Aid's Community School Director Yalenis Cruz, herself a graduate of the high school.)

Freshman Seminar sessions engage students in various activities that help them explore topics in a non-threatening way. For example, in the "Birthday Line-Up," students examine the effect of body language by putting themselves in line by their birthdays without speaking. A check-in survey assesses students for stress. During the eighth session, nominations are held for Freshman Council. The freshman group continues to meet throughout the year to organize community service projects and represent the class' interests and concerns.

Each session ends with journal-writing; students are asked to reflect on the day's topic. Teachers provide comments on each entry, but more importantly, they read the journals to detect anything that might warrant intervention and refer these students to Children's Aid's social worker. Having a social worker dedicated solely to the freshman class is key. The teachers feel supported because they have a qualified person to turn to and the students know they have a resource just for them. As the point person for struggling freshmen, our social worker helps to ensure that no student falls between the cracks.

About Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics: Located on the east side facing the FDR, Manhattan Center has an enrollment of over 1,600 students who come from all over the city; students are new to the community and to each other. Children's Aid's partnership with the school began in 1998, when CAS developed an after-school program that continues today and offers classes for credit, peer tutoring, college help, leadership opportunities, programs in the arts and Freshman Seminar. ■

Smoothing School Climate with a Non-Punitive Approach

'Balance Center' at P.S. 5 Helps Students Learn How to Adjust Behaviors

by Hersilia Méndez



Program Facilitator Nathaniel Smith works with a P.S. 5 student at the community school's balance center.

"Yesterday I did something bad, now I am with Nate because of this. So we are doing this activity that made me think a lot and I realize a lot about my self, I learned what annoys me, what angers me. I am like a super man, I live two lives, like when I am at home I am usually quiet and not talkative but in class I am like a wild animal. When I got in trouble I was like 'Oh Man I'm finished!' But after the activity I think I can improve my behavior; Nate, thanks for doing this activity with us so that we can find our true selves. Everything I learned is in my brain now... I CAN IMPROVE," writes Nicholas, 11 years old, about his experience at the P.S. 5 Balance Center.

The balance center is a non-punitive approach to behavioral issues. An intervention where students learn to explore and own their behavior, balance center may be an approach that could help improve school climate. It is used in three Children's Aid Society (CAS) elementary after-school programs, with a beneficial

impact on students. Alma Whitford, CAS Assistant Director of Community Schools, believes that this approach allows a child to remain in an after-school program despite exhibiting unwelcome behaviors. Giving these children the individualized attention they may need to workout whatever may be upsetting them, without stigma, is what the balance centers are all about.

"Kids come in and they may be agitated, a little off balance, so to speak, and we try to get them back on balance," says Nathaniel Smith, The Children's Aid Society's Program Facilitator at P.S. 5. "If they are angry, we help them identify why and help them learn to cope with that feeling without hurting someone else or themselves. It makes a difference to have a neutral place where they don't come to play or get punished, but to learn to understand their actions, and take responsibility for them."

Balance Center Key in After School

According to Carolyn Chin-Bow, P.S. 5's Community School Director, this exploratory environment is key in after school. In some cases, the balance center environment extends what goes on with the counseling staff and with interventions during the school day. At that time children are exposed to curriculum who also helps develop pro social skills such as communication, cooperation, appreciation for diversity and conflict resolution. It helps identify children that may be in need of further intervention as well.

Ms. Chin-Bow explains, "At the beginning of the year at P.S. 5, our balance center facilitator was not with us and so we had a taste of what school is like without it; it really helps the counselors and teachers to concentrate on teaching rather than having to deal with disruptive behaviors." Ms. Chin-Bow works closely with school principal Wanda Soto on these school issues.

"Children often refer themselves to the balance center to address concerns and resolve problems carried over from the day program," says Myrna Torres, former P.S. 5 Community School Director. "Students come to the balance center to learn how they can substitute negative behaviors and interactions with positive behaviors and interactions and this can be very helpful to the whole school." ■

Finding and Nurturing Potential in the Bronx

Youth Council Thrives at Children's Aid Society's I.S. 98 Community School

By Richard Negron



Jacquy Joachim, Children's Aid's Community School Director (second from right), works with members of the 05-06 Youth Council at I.S. 98 in the Bronx.

I.S. 98's Bronx Youth Council chapter is aptly named "Leaders of Tomorrow."

The 12 eighth-grade members were recruited because of their demonstrated leadership skills as well as their potential. Referred by their teachers, Children's Aid Society (CAS) staff and alumni, the members are expected to participate regularly in all Bronx Youth Council activities (there is a youth council chapter in each of The Children's Aid Society's Bronx community schools), maintain high grades and incorporate the leadership concepts they learn in school and in their everyday lives.

One of the goals of the youth councils established by Children's Aid in its Bronx community schools is to promote a culture of positive peer pressure in which dynamic, thoughtful middle school students share their knowledge with other students, encouraging them to stay in school, set high standards for themselves and be constructive sources of change in the school and within their communities. Last November, members of the Bronx Youth Councils held a well attended conference at Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, where they addressed four elected officials about issues the students considered to be of urgent importance to their peers.

Prior to their final selection for the council, students attend a youth leadership workshop conducted by Jacquy Joachim, Children's Aid's Community School Director at I.S. 98. Once they are chosen, they select officers, hold regular meetings and

plan community service events. For its project, the I.S. 98 Youth Council chose AIDS awareness. Members participated in an AIDS walk, distributed literature and sought to create awareness and understanding of the issue among their peers.

At I.S. 98, where Claralee Irobunda is principal, the youth council chapter is staffed by Venesia Contreras. A former graduate of I.S. 98, Venesia is a Children's Aid Youth Development Counselor who, in addition to providing ongoing support and guidance for the group, also ensures that members are connected to other Children's Aid youth development activities – e.g., community justice at I.S. 98 and E.X.C.E.L., Children's Aid's educational and life skills program that helps prepare students for college – with the goal of providing a well rounded and comprehensive youth development experience.

During a recent youth council meeting at I.S. 98, Sasha Hughes, Melissa Galan, Calvin Campos, Jennifer Perez, Carla Gomez and Djibril Diallo personified all of the qualities of youth council leaders. While they are all very different, they shared a common bond of wanting to help their school, their communities and other students. They were also excited because they would be in a position to recruit the new cohort of incoming eighth graders that would replace them. When asked to describe what they would look for in new members, they all answered, "We select students that have potential!" ■

