Whistling in the Graveyard
Saving Our Students
Solutions to America’s Dropout Problem

CHAPTER 11
Putting It Together
Conference Handout Version

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A great deal of material and ideas has been included in previous chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify key components in working with at-risk youth. Additionally, if these principals work with at-risk youth, they will work with students from all spectrums of education. These ideas really follow simple learning theories and human nature.

Parents, church leaders, youth organization leaders, and any school will benefit from using these principals in their program. These principals would also be effective in any organization or work environment. The rest of the chapter will deal with these powerful practices and principles.

Personalization

Many years ago, I heard a powerful saying “we do not care how much you know, until we know how much you care.” This motto has stuck with me during my entire career. I have hammered it into my teachers and those who have worked for me in other capacities. It does not take long in any situation for a customer, constituent, or student to determine if the person who is helping them has their best interest at heart.

A school, classroom, family, or any other organization must personalize the experience for those they serve. People need to believe that you care and that you want to help them. When they are sold on this fact, they will become more attentive and cooperative. Conflict arises when individuals perceive that someone is taking advantage of them.

I have suspended hundreds of students from school over the years. I knew that I had done my job when a student and parent left my office after being suspended and thanked me. Suspending a student or disciplining an employee are among the most stressful things that a principal will encounter. If that individual knows that you care about them and that you are trying to help them, they will respond positively.

There are multiple ways to personalize an experience. Learning someone’s name and using it in the conversation is one of the most important. Approaching the infraction as a problem to be solved helps individuals feel loved and accepted. Judgmental approaches will only bring negative feelings and unresolved issues.

Personalization starts long before there is a conflict and knowing someone’s name and using it are just the beginning. Knowing about the person and knowing the person is critical for success. Taking time to visit with people for just a few minutes goes a long way when the chips are on the table. Knowing their interests, hobbies, fears, ambitions, and many other things helps build a positive relationship and relationships are everything when working with people.

We have tried to visit student homes at least once per year. There are instances where students have had multiple visits over the year by a staff member or several staff members. Schools working with at-risk youth should consider this approach. I am aware of award winning transition programs where
administration, teachers, and counselors visit sophomore students at their home during the summer between their 9th and 10th grade years.

I am convinced that one of the major secrets to our schools success is the personalization of our student’s experience with our school. This is an area that requires continual work and effort. It has become to easy with technology to text, email, or auto phone parents and students about school performance or activities. There is place for these practices but they do threaten the personalization factor.

Positive Physical Environment

People always rise to the type of environment that they work or reside. Depressing classrooms and hallways only invite violence, vandalism, and lack of motivation. Elementary teachers and schools have the corner on the market for positive environments. Generally, everyone is happy in an elementary setting. Secondary teachers often slap a few posters or signs on the walls of their classroom and call it good.

I have discussed the fact that we have invested a great deal of time and money in providing a positive environment at Landmark High School. This had taken years to develop and did not happen over night. The old building was a difficult setting to provide this environment but we pulled it off. Our new building has positive things throughout.

Student attitudes are determined daily. Our students feel like this is their home and are very protective of it. Once in awhile a new student who is angry will vandalize something in the building but we find out who the offender is from other students usually within minutes not hours. Students who have vandalized us at the beginning become the greatest advocates for the school. This is because of the peer pressure and reaction that they see from other students when they vandalize the school.

A few times a year, we have the entire student body have a school wide clean up. Students sweep, polish glass, clean the parking lot, pick up trash on the grounds, plant trees or flowers, and many other activities that beautify the school. When students are involved in this, they become invested in the school.

Positive Culture

Work and school must be fun for the students and staff. Learning must be a positive activity. Staff needs to look forward to coming to work everyday and students must look forward to coming to school. This takes a lot of work on many peoples part but the dividends are paid by have a positive culture. There are a million ways to promote positive student culture. What is important is that all students are touched and involved in the culture not just the jocks or popular kids.

When I taught at a high school we had what we referred to as the “north parking lot kids.” These kids were the outliers; they were not involved with the school. A traditional high school’s barometer of school spirit could be measured by how many “north parking lot kids” they have. The “north parking lot kids” come to Landmark High School. They do not care about games or other trendy
things that are going on at a regular school. Finding ways to get them involved and reach them is a considerable challenge. We have found that often, giving them a cause to get behind is the best way to involve them. Earlier in the book, I mentioned the variety of service projects that we do at our school. Service is a big part of our student culture. Service makes anyone feel needed and important.

The staff at our school has a very unique culture. Again, it takes a lot of work to keep this a positive experience. Working with our students is very draining both physically and mentally. As a staff, we take time to laugh and play together. This may only be the first few minutes of a meeting or it could be the final year-end party, but important bonds are built during these times. Our staff likes to eat. So we spend time feeding them on occasion.

One big staff tradition that has lasted over thirty years at Landmark is pig out week during the month of December. One different days, different staff members will host the lunch for everyone else in the faculty room. Pig out week has nearly turned into pig out month in the past few years. Staff members put out creative and fun dishes, sometimes it becomes a competition. They usually work in groups of three or four to sponsor a meal. This activity really helps us get through a tough month at our school.

Recognizing students and staff for good work is also important. We have a tradition called pinning. When students have proven that they have gained the spirit of the dragon, they are pinned a true dragon. Students know that this is a big deal to be pinned and there is ceremony that goes with it. All new staff are pinned as they join our ranks. Pinning gives a sense of unity to both the staff and students.

There are many other things that we do that I will not mention here. Suffice it to say that having a positive culture takes work, but it is very important to the success of the school or organization.

**Positive Transition**

Transition is a great concern. Transition between programs and schools is when students typically become lost. We are continually working to upgrade and improve our transition program. Currently, during the second week of school, all students undergo “Indragonation.” This is program where students learn the history and expectations of the school. They also are exposed to the “7 Habits” philosophy and the vital behaviors. This establishes a common ground and language that we have program wide.

Each term, the new students undergo the same process. This is a huge commitment on several levels for the staff. Experience has shown that there are big dividends when we have this type of program.

**Address The Roots of The Problem**

It is easy to address the problem and impose consequences. Schools across the nation do it all the time. We have found that very little positive change comes from just focusing on this practice. There are underlying reasons that a student is acting out, truant, defiant, not completing class assignments, and other types of
negative behaviors. Finding out why the student is engaged in this behavior is
critical if long-term positive change is going to happen.

Once we learn the reasons behind the behaviors or precipitating factors of the
behavior; we can address the reasons and help change the behavior. Many at-risk
kids have vision or hearing problems that have never been diagnosed before. That
may be why they are frustrated when they are asked to read aloud to the class.
Literacy and numeracy also play a part in a student’s ability to complete work.
We can not assume that students “get it” and can do the work after we have
taught the lesson.

Throwing a math problem or concept up on the board and doing it once or
twice is ineffective with many students. The bright ones will get it, the middle
group in the class will struggle through it, and the lower group will either not
listen because they do not understand or will become disruptive. So if a student is
having discipline issues in a math class is he just being a jerk or is there another
reason?

For every undesirable problem there will be reasons for the behavior behind
the problem. Students can and will change if someone help them address these
reasons. Master teachers have known this principle for years. These type of
teachers will go the extra mile to help students succeed.

Ensure Protective Factors Are Present

The protective factor research is overwhelming. Many people have studied this
idea and all agree that protective factors will help at-risk students become
successful. I discussed protective factors in detail in chapter 5 but only covered a
basic overview of the concept. There are several great books on protective factors
and at-risk youth. “Resiliency What We Have Learned” by Bonnie Bernard is the
best book I have read on this topic.

She developed the factors discussed in chapter 5 several years ago. As a school
we have worked on these factors for over twelve years and they are deeply
embedded into our programs. Protective factors can overcome the risk factors
that students carry. I will list these factors again below.

Protective Factors
1. Clear and consistent messages
2. High expectations
3. Opportunities to participate in meaningful activities
4. Positive relationships with an adult role model

Schools and other organizations that serve youth will be much more successful
when these factors are embedded in their program. I have watched first hand
these factors in action. They are one of the most powerful tools that I am aware of
in working with youth.
Vital Behaviors

I addressed the concept of vital behaviors in great detail in chapter 6. We spent over three years refining the vital behaviors that we think are important at our school. When students are not being successful, we can look through the lens of these vital behaviors and determine which behavior or behaviors the student is struggling with. We can then teach the student skills needed to do the vital behavior.

This approach eliminates the “you’re a bad kid” attitude that can be found in some schools. Our students have felt this attitude many times in their educational career. Teaching them what to do and how to do it are much more effective. These vital behaviors are again listed below.

1. Attendance – 90% or Better
2. Positive Attitude – Act As If
3. Be Productive – Get It Done
4. Cooperation – Team Work
5. Non-Violence – Get Along

Promote Literacy and Numeracy

Most at-risk students have major literacy and numeracy deficits. These deficits must be overcome or students will continue to struggle in college, the workforce, and personally. At Landmark, we have a leveled library that is very extensive. Students are able to check out fiction and non-fiction that they can read and understand. Research has shown that when students read material that they can understand reading levels will improve. We work hard at delivering instruction at the student’s current level.

Teaching over their head will only cause frustration, discipline problems, and apathy. Preparing and adapting materials for all students is an ongoing process and requires a lot of work and commitment on our teachers part.

As a school we emphasize reading everyday. We realize that we are in a race and that we only have our students for a limited amount of time. We want to help them and get the biggest bang for the buck. Reading and writing are powerful tools to accomplish this task.

Our math teachers expect our students to do the required state core math for their grade level. We do realize that our students are behind in math concepts. Most of our students are enrolled in two different math classes. The primary math class teaches the current grade level state requirements. The second class works to address basic math skills that the student is missing.

Stay Current

New research is continually being published about what is working with students. Knowing what is out there and what is cutting edge will help us keep up with current practice. We know so much more about at-risk students than we did twenty years ago. Our ability to serve them and help them has greatly increased
over this period of time. Our school is involved in a state and national dropout coalition. We have the privilege of meeting with several national level experts on the high school dropout problem and we will be upgrading our programs based on new knowledge.