


Personal Responsibility Through Mentoring

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Cousino High School in Warren, Mich., has experienced significant growth in the last few years. This comes as a surprise because it is not located in a growing area. This growth to almost 1900 students (up from 1200 just five years ago) has triggered the need for school professionals to generate new and innovative programs to meet the needs of their ever-changing population and the State of Michigan's increased rigor in graduation requirements.

High schools across the country like Cousino need to address ninth-grade students and their transition to high school. Many students are consumed by the new athletic and social environment; therefore, their academics are likely to suffer. When asked by students to explain their academic status, more oftentimes than not they say: "I was too busy hanging out with all of my new friends," or "I am too caught up in the football team,"

or "I am trying to figure out who I want to take to homecoming." These statements, along with dozens of other similar comments, warranted a response by Cousino High School to intervene in the peer pressure and culture shock faced by incoming ninth-graders.

Students have much at stake when they transition to high school. At this juncture, students either work hard toward the goals of graduation and a collegiate experience, or they veer off course and struggle to earn a high school diploma. Those who are not connected to the high school experience (after-school activities) may struggle both socially and academically. In this era of increased emphasis on student achievement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it is important to realize that a student's freshman year is a critical time: one that—if not dealt with successfully—can lead to failed classes, lost credits and, in some cases, dropping out of high school.

Program Defined

In an effort to support the freshmen at Cousino High School, an innovative and successful program was created that meets the needs of these students. It is called Club Connect. Club Connect is a ninth-grade program that seeks to meet the needs of freshmen by assisting in their adjustment to the demands of high school through mentoring and personal responsibility.

This innovative program was also created to connect students to one another as well as to the clubs, sports, and activities that the high school has to offer. Club Connect seeks to aid freshmen in their transition to high school through academic responsibility, student-to-student connec-

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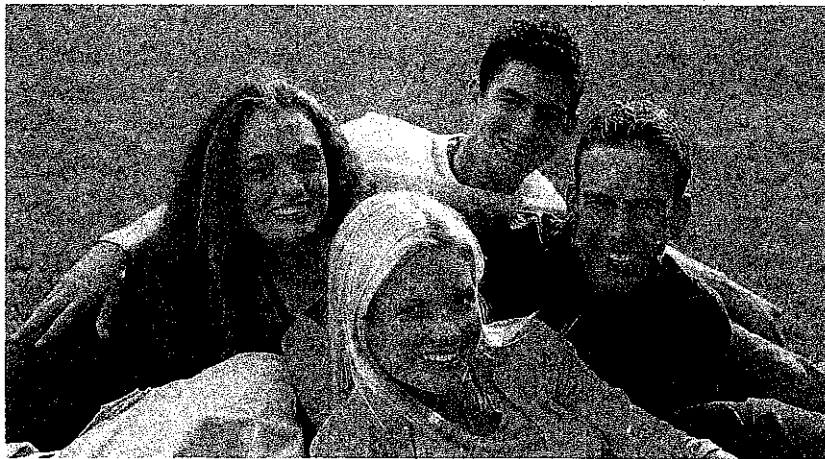
tion, and school involvement.

Program Timeline

With the purpose of the program established, a framework was created for implementation. The premise is that ninth-graders would best be served by being mentored by upperclassmen (11th- and 12th-graders). Many attributes define a student who be-

comes a mentor. These students are not only successful in their academics, but they are also involved in many after-school activities. These students show leadership skills and are respectful, dependable, responsible, and creative. Above all else, the upperclassmen who are chosen desire to help ninth-graders transition to high school because *they* were once nervous freshmen apprehensive about beginning *their* high school years.

Prospective mentors for the program are given a five-day window to apply in April in preparation for the upcoming school year. They have to complete a series of short-answer questions and get three teacher recommendations. This short application window is necessary in order to have a program where the students take the lead in the mentoring process. Additionally, it is very important to have responsible mentors in order to have them take ownership of the program. This is important



Continued on page 20

because, when students take ownership, they know their suggestions matter and they feel valued. These applications are then reviewed by three teachers, and anywhere from 60-70 mentors with the highest scores (from a pool of 100+ applicants) are chosen.

These 60-70 mentors participate in an extensive mentor training series. This training was created to guide the mentors through some of the obstacles they might face when working with their ninth-grade mentees. A variety of topics are covered including: mentor expectations, mentor roles, and mentoring success tips. A great deal of the three-hour mentor training is done to reinforce these topics through role-play. Although discussion is great, role-play makes it more real and forces the mentors to discuss as a group how

At ninth-grade registration, parents are given an informational pamphlet explaining Club Connect and are given the opportunity to sign up for their child to have a mentor. All students must have permission from their parent or guardian. The program's focus is getting students connected to high school, instead of being focused solely on academics. This design is necessary in order to keep the ninth-graders engaged in the mentoring process. The belief is that, if the focus is solely academic in nature, students would be turned off to the

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to best manage various mentoring situations. These experiences better prepare mentors to work with challenging ninth-graders. It is the role of the mentor to help students discover that they can help themselves—thus giving them the personal responsibility to make informed decisions that will impact their future high school years.

These students have their first mentoring experience at ninth-grade registration in August—just a few days prior to the start of the new school year. They welcome the students and their parents to Cousino, assist them in the registration process, and encourage them to become part of Club Connect.

mentoring process and would not be willing to engage or invest in it.

Upon the completion of registration, the mentors and mentees complete a personal profile. This form allows the students to write their contact information as well as their hobbies and personal interests. It is used to pair the upperclassmen with the ninth-graders based on similarities in an effort for them to have common interests. These similar interests serve as a foundation to establish their mentoring relationship.

Beginning the second week of school in September, the ninth-grade students meet with their upperclassmen mentors every two to three weeks during the school day. The students and their mentors meet on a rotating basis so they do not miss the same class too often. During these sessions, a variety of subjects are addressed including: study skills, diversity, school clubs, sports teams, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, scheduling for 10th grade, and career planning. These sessions allow time to focus on the topic of that week's

mentoring session while also providing time for the mentoring relationships to flourish.

These mentoring sessions eventually led to the creation of a steering committee. The committee meets every four to six weeks to evaluate past mentoring sessions, plan upcoming events, and work through any concerns voiced by other mentors or mentees. The time invested in the steering committee has been so rewarding, because the members have become extremely committed to the program. Additionally, they work daily with their mentees so they can really shape the program as each session is planned. This interaction between mentors and mentees is used to tailor each session to best meet the needs of the ninth-graders. The steering committee has significantly increased the success of the program, because the mentors can speak on behalf of the ninth-graders to address their needs—giving them a voice when they are reluctant to share their thoughts in a group setting.

The program concludes near the end of March. This was designed so students are then able to transition from relying on their mentor to being personally responsible for their schoolwork, grades, and school involvement. This makes the ninth-grader more prepared to excel in the 10th grade. This philosophy has been key to the program's success because, more often than not, high schools around the country seek to implement programs to "save" the student. Interventions such as retaking tests, extra credit, and free credit recovery only seek to save the student without addressing the skills that the students lack. In society and in the workplace, adults are required to be responsible for their actions. High schools need to expect the same level of personal responsibility. If students are equipped with these skills, they can overcome obstacles on their own through personal responsibility.

Club Connect excels because of the relationships the students make with one another. Children learn better from their peers when it is in a controlled environment. According to Tom, one of Cousino's senior mentors, "Mentoring works because it is a good way for ninth-graders to bond with someone older and more mature." He goes on to say that, "Ninth-graders really need a role model in their life. My ninth-graders say they are more involved and more relaxed because of mentoring." The mentors are able to say, "I've been there and done that ..." or "here are some study tips to help with your math class." These growth opportunities allow ninth-graders to develop relationships, have accountability, and get on track right from the outset of their high school years.

Successful Results

In the five years that Club Connect has existed, the success of the program is awe-inspiring. In any given

year, 92%-97% of those ninth-graders involved in the program have passed their classes. Although academic success is important, the reality is that the changes in the lives of both the mentors and mentees as a result of the mentoring relationships are immeasurable. Students have joined school clubs, made various athletic teams, enhanced relationships, and excelled in the classroom because a mentor took an interest in a ninth-grader's transition to high school.

The year concludes with a Celebration Continental Breakfast for the mentors and their parents. The students are honored for serving as mentors for the past school year and are presented with a gift to show appreciation for their commitment and sacrifice. The program thrives because of the committed mentors who run the program, and this is emphasized. It is a great time to say "thank you" for all of their hard work. In the end, many of the mentors' and mentees' lives become changed for the better because of the investment they made in each other.

Conclusion

Club Connect is successful because of the selected upperclassmen mentors who drive the program and work with the ninth-grade students. Students who were mentees in their ninth-grade year are now, as upperclassmen, becoming the mentors running the program. This is a true measure of the program's success. It shows that if personal responsibility is the focus, and accountability itself is achieved through relationships, then results in the classroom will occur. This is the goal that all high schools desire, and Club Connect has attained. A ninth-grader and her mentor, Kristen, put it best by stating: "Mentoring works because we want it to." There is no substitute for promoting personal responsibility, and a successful school-mentoring program can turn that dream into a contagious reality.

About the Author:

Kevin Kuczynski, MA, LLPC, SLC, BCPC, is a high school counselor at Cousino High School in Warren, Mich. His services consist of counseling, consultation, referral, peer mediation or any other activity to meet the immediate needs of students. He also assists in coordinating ongoing systemic activities to assist students in establishing personal goals and developing future plans. He received his bachelor's degree from Cedarville University and his master's degree from Liberty University. He is involved with various professional organizations and also has private practice experience, where he specialized in adolescent, family, and marital therapy.

