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ABSTRACT

This resource bulletin focuses on problems in the lives of adolescents that affect students' engagement in schoolwork (drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, the increasing adolescent suicide rate) and considers the school's role with and responsibility for troubled students. It looks specifically at the high school's use of support groups to help such students by summarizing the results of interviews with guidance and student services personnel in a large suburban high school and a private high school in a moderate-size city. The summaries illustrate how support groups function and what types of groups work in diverse settings. Discussed are support groups for: (1) students recovering from alcohol or drug abuse; (2) students from divorced families, single-parent homes, and stepfamilies; (3) students with low self-esteem; (4) students who are grieving following a death; (5) learning disabled students; (6) students with eating disorders; (7) anxious or phobic students; (8) depressed students; (9) students formerly institutionalized in psychiatric facilities; and (10) students suffering from test anxiety. Providing another perspective are comments from Stephen Elliott, assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a nationally recognized figure in the field of school psychology. A selected bibliography on support groups is included. (NB)

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High schools are continually presented with problems in adolescent life that affect students' engagement in schoolwork: drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and an increasing adolescent suicide rate. Consequently, debate is sparked over the school's role with and responsibility for troubled students. What should the high school's response be?

Some would minimize school attention to these issues, delegating them to other social agencies on the argument that high schools are incapable of handling such problems and that they should focus primarily on instruction. Others insist that because these issues impinge so dramatically on student performance, they must be tackled directly within the school.

In an effort to respond constructively to adolescents' problems, some schools are shifting to a group model of help by forming support groups. Why support groups? According to a school psychologist we talked to, these groups are particularly worthwhile because peer culture has a major impact on adolescent development. Discussing common concerns with peers under the supervision of a group facilitator can therefore lead to substantial progress. Also, restrictions on time and a need for efficient use of staff resources make support groups a practical school response.

To learn more about how schools have brought students together to work on concerns ranging from drug abuse to loneliness, we talked to guidance personnel in a variety of settings. They described support groups they have initiated which try to respond to—or to prevent—a variety of difficulties. Support groups are certainly not the only, or necessarily the most effective means of helping students with grave, even life-threatening problems, but an awareness of

how some schools have drawn students together to work on a common concern or problem might lead to other creative institutional responses.

We found a wide range of support groups, including those that deal with substance abuse, both for the user and the recovering user, as well as for the children of alcoholics. Other groups focus on family disruption, such as the concerns of the children of divorce, step-families, and one-parent homes. At one school, a grieving group was spontaneously formed following the death of a student. Groups dealing with loneliness and shyness have reduced youth alienation and improved their social skills and relationships. Eating disorders are increasingly common in adolescents and are treated with considerable concern. Newcomers and transfer students are served by groups, as are pregnant teens. Management of depression and suicide prevention have become topics for groups as have anxiety and phobic reactions to school. Apparently the only limits for support groups are the boundaries of imagination and resources, as well as the expertise to *refrain* from trying to resolve problems that are beyond the capabilities of school staff or peer group leaders. High schools are often impersonal environments through which students pass, each convinced that one is uniquely alone in struggling with problems. The group facilitators with whom we spoke attested to the relief students experience as they discover they are not

alone with a concern, whether it be shuttling back and forth between divorced parents' homes on weekends, or having severe anxiety reactions to new situations. Although student groups vary in how they are structured, they all bring students together in small numbers to discuss their concerns—in confidence—with peers who have a similar problem.

Skeptics of support groups may see administrative practical barriers to implementation; they may doubt their effectiveness; they may believe that instructional time is far too precious to spend on such activities. The people with whom we spoke, however, argued that participation in support groups frequently led to improvement in academic achievement, as well as to enhanced social skills and fewer disciplinary problems for teachers and administrators. One director of guidance said that whenever he needed to convince anyone in his school about the efficacy of support groups, he tried to have one of the students describe the group experience. Such testimony was usually convincing.

This bulletin summarizes the results of interviews with guidance and student services personnel in a large suburban high school and a private high school in a moderate-size city. To gain another view of this topic, we also spoke with a professor who is nationally recognized in the profession of school psychology. In addition, selected bibliography on support groups is included. •

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Support groups: diverse programs for diverse needs

The following interviews of high school guidance/student services personnel were selected for the diversity of their programs as well as differences between their schools. Represented are a small private school and a large suburban-urban school. We also spoke with a professor of educational psychology who provided a practical overview of support groups. In these interviews, we were interested in learning how support groups function and what sorts of groups work in diverse settings. We found a great diversity of programs as well as some practical guidelines for successful support groups.



Nick: "The only requirement is a willingness to attempt positive change."

At a small private high school serving 530 students in a city of about 200,000, we talked to the head of guidance about the program of support groups initiated by the school four years ago. This Catholic school draws students from a radius of 50 miles, and although it is a parochial school, includes students of all denominations. The student body is primarily white and middle-class, although there is a small representation of Black, Hispanic, and Asian students. "The only requirement is a willingness to attempt positive change," says Nick. "We began this program four years ago, when we had a student who returned from drug treatment and wanted us to form a support group for students who had gone through that experience. Her experience wasn't shared by other students, so we began a group focused on alcohol and other drugs. We started with three or four students who were recovering from abusive patterns or were still users.

"We then began a group for the children of divorce, single parent homes, and step-families. So often these kids feel caught in the middle; they have problems shuffling back and forth to different homes on the weekends. We began this and all our groups with a contract

that stresses confidentiality, the need to contribute something to the group, and the importance of no distractions in group.

"We also believe in self-initiation into the group. We do that by means of a high school orientation. During the orientation, kids fill in a form which includes some information about their families. We ask them to put down something important about their families, something meaningful. We then meet individually with them and use the information they provided to inform them of a group. For instance, I might look at this form and say: Sally, you've put down here that your parents are divorced and both are remarried. You live with your mother during the week and go to your father on the weekends. I don't know if you'd be interested, but we have a group here for kids in your situation."

Nick works with another guidance counselor to guide that particular group in a very structured way for its first meeting to build in emotional safety for the group participants. "I introduce myself and my co-facilitator, we talk a little about the group, and then I invite each kid to provide two or three sentences which are strictly factual. For instance, I'm Sally, my parents are divorced, I live with my mother. After we go full circle, most kids are stunned that so many others are in their situation. They felt completely alone before.

"We have found," Nick reflects, "that kids improve academically when they have an opportunity to get the garbage out. Some teachers are skeptical, but our rationale has been

that these kids can sit in your class and think about family problems and really not be there at all."

Nick names some of the other groups. "We have a self-esteem group. For that group, we make contact with the kids who eat lunch by themselves, the loners. It's a more structured group, with an activity such as telling the group one thing you're good at.

"We spontaneously started a grieving group, following the death of a student last Spring. It has a non-religious focus, based on the grieving stages of Kübler-Ross, and many kids have said that without that group, they wouldn't have made it. We also have a group for the learning disabled. This group primarily emphasizes improving study skills, dealing with teachers who don't understand, and so on. It is co-run by a learning disabled specialist and a guidance counselor."

I asked Nick about obstacles to implementation of support groups. "It's important to sell the groups to administrators," he says, "important to give assurance that the kids will perform well in the classrooms. We have found this to be the case."



Dennis: "This is teaching taking place."

Dennis is the clinical school psychologist who heads guidance programs at a large suburban-urban high school on the border of a major metropolitan city. The school

enrolls 3200 students with a diverse socio-economic profile, 15 percent Black. However, the majority are middle-class, according to Dennis, who founded the school's support groups program, which began with a group for students suffering from eating disorders. It now includes groups for anxious or phobic students, a depression management group, four substance abuse groups, a post-hospital group for students who have been institutionalized in psychiatric facilities, and a test anxiety program.

"In our substance abuse groups, we work with four levels," Dennis says. "The first of these is a preventive, six-session experience, educative in nature, and focused on early detection of substance abuse. We also have a group for the serious abuser. We have groups for the children of alcoholics. And we have an aftercare group, for those students who have been inpatients in a treatment facility and have returned to school."

New Beginnings, according to Dennis, is the optimistic title given the group for anxious or phobic students. "We try to separate out the truants from the phobics," he says. "The group focuses on standard developmental issues, the concerns of adolescents. As you can imagine, a large percentage of these students have psychosomatic symptoms, lots of headaches and stomachaches. Our most popular group is a test anxiety program, which is a six-session group co-run by a teacher and counselor. It is devoted to test-taking skills."

A short-term group for the seriously shy, lasting about 6 weeks, emphasizes the develop-

ment of social skills. Through that group, Dennis found that his staff was able to discover some serious emotional problems that may have gone unnoticed until a later, more crucial stage.

Most students are referred to the support groups program by deans, social workers, or school psychologists. However, after making a presentation to the recent freshman class, 80 students referred themselves.

"We have to sell these groups," he admits. "We explain that this is teaching taking place. And in fact the school is always being asked, 'what are you doing about this?' 'This' may be any sort of problem such as suicide prevention or drug abuse. The key is to have administrative support.

"After all," Dennis concludes, "if schools believe in holistic education, they have to pay attention to some of the problems and concerns students bring with them to the classroom."



Stephen Elliott: "It is clear that peers can be helpful change agents."

Stephen Elliott is Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and active in the profession of school psychology. He is editor of *School Psychology Review*, the official journal of the National Association of School Psychologists.

"Utilization of peers to facilitate

the academic and social/emotional development of handicapped and lower-functioning students has been documented in the empirical research literature," Elliott says. "It is clear that peers can be helpful change agents. Peer support groups are being implemented at both the elementary and secondary school levels, and it is obvious that most of these groups are being developed by school counselors to enhance the coping process for a wide range of children.

"I believe there are a few assumptions underlying the use of support groups," Elliott says. "One, that peer support groups are capitalizing on some well-established psychological principles for positive mental health, such as belonging and attachments, identity and self-understanding, and the desire to confront problems versus avoiding them. If well developed, support groups should be able to provide a setting wherein students can share their ideas, experiences, and concerns in a nonthreatening environment.

"Based on my general experiences with group procedures, I believe the following guidelines enhance success of groups. Successful support groups have a topical focus and leaders; they are voluntary. Successful support groups have communication rules. Successful support groups by their very name are designed to be reinforcing of a person's efforts and being, but not necessarily of his or her behaviors.

"This is a particular belief of mine. I will emphasize that some confrontation is healthy, but in general, support groups should be accepting of a wide

range of attitudes and feelings."

I ask Elliott about practical issues related to group size and composition. "Certainly there are pragmatic issues to consider carefully," he says. "One is group size—groups larger than 8 to 10 should be avoided because people need time to talk and it is desirable to have some intimacy.

"The makeup of the group also is important—support groups are predominately comprised of individuals with a common problem. It would seem important to have individuals at different stages of solving the problem.

"There is a need for an educative function for any such group; and finally, adult involvement is another issue to consider. Initially adults need to be involved and should help establish groundrules as well as provide encouragement for students. Adult modeling of reinforcement is extremely important. But I suspect that there comes a time when it is better for the adult physically to withdraw from the group and let the group continue on its own."

Elliott believes it is advisable to obtain parental permission before starting, and stresses the importance of confidentiality. "Usually," he says, "if a student is with a group of peers who have experienced the same problem, one can rely on a certain sensitivity and empathy. However, there are some very sensitive topics, such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse which may not be appropriate for high schools to deal with in the context of peer support groups." •

—Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood

For further reading:

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