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Evaluation of an “Alternative” School in South Georgia: Does It Improve Grades, Behavior, and Attendance?

Abstract

Using both quantitative and qualitative analyses, an evaluation of Westside Performance Learning Center (PLC) was completed. The central research question was, “Do students enrolled in the PLC experience a positive change in grades, behavior, and attendance?” T-tests comparing the conventional school and the PLC indicated that there was a statistically significant improvement in grades and behavior. Additionally, a focus group conducted with a sample of students at the PLC indicated that program structure, students’ relationships with faculty/staff, and general school environment had a positive impact on grades, behavior, and attendance. We also considered the effects of mentoring and incentives on the students. Recommendations for program improvement were also discussed.

Keywords

South Georgia, Alternative school, Grades, Behavior, Attendance

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Evaluation of an “Alternative” School in South Georgia: Does It Improve Grades, Behavior, and Attendance?

SOCI 7022: Sociological Research Methods Class

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Abstract: Using both quantitative and qualitative analyses, an evaluation of Westside Performance Learning Center (PLC) was completed. The central research question was, “Do students enrolled in the PLC experience a positive change in grades, behavior, and attendance?” T-tests comparing the conventional school and the PLC indicated that there was a statistically significant improvement in grades and behavior. Additionally, a focus group conducted with a sample of students at the PLC indicated that program structure, students’ relationships with faculty/staff, and general school environment had a positive impact on grades, behavior, and attendance. We also considered the effects of mentoring and incentives on the students. Recommendations for program improvement were also discussed.

Literature Review

Alternative schools are where youth who have become problematic in a variety of ways within the conventional school setting are sent. Raywid (2001) reported during the 70s and 80s they were “. . . the prospective solution to a variety of the nation’s ills” (p. 192). In a United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics analysis report, Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002) maintained that students are referred to alternative schools and programs if they are at risk of educational failure, non-attendance, disruptive behavior, or any other factors dealing with the withdrawal from school. The suggestion of alternative school attendance evokes negative images and parents balk when it is suggested as an option for their child’s education. One could argue that alternative schools, designed to employ strategies that address the myriad of social issues affecting the children who are sent to them, will encourage the “right” child to excel academically and improve their attendance and graduation rates. These schools stress learning by participation and observation and have fewer rules and less regulation of conduct. This encourages students to exert more individual and collective decision-making than in other schools (Raywid). Jenkins and Keefe (2002) found that students reported working harder and learning more at the alternative school. They also reported that in many district schools, students’ achievement test scores were higher than the average. Raywid also found that alternative school teachers reported increased job satisfaction and the students actually “like” attending school.

Additionally, alternative schools are structured to meet the needs of the youth who attend them (Knutson, 1995/1996). Alternative schools nowadays are an “. . . innovation; small-scale, informal ambiance; and departure from bureaucratic rules and procedures” (Raywid, 1994, p. 26). Smith, Molar, and Zahorik (2003) found that the Wisconsin’s Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program significantly increased student achievement because this program, like many other alternative school programs, “promotes effective teaching, mitigates the impact of poor attendance, and narrows the achievement gap between African-Americans and Whites” (p. 74). Cotton (1996) pointed out that with individualized instruction, small-school students take more responsibility for their educational well-being and learning activities.

Furthermore, alternative schools that take advantage of the benefits of a well-structured mentoring program can prevail over the influence of peers and lack of supervision by parents. These are strong risk factors in the causes of delinquency (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; Department of Justice, 1996). Also, incentive programs play a role in persuading children to stay in school and excel. They are not a new plan to motivate people to do things and have been utilized by marketing firms and businesses for years to persuade certain behaviors and responses. The Pizza Hut Book It® National Reading Incentive Program motivated children to read by rewarding them for doing so and has been very successful. Incentive programs in schools, conventional or alternative, are a promising way to improve students’ achievements (Lavy, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an “alternative school,” the Westside Performance Learning Center (PLC). The PLC is a small, autonomous school comprised of small classes and individualized instruction. This research examined the effects the PLC program had on students’ grades, attendance, and behavior. It also examined the effect the mentoring and incentive programs had on the students. Quantitative data were collected on students’ grades and behavior from the school database. Qualitative data were collected by utilizing focus groups to obtain information from students to evaluate the effect of the PLC on grades, attendance and behavior, as well as the effect the PLCs mentoring and incentive programs had on student success.

Westside School

Westside School, located in Valdosta, Georgia, originated as a high school for African American students during the time of racial segregation in the 1950’s. In 1987, the school became the site for Lowndes County School’s in-school suspension program. Its purpose was to remove chronically disruptive students from the conventional school setting on a short-term basis, one to ten days per referral. Several years later, Lowndes County added an alternative school program to accommodate disruptive students on a long-term basis and serve severely behavior-disordered students. In 1994, the Crossroads Grant, funded with Georgia Lottery funds and made available by the Georgia Department of Education, extended the alternative program to accommodate additional students for a minimum of one semester. The grant provided educational services for students in grades 6-12. This program operated until May 2002.

In the spring of 2002, a grant was secured from Communities In Schools of Georgia (CISGA) through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, that targeted high school students in grades 9-12 who were unsuccessful in the conventional high school setting due to academic and/or social issues. The model was designed to: (1) address students’ alienation through

nurturing and caring adults and a small school environment; (2) devote the time and resources needed to reach students; and (3) address barriers that impede students’ progress in the conventional school setting, such as, high student/teacher ratio in the classroom, poor social and interactive skills, dropouts, and poor attendance (CISGA, 2004). In the fall of 2002, one of the two pilot programs in the state of Georgia was implemented at Westside School of Valdosta in the Lowndes County School system.

The Westside PLC (Performance Learning Center) program is considered a *conversion model*. Original program design for the PLC’s was to be separate from the alternative program, the punitive model for dealing with disruptive and court-ordered students. The Lowndes County School Board agreed to implement the Westside PLC program only within the existing alternative program. Consequently, it is the only program in the state of Georgia integrating court-ordered, school-mandated, and self-referred students all into the same program. The PLC can facilitate 68-72 day students and approximately 20 night students. The facility also serves high school alternative students with special education needs. These students can be enrolled in PLC classes, if PLC services are needed. The grant from CISGA consisted of \$75,000. This was used for 72 computers, five teacher computer stations, NovaNET online courseware for the first year, staff development training in NovaNET, ongoing staff development, and technical support.

The major components of the PLC are NovaNET, the PARC (preparation, action, reflection, celebration) model of Georgia Learn and Serve, mentoring, and incentives. NovaNET is an online comprehensive instructional program that delivers thousands of hours of standards-based interactive curriculum, integrated assessment, and student management and record keeping. Lessons are aligned with the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum Standards, self-paced, and provide the student with immediate feedback and motivation (Peason Digital Learning, 2004).

The mentoring program encourages and assists the student to achieve their educational, vocational, and personal goals. The services coordinator interviews all mentors and matches a mentor with each student. Mentors interact with students on a regular basis and are recruited from the school system, community, local colleges and institutions. They include parents, students, educators, professionals, retirees, and volunteers (PLC Handbook, 2002). All students at the Westside PLC are assigned a mentor (D. Troy, personal communication, 2004).

The incentive program consists of weekly sodas and snacks for perfect attendance and cash prizes at the semester’s end. When a student performs an extraordinary act of assistance, kindness, or service to the school, community, and/or peers, they receive incentive tickets. The tickets can be redeemed for school supplies or other gift items, which have been donated by local vendors (D. Troy, personal communication, 2004).

The present research evaluates the Westside PLC to determine if the program has a positive effect on student grades, behavior, and attendance. We also considered the effect of mentoring and incentives on student performance.

Methodology

Data Collection

To determine the change in grades, behavior, and attendance for the students enrolled at the PLC, we used both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The original plan was for the

research team to access student records held at the PLC to conduct the quantitative analysis. However, upon visiting the school and examining the available records, it was determined that student files were incomplete and inadequate for our research purposes. As a “back-up” plan, we utilized the PLCs’ database which included variables such as student identification number, full name, reason for referral, entrance date; exit date, number of days of in-school suspension (ISS) prior to and during their time enrolled in the PLC and grade point average (GPA) prior to PLC enrollment, and current GPA or GPA upon exit from the program. The students exit the program in two ways: re-entry into conventional high school or graduation.

For the qualitative analysis concerning grades, behavior, and attendance, we conducted a focus group consisting of students currently enrolled in the PLC. Students for the focus group were randomly selected from a list of students presently enrolled in the PLC. Prior to holding our focus group, informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians and students.

Sample

The sample for the quantitative analysis consisted of all 299 students who attended the PLC between August 2002 and December 2003. From that list, 10 students were randomly selected to participate in the focus group, based on date of enrollment at the PLC. This provided a sample of students with varying seniority; those in the program for more than one year, one year, and four months.

Measurement

The primary variables of our research were grades, behavior, and attendance. To measure change in grades, we compared the GPA prior to PLC participation with current or at-exit GPA. The grade point average is a cumulative summary of the student’s academic progress before entering the PLC and while attending the PLC. The grade scale used in this school system is as follows: A = 100-90; B = 89-80; C = 79-70; F = 69 and below. The cumulative grade point average from the conventional high school was compared to the cumulative current or at-exit grade point average from the PLC.

Behavior was measured by change in the number of days in ISS and/or OSS. In-school suspension occurs when students misbehave and are sent to an all day detention. Out-of-school suspension occurs when students misbehave and are prohibited from returning to school until the suspension period has been served in its entirety.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

The focus of the quantitative analysis was to determine if students enrolled in the PLC experienced a positive change in grades and behavior as compared to the same variables while attending a conventional school.

Table 1 is a paired-samples t-test that was calculated to compare the mean prior grade point average to the mean current or at-exit grade point average from 2002-2003. The mean prior grade point average at the conventional high school was 68.05 (M = 68.05, SD = 14.24), and the mean current or at-exit grade point average at the PLC was 79.92 (SD = 8.51). A

significant increase from prior grade point average to current or at-exit grade point average was found ($t(150) = -10.58, p < .001$).

Table 1

t-Test of the Westside PLC Students' Prior Grade Point Averages and Current or Exit Grade Point Averages, 2002-2003

Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	df	sig (2-tailed)
-11.86	13.77	1.12	-10.58	150	.000

N = 151

Table 2 is a paired-samples t-test that was calculated to compare the mean prior in-school suspensions at the conventional high school to the mean current in-school suspensions at the PLC from 2002-2003. The mean for prior in-school suspensions was 1.35 ($M = 1.35, SD = 2.71$), and the mean for current in-school suspensions was .16 ($M = .16, SD = .55$). A significant decrease from prior in-school suspensions to current in-school suspensions was found ($t(146) = 5.30, p < .001$).

Table 2

t-Test of the Westside PLC Students' Prior In-School Suspensions and Current In-school Suspensions, 2002-2003

Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	df	sig (2-tailed)
1.19	2.72	.22	5.30	146	.000

N = 147

Table 3 is a paired-samples t-test that was calculated to compare the mean prior out-of-school suspensions at the conventional high school to the mean current out-of-school suspensions at the PLC from 2002-2003. The mean for prior out-of-school suspensions was .73 ($sd = 1.16$), and the mean for current out-of-school suspensions was .33 ($sd = .93$). A significant decrease from prior out-of-school suspensions to current out-of-school suspensions was found ($t(149) = 3.36, p < .001$).

Table 3

t-Test of the Westside PLC Students' Prior Out of School Suspensions and Current Out of School Suspensions, 2002-2003

Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	df	sig (2-tailed)
.39	1.32	.10	3.63	149	.000

N = 150

Qualitative Analysis

The focus group was conducted to assess changes in students' grades, behavior, and attendance. Additionally, we were able to evaluate the impact that mentoring and incentives had on the PLC students. The focus group was guided by a semi-structured interview consisting of nine questions (see Appendix A). Qualitative analysis corroborated the quantitative results inasmuch as students realized improvement in grades and behavior due to PLC intervention. Additionally, students also recognized a positive change in their attendance as a result of the PLC. As a result of the qualitative analysis, several categories emerged from the data which the students attributed to their success. The categories were program structure, faculty/staff, and environment.

Program Structure. Overwhelmingly, students cited program structure as the principal contributor to improved grades, attendance, and behavior. Specifically, the computer-based and self-paced methods of instruction were most conducive to students' improving their grades. This is because everything is on the computer and there is limited use of textbooks, no homework or missed assignments.

Significant advantages of the program's structure identified by the students were: 1) the computer does not allow the student to move on to the next lesson until an acceptable passing grade is realized, thus, driving the student to "work hard to understand it—you actually learn the work;" 2) it is a self-paced program which accommodates freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors in the same classroom, all on different blocks and/or lessons, and all receiving individualized attention from one teacher. With this structure, students did not feel "stupid" when asking questions and felt that this also allowed for more assistance, not only from the teacher, but also from students whom had already completed the lesson; 3) this system affords for credit recovery, and does not limit the student to receiving "just four credits a semester." When a student is competent and "hard-working" they can quickly move through a lesson, which permits them to "get as many credits in a semester as you can." "Testing-through" (where a student is already proficient in an area, the student can take the prescriptive curriculum and final test, and move on if the required grade is received) was an often-cited feature students believed played a major role in grade improvement; 4) in the conventional school setting "if you don't get the lesson, there's no stopping, they whiz by it," whereas, at the PLC "you stay on that subject until you get it, and if you don't get it, the teacher is right there to help you and has the time for you;" and 5) the computer system allows students to "go back" and review the lesson as many

times as required to “understand it, get, and pass it.” “At the regular school, if you fail a test you don’t get a chance to pass it—you have to keep the failing grade.”

The consensus of the students in the PLC was that “because it [program structure] is self-paced you can get more done, but you can also get behind sometimes by lagging off—but if you skip it, [it] is more noticed because class sizes are so small.” This group of students, who felt their attendance at the PLC was “much improved” as compared to the conventional school, stated what motivated their PLC attendance that did not motivate their conventional school attendance was that they “love the teachers.”

As with grades and attendance, the students attending the PLC felt their behavior had improved and credited improvement to two major factors: 1) the structure at the PLC requires the student to be more “self-reliant and self-motivated” and 2) there are less “distractions” at the PLC which entices you to “act up.” Distractions equated to friends, girls/boys, dating, partying, and extra-curricular activities which all “divert your attention.”

Faculty/Staff. In a word, the students described the teachers at the PLC as “awesome!” They described the teachers as: “. . . more caring and compassionate to what’s going on with you” and “they take, and have the time to get to know you and sit with you—it’s a different kind of attention.” They described this relationship as a “close relationship where they care about you.” According to the students, a close relationship was not possible at the conventional school because each semester a student is presented with four new/different teachers, and the teachers and staff are “too busy to relate, because there are so many more students.” The school counselor also had an impact on the students as “she makes college a viable option and gets you pointed in the right direction.”

When discussing the mentoring program, some students did not have a mentor. Those with a mentor said they were “helpful and encouraging, and helped to keep you from getting side-tracked.” Those without a mentor felt they did not need one because of the relationship they had with their teachers.

Most students liked the incentives and took them “real [sic] serious.” They were motivators to some and appreciated by all. One student stated she was “self-motivated” and “don’t [sic] necessarily need incentives because you can’t succeed if you’re not here [referring to school attendance].

Environment. The general consensus of students in the focus group was, because the PLC has “everything in one location,” it is easier for students to “stay focused” on getting their “business” done. They did not have to move every hour to a new classroom, and lockers and classes were “right there” for easy access. In contrast, at the conventional school, they found it harder to stay focused because there were a lot of changes on a daily basis and there were so many more students. The PLC provided for a more orderly and structured day.

There is one important caveat about our use of focus groups. There was only one focus group conducted and only 10 students in the focus group. Therefore, the results above are not based on a representative sample of students. If time permitted, we would have conducted more focus groups to be able to interview a larger number of students. Therefore, the results of the focus group should be viewed as tentative.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The simple conclusion that can be drawn from the evaluation is that, for these students, the PLC does help improve grades, behavior, and attendance. The qualitative data reinforces the quantitative data and also helps to explain why the program works. Specifically, the students identified three general areas that they felt helped them improve their grades, behavior, and attendance. These areas were: program structure, faculty/staff, and environment. Students identified the individualized, self-paced method of instruction which allowed students to work at their own pace and level, the caring teachers, and lack of “typical” distractions as most helpful to their success at the PLC.

There were few areas that the students identified as needing improvement. They identified the negative perceptions that their parents had of Westside School in general, as one of the issues that could be addressed. Better public relations with the community and specifically parents, may help to change the negative perception of what seems to be a positive program. The students also brought up the issue of food. They felt that the food and portions are more in line with an elementary school. The focus groups also uncovered a problem with the mentoring aspect of the program. Only a few of the ten students in the focus group stated they had a mentor. Of those, the contact with the mentor can be best described as sporadic. With all of the research identifying “. . . that mentoring can, in many instances, help young people change direction and do better academically and socially,” (U.S. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and Department of Justice, 1996, p. 81). This may be an important area the program needs to target for improvement. Additionally, while the students liked the incentives they received at the end of the week, they did not indicate the incentives had a big impact on attendance.

In addition, the evaluation team also identified other areas of improvement. The primary area of concern was the students’ records. The records kept on PLC students at Westside School were incomplete for the most part. This made it difficult for the evaluation team to determine the academic and behavioral background of the students in the program. For example, many of the student records did not have a completed intake form. To serve the students better and to complete a more comprehensive evaluation, this information would be very helpful.

In conclusion, the evaluation of the PLC at Westside School presents a picture of an alternative school program that is having a positive effect on the students served. The positive aspects of the program described above far outweigh the negative aspects.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What are the differences between Westside School and your previous school?
2. Do you think your attendance has improved, gotten worse or stayed the same since coming to Westside School? Why?
3. Do you think your behavior is better, worse or the same since coming to Westside School? Why?
4. Do you think your grades have improved, gone down, or remained the same since coming to Westside School? Why?
5. Has your mentor helped you? Explain.
6. Have your teachers helped you? Explain.
7. Has the administration helped you? Explain.
8. Has the service coordinator helped you? Explain.
9. Have the incentives helped you? Explain.