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Tips for Implementing a Student Assistance Program

By Van E. Cooley

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Here's how two neighboring school districts combined resources to develop a program for at-risk students. The program proved successful and now operates countywide.

A look at the demographics and other related statistics reveals that today's students come to school with many sociological and psychological problems that affect academics, student behavior, attendance, and the general operation and management of schools. These problems include:

- One of every two marriages occurring since the early 1970s generally ends in a divorce
- 24 percent of youngsters under 18 currently live with one parent
- Nearly 70 percent of youngsters in a single parent situation live with the mother
- 51 percent of women return to the labor force before their child reaches the age of one
- Nearly one of every six families with related children were living in poverty in 1987
- Nearly 16 percent of children live in a stepfamily
- Suicide is the second largest killer among persons 14–25

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- 21.9 percent of the class of 1988 indicated they first used alcohol in grades 7 or 8
- 24 percent of students used marijuana prior to high school, and 23 percent during high school
- The United States leads all developed countries in teenage births and abortions
- 56 million American families indicated alcohol-related problems, with incidents of child abuse reported by 41 percent of the families
- 30 to 40 percent of females and 9 to 11 percent of males have been sexually abused by the age of 18
- The rate of serious crimes has increased 11,000 percent since 1950.

These statistics provide insight into the range of problems that teachers and administrators now face. Teaching and learning are inhibited by problems students bring to school, and educators are forced to assume the role of the extended family and address problems that once were the responsibility of the family.

Student assistance programs are a mechanism to provide students with support and direction. SAFARI (Student Assistance For At-Risk Individuals) is a nationally-recognized, comprehensive, K–12 program that addresses drug and alcohol use, sociological concerns, conflicts experienced by students, and at-risk behaviors that interfere with academic success.

SAFARI began as a cooperative effort between the Westfield-Washington and Marion-Adams School Districts, two neighboring districts located north of Indianapolis, Ind. These districts combined resources to develop a program manual, to provide inservice training for staff members, and to provide education for the community.

At-risk behaviors have no boundaries, and the importance of an effort between neighboring communities cannot be overstated. The SAFARI program expanded countywide, with six school districts now working together. Although programs in these districts differ, there is a cooperative effort in the use of local resources and networking of student activities.

SAFARI Overview

SAFARI serves as an umbrella, supporting and coordinating other student services offered in the Westfield School District. It does not circumvent existing policies or guidelines, but works in conjunction with student services to provide a mechanism to address the needs of at-risk students.

SAFARI consists of six basic components built around prevention, education, and intervention. These components include adopt-a-teacher, support groups, parent education, staff development, student activity clubs, and peer facilitation.

A SAFARI coordinator is responsible for the daily operation of the program. The coordinator serves as

a resource person and facilitator for all SAFARI activities. Implementation and management of SAFARI components is the responsibility of building level core teams.

Core teams are composed of teachers, counselors, school nurses, and administrators from each of the three buildings. The role of the core team is to review student referrals, assess the needs of the referred student, and match the student with the appropriate program component. Student progress is monitored by the core team, which meets on a regular basis.

The core team also serves as a board of directors, reviewing policies and procedures, and addressing building level problems. The SAFARI coordinator works closely with core team members in the implementation of SAFARI components. With the exception of the SAFARI coordinator, all other participants in the program are volunteers.

Adopt-a-Teacher

One of the most important components in the SAFARI program is adopt-a-teacher. Adopt-a-teacher involves providing students with self-concept enhancement activities from a teacher and/or staff member on a regular basis.

Personal contact is something that occurs in schools every day, and in every school there is one significant adult who is important to a particular student. The adopt-a-teacher concept formalizes this contact and

strengthens the chance of student success in academic areas by pinpointing specific student needs and providing support.

> At-risk behaviors have no boundaries, and the importance of an effort between neighboring communities cannot be overstated.

The adopt-a-teacher concept allows students to identify several staff members with whom they would feel comfortable, matches student needs to the skills and background of one of those staff members, and provides support/resources for the teacher. Program guidelines suggest a minimum of one contact hour per week for a teacher/student pair. Teachers and staff members meet with students before school, after school, during lunch, and during preparation periods. Adopt-a-teachers are provided with ongoing training and support. Feedback from the adopt-a-teacher and student is required.

Taking a student out of the classroom may cause conflict with some teachers. Westfield teachers were surveyed to determine teacher preference for the most convenient time for students to leave class. The message to teachers and staff members

must be that significant learning will not occur if a student has problems or concerns that are not being addressed. When teachers understand that student problems and conflicts lead to disruptive behavior and inhibit academic progress, they will more likely be willing participants.

Support Groups

A second program component is support groups. Providing students a forum to discuss problems and concerns in a safe, appropriate environment is a major program goal. Support groups are groups of students meeting with trained facilitators to discuss common problems and concerns. Support groups provide students with information and skills for decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Groups are based on student needs and facilitated by two trained adults. Group leaders may be counselors, teachers who have been trained in specific areas of interest, or professional staff members on loan from outside agencies.

Groups conducted in the Westfield Schools have dealt with topics such as self-esteem for retainees, comfort for new students, bereavement, divorce, pregnancy and young mothering skills, eating disorders, insight drug/alcohol discussions, and recovery/after-care. Support groups provide an appropriate avenue for peer discussion, exploration, and clarification of values and behaviors.

Parent Education

Parent education is a key SAFARI component. Providing support, education, and decision-making skills to students will have little effect if the student returns home at the end of each day to a negative home environment. Most parents want to do what is best for their child, but many do not possess the knowledge and skills to be strong, assertive role models. SAFARI provides parents the opportunity to enhance parental knowledge and skills through several avenues.

Providing parents useful information in reference to at-risk behaviors is an important first step. Each parent in the Westfield district was mailed a SAFARI parent handbook. The handbook provides an overview of the program, program goals, a policy statement, program definitions, an alternative to expulsion policy, substance abuse warning signs, a discussion of prevention techniques, and a list of referral agencies.

Another educational component is the SAFARI parent newsletter. Parents are mailed a quarterly newsletter that updates parents on SAFARI activities. The newsletter promotes awareness of at-risk behaviors and provides other useful information. Core team members and teachers working with students are often featured in the newsletter.

Community programming is used to build parent awareness of and confidence in recognizing and addressing student at-risk behavior.

The program, SAFARI Saturday, a morning of professionally led workshops concerning needs determined by survey, is only one example of this approach. Such programs earn credibility and establish the school as a resource when planning includes complimentary breakfasts and local "celebrities" such as an anchor of the local television news station.

The most comprehensive effort of parent education has been the crisis-based parent conference. This concept involves school officials taking a major role in matching parent/family needs with the appropriate resource. The success of this concept is based on problem identification and an up-to-date listing of available resources.

Another parent education service is the "Active Parenting Classes." Active Parenting is a packaged program composed of videotapes and parent workbooks. This interactive program provides parents with information to improve parenting skills and a support group to discuss similar problems and concerns. The Active Parenting Class consists of six two-hour sessions. The success of Active Parenting can be seen through continued interaction among group members. Members of active parenting classes continue to meet and discuss mutual problems.

SAFARI Student Activity Clubs

SAFARI Activity Clubs are cocurricular activities developed to complement the program. The major purpose of SAFARI club is to promote a drug/alcohol-free environment.

Research indicates peer disapproval of drug and alcohol abuse has translated into a reduction in the number of students using drugs (Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 1989). The elementary, middle level, and high schools all have SAFARI clubs.

In the elementary school, SAFARI club activities begin with the "Just Say No Pledge." Normally, three simulation activities focusing on decision making are provided. The final activity focuses on alcohol/drugs and actions student should take if offered alcohol or drugs. A third part of the program is an outside speaker.

> SAFARI activities provide students the opportunity to discuss concerns and to work through school/family problems.

Topics presented at the elementary SAFARI club have included representatives from the American Lung Society focusing on the harm of tobacco use; hospital personnel speaking on wellness; individuals from the Safety Task Force discussing the importance of seat belt use; representatives from local utility companies speaking on safety in the home; firemen discussing home escape routes in case of fire; and a professional athlete speaking on

drug and alcohol abuse. Games and recreational activities are often part of the SAFARI agenda. Refreshments provided by parents are served at the conclusion of the formal meeting.

Middle level SAFARI clubs meet weekly during an activity period, and monthly at an after-school meeting. First semester activities are informational, focusing on making students aware of school resources. Situations middle level students may face are discussed. Second semester activities stress building peer disapproval for drug/alcohol use. The message conveyed is that there are fun and fulfilling activities that do not require drugs or alcohol. Development of a no-use value is extremely important.

SAFARI activities provide students the opportunity to discuss concerns and to work through school/family problems. Involvement with the coordinator and core team members is an important foundation for the trusting relationship needed in identifying students with needs and encouraging students to seek help.

The high school SAFARI club is a cocurricular activity that provides a number of social and community activities for students. One student activity is the SAFARI Care Core. High school students are provided training, and must serve the community at least four hours per month. Many students are trained as peer facilitators and work with SAFARI clubs at the elementary and middle levels. Other students volunteer

time at the elementary school, providing positive role models for individual students or small groups.

Members of the high school SAFARI club also serve as a liaison to the Hamilton County Youth Council, which is composed of student representatives from six area schools. The purpose of the Hamilton County Youth Council is to promote drug/ alcohol-free social activities countywide.

Peer Facilitation

Peer facilitation is important to any student assistance program. Peers who serve as role models, group facilitators, peer tutors, and teachers in regularly scheduled classroom activities strengthen the younger students' resolve to adopt healthy life choices. SAFARI uses both "role model" and "at-risk" type student facilitators. Success of this component lies in careful screening, training, monitoring, and scheduling.

Implementing a Program

Procedures followed in implementing a student assistance program will, to a large extent, determine if the program will be successful. Student assistance programs in most schools are voluntary programs; and teachers, staff, and community members must have input into program development from the start. Staff and community members must feel there is a need for such a program.

Administrators, teachers, and parents must realize that there are no quick solutions for student misbehav-

ior, and that positive modification of student behavior will take time. There are nine steps local school districts can take to ensure success. They are needs assessment, formation of a community advisory group, staff inservice, material development, in-house inservice on use of materials, implementation of SAFARI concepts, recognition, consensus building, and planned evaluation.

1. Needs Assessment

The first step in developing a SAFARI program is to determine if there is a need for student assistance programming. The procedure is accomplished through surveys, interviews, examination of records, and other data collection methods. An assessment can normally be conducted in a short period of time. Student drug and alcohol abuse patterns, student absenteeism, dropout rates, behavior, suicide, and academic progress in the Westfield school district were examined. Information pertaining to single parent homes, latchkey children, and percentage of student body qualifying for free lunch was also reviewed. The information was tabulated and the need for a program established.

2. Formation of a Community Advisory Group

Community advisory group members were students, parents, law enforcement personnel, a local attorney, a local physician, school nurse, news media representative, teachers, and administrators. This group verified the needs assessment,

developed a policy statement, and examined several program options.

Other schools with student assistance programs in operation were visited. Members of the committee reviewed literature and collected data on program options. Once a decision was made to implement a student assistance concept, a presentation was made before the Board of Trustees.

3. Comprehensive Inservice for Teachers and Administrators

Eight teachers who were involved in researching the student assistance concept attended state and national conferences. These teachers returned with a great deal of information on program development. Each teacher assumed a specific area of responsibility in developing parent and teacher handbooks. These teachers, representing each of the three buildings, became charter members of the district core team. A consultant who had worked with other school districts in implementing a student assistance program was hired to provide insight and program direction. Three inservice days were selected, and all teachers in the Westfield-Washington School District were invited to participate.

Substitutes were hired and inservice activities were held during regular school hours. Approximately 85 percent of all staff members attended the student assistance inservice training. Local news media representatives and members of the parent advisory group also participated in the training sessions.

Inservice and faculty development are ongoing activities. Teachers and administrators are encouraged to attend state and national conferences on drug/alcohol abuse, suicide, pregnancy, divorce, and other appropriate topics. Teachers and administrators returning from conferences meet with core teams and disseminate information and resources.

Conference participation has been a reward for teachers and administrators who have volunteered extra hours working on the program. Many area hospitals and drug treatment facilities provide educational programs at no cost to school districts. It is recommended that a substantial part of the at-risk budget be earmarked for training and development.

4. Material Development

The SAFARI program addresses many sensitive issues. Teachers, administrators, and staff members who participate must be knowledgeable, and the program must have established procedures for program operation and decision making. One mistake can destroy program credibility; therefore, care and time are necessary in developing policies and procedures. Written policy and procedures cannot be overemphasized.

Information pertaining to the SAFARI program should be packaged in a teacher handbook. This document should provide information on student referral, identification, follow-up procedures, parental communication, and student tracking forms. Information on the adopt-a-

teacher concept and support group procedure should also be included. The teacher handbook should also contain suggested group activities and materials to be used with adopt-a-students. Guidelines for student assistance activities are specific, and record keeping and evaluation forms should be provided. This document helps to promote and maintain program credibility.

Parents must also be informed of the purpose and nature of student assistance programming prior to program implementation. It is recommended that a parent handbook be developed and distributed to parents and the community before the program is initiated. Westfield-Washington and Marion Adams core teams jointly developed a comprehensive parent handbook. Communication with parents and community in the Westfield-Washington school district has continued through a SAFARI parent newsletter. This document provides parents ongoing program information and suggestions for effective parenting.

Extra time and effort in material development are essential. The "Medium Is the Message," and comprehensive, polished documents result in program credibility.

5. In-House Inservice on Use of Materials

Step five involves conducting an inservice on use of the SAFARI teacher handbook. Each teacher and staff member should be provided a handbook, and inservice sessions held to discuss procedures with

teachers. The importance of following guidelines listed in the handbook should be emphasized. Teachers are asked to record problems they have implementing the program manual and to share these concerns with core team representatives. Modifications can then be made based upon feedback. The ongoing nature of this process is important to program success.

6. Implementation of SAFARI Concepts.

Adopt-a-teacher and support groups were the first concepts to be implemented on Westfield-Washington. SAFARI clubs and parent information programming were soon established. Program awareness encourages families in need to seek support. The serious nature of those needs requires responsible program planning and growth. The perspective taken by the Westfield-Washington School District was that "it was better to do a few things right, than a lot of things wrong." In the beginning, emphasis was placed on adopt-a-teacher and support groups.

7. Recognition for Teachers and Staff Who Participate in SAFARI

SAFARI, a voluntary program implemented with less than $30,000, depends on teachers, staff members, and parents who volunteer time to work with students. It is critical that teachers, parents, and administrators receive as much recognition for their efforts as possible. SAFARI personnel must be recognized at school board meetings, luncheons, and through the media. Individuals who have worked to make the program a success must be rewarded for their contributions. Recognition may be informal, but it must be continuing and consistent.

8. Consensus Building

This involves marketing and ensuring that core team members, teachers, parents, and community members have ownership in the program. Comprehensive public relations must continue with the news media encouraged to cover special events. Presentations are made to the parent-teacher organization and civic groups, and parent volunteers are asked to assist and supervise SAFARI activities.

The SAFARI program, in two and a half short years, has become the most recognized and credible program in the Westfield-Washington Schools. The fact the program attempts to positively meet the needs of students, parents, and the community has led to acceptance and support. However, this acceptance and support requires the marketing of an awareness that a recognized change in student behavior does not immediately follow the implementation of a student assistance program. Student assistance programs address many sensitive, complicated topics, and the modification of student behavior takes time.

One of the most important aspects in consensus building is the SAFARI coordinator. Program credibility and the credibility of the coordinator go hand in hand. It is important that the SAFARI coordinator be organized and child-centered, possess common sense and strong communication skills, be available to the community, and, most of all, be a people person.

9. Program Evaluation

Evaluation procedures should be established prior to implementing a program. It is important to evaluate each program component and activity. Each program component is evaluated by student, teacher, and administrative participants. Student grades, attendance, and behavioral patterns represent criteria used to assess changes in student attitude and behavior.

Westfield students in grades 6 through 12 are given a drug/alcohol survey each year. Survey results are used to document changes in use, perceived usage, and attitudes concerning usage. The survey provides a basis for continuing program assessment and modification.

Impact of SAFARI

SAFARI has resulted in a more student-centered approach by teachers, administrators, and staff. A 95 percent involvement of teachers and staff in the adopt-a-teacher program reflects program acceptance. More than 62 percent of the students perceive SAFARI as being for all students, and not just a drug/alcohol program. In addition, more than 25 percent of the students stated they knew of someone helped through SAFARI. Nearly 60 percent of the students reported that SAFARI had encouraged less drug/alcohol use, and more than 59 percent of the students suggested SAFARI had made it easier for students to be accepted in school.

SAFARI's success must also be measured by the increased requests for help. The program has responded to a seventh grade student's report of parent usage, a third grade student's concern of an aunt's possession of what the student perceived as cocaine, a landlord's report of suspected alcohol abuse and child neglect, a family's request to help an elementary age brother and sister through a father's arrest for DWI and the family's confrontation with his alcoholism, and a father's decision to confront his son about truancy and related chemical abuse.

SAFARI counts among its successes a strong working relationship with area counselors and therapists in a unified student, parent, counselor, and school approach in the matters of incorrigibility, low self-esteem, lack of motivation, drug/alcohol abuse, poor social skills, and other behaviors not previously addressed in the systematic, "team" approach provided by SAFARI. SAFARI's greatest success is also the success most difficult to document: the change of attitude taking place throughout the Westfield community.

Conclusion

Student assistance programs may not be the solution for all the problems students bring to school; however, student assistance programs provide a cost effective framework

for addressing student behaviors that affect the general operation and management of schools. The SAFARI program discussed here is an attempt to address causes rather than symptoms of student misbehavior. Schools, as a microcosm of society, must address the problems that affect society. Student assistance programs provide a progressive, aggressive approach to improving the educational environment.

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Magnet Schools Aren't That Different

Magnet schools enhance desegregation in school districts, but they aren't as different from other schools as people think, according to Robert A. Dentler, senior scientist at the Southwest Regional Laboratory.

Dentler says the success of magnet schools in desegregation can be attributed in large part to commitment. And, just as the level of a district's commitment to desegregation can determine the desegregative potential of the magnet school, the level of a district's commitment to achievement has a lot to do with a magnet school's educational outcomes.
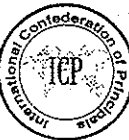
Good magnet schools demonstrate equity by drawing a mix of white, African American, and other minority students, Dentler says, and they use these cultural differences as an educational resource to foster respect among students.

But, he warns, magnets are also "havens for parents seeking to avoid interracial contact or seeking to preserve special educational advantages."

Dentler's report, *The National Evidence of Magnet Schools*, was published by the Southwest Regional Laboratory.