

THE SELECT 50 INITIATIVE: HELPING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ACHIEVE ACADEMICALLY THROUGH SCHOOL-FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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This poster presentation summarizes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that involved helping 50 students identified as being academically at-risk in each of 12 middle schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This PAR project emerged from Milwaukee's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLC) Initiative, which provides after school programs for students, families and community residents. The CLC Initiative has documented that after school programs help students academically. The challenge is to identify, recruit and retain students in after school programs that are at risk of failing academically. This is a particular challenge for middle school students. Accordingly, at the beginning of the 2001-2002 academic year, a group of 12 middle school principals with CLC programs were asked to select 50 students who were at risk academically. Parents, retired teachers, and local community residents were recruited to fill positions as half-time outreach workers. The outreach workers were charged with building and sustaining personal relationships with these students, their families and their teachers. The task was simple but challenging: Create a personal relationship that is based on trust, support and improved communication between the students, parents, and teachers. It was assumed that through this supportive relationship students would improve academically in terms of grades, attendance and overall attitude toward school.

The focus of this poster presentation is on the activities and learning that occurred among the Outreach Workers as they implemented the project. The display highlights the array of practices that the outreach workers implemented, the challenges and barriers they encountered, the success they enjoyed, and the results they produced in student academic achievement. Representatives from the project are available to discuss the learning that occurred not only among the select 50 students but more importantly, from an adult education perspective, among the teachers, administrators, parents and community volunteers who work with at-risk students.

The implementation of the project evolved over three phases: Phase I involved gaining entry into the schools and establishing connections between the outreach workers, teachers, principals and the CLC after school programs. This phase also included identifying the pool of students who were at risk of academic failure and recruiting students into the program. Phase II involved establishing connections with the students and building a relationship of support and trust between the students and the outreach worker. This phase also included building similar relationships of trust and support between the outreach workers, teachers and the parents of the select 50 students. Phase III involved the on-going work with the select 50 students with emphasis on helping them remain focused on their studies as well as maintaining the web of support among the teachers, parents, CLC staff and other caring adults.

This Select 50 initiative represents an innovative Participatory Action Research strategy that connects university credit/non-credit instruction with community education initiatives that delivers tangible gains in student learning and academic performance, professional development for teachers and community outreach workers, and meaningful change in school policies and procedures. The Select 50 outreach workers and their supervisor participated in an action research class organized through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Community Development. Much of the class discussions were focused on the learning that must occur among the adults working with the students, i.e., teachers, principals, CLC staff and parents. The challenges and barriers that the outreach workers identified and in many cases were able to overcome came most often not from the students but from the school as an organization and culture and the adults who were working with the students.

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