Recasting At-Risk Students as Leaders

By Jason Towne

"I guess I'm a loser," Michael, 16, told me when I asked why he was going to drop out, "and school is a waste of time."

Needless to say, I was disturbed by his plan, but even more by his self-assessment. I shared my high school story and that I, too, had failed, but then turned it around and became a leader. "I'm no leader," he retorted. Soon after our conversation, Michael dropped out.

Michael's sad story got me thinking about the potential role of leadership development for at-risk youths—one of the most important, yet frequently neglected, factors in motivating failing students to reach their maximum potential.

In 2009, I published a book based on conversations with great teachers, and since then I have traveled the United States speaking with various groups, including school district leaders, principals, teachers, and troubled students.

During one of my visits to a high school in Florida, I met a principal with a problem. He had a dropout-prevention program that wasn't working. He couldn't get his at-risk students to show up for counseling or to show any interest at all in being helped.

Michael popped into my head. I needed to think differently. I suggested a radical change—transform the dropout-prevention program into a leadership program, target at-risk students, and make it invitation-only. The principal agreed to try it, and we crafted a plan.

Nearly 100 students were invited to join a new leadership committee. The students were all potential dropouts, mainly because of their high absentee rates. The staff worked hard to "rebrand" the program from yet another don't-drop-out lecture to a unique opportunity.

The key to making this work was to impress upon the selected students that they were on the committee not to help themselves, but to help other struggling students. They would be the team that would help reshape their school and possibly their entire district.

The students' input was needed because the adversity they had experienced brought with it unique perspectives that couldn't be found elsewhere. It did not matter whether they had actually overcome adversity yet; just experiencing it was enough. They were important.

Official invitations to the first meeting were hand-delivered to each student by the principal himself. We used the term "leader" a lot, as I believe that most kids respond well to leadership and want to become leaders at something. Nearly all the kids I knew at my old urban school, for example, wanted to one day run their own businesses, a sure sign of leadership ambition.

So when we approached the students to help us start a leadership movement, most were shocked. People just didn't think about them like that.

Over the following week, teachers and other school staff members promoted the new leadership committee. This was going to be more than just a one-time brainstorming session, but rather a group that met on a regular basis, worked collaboratively, and
effected real change. This was a rare opportunity, and it was our hope that it would begin to transform the mentality of the students from "losing" to leading.

The program launch took place in the school's media center; surprisingly, nearly every invited student showed up. There were multiple tables with a moderator (assistant principal, guidance counselor, teacher, and so on) at each. The principal thanked the students for being a part of the new leadership team and told them they had an opportunity to change the world, one school at a time. He then introduced me, and I engaged them for 20 minutes about opportunities and the future. Given my own background, and subsequent turnaround, they seemed to relate to me.

When I finished, the students were then asked by their table moderators to fill out a one-page information sheet about themselves. Then it was their turn to talk. Simultaneously, each moderator went around his or her respective table and asked the students to share personal stories. They talked about the problems they had and potential solutions for those with similar issues. Because this was for others, the students let loose, relating stories of poverty, abuse, neglect, apathy, peer pressure, and bullying. It often got emotional, and tears were not uncommon for the kids and the adults.

During the meeting, the principal and a visiting area superintendent spent time at each table listening to students and praising good ideas. It was clear that something special was occurring. The same students who wouldn't show up for counseling or, if they did, would simply shut down, were now emphatically engaged. They were so intent on helping others that it never occurred to them how much they were now allowing us to help them as well. Or maybe deep down they did know, and this was a cry for help that this leadership format made socially acceptable. Either way, the committee was a success.

After the gathering, teachers and others at the school began to think about at-risk students differently, and the kids knew it. They came across as inspired, motivated, valued, and respected. Many started to attend school more regularly and even recruited other struggling students to join the cause. They were being listened to by the highest authorities they knew. They had a purpose. A voice. Everything had changed.

I often think back to Michael and how different our conversation might have been had he been exposed to a culture of leadership like this. I believe he would have invariably helped himself through the helping of others—the very hallmark of a leader, not a loser.

Jason Towne is the author of Conversations With America's Best Teachers (Inkster Publishing, 2009) and a speaker on issues relating to education and leadership. He is now studying in the master's program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
Sheri Williams  
1:18 PM on August 8, 2014

Jason, Thank you for reframing the conversation. This story is being replicated across the country by educators who refuse to label students at-risk. In my experience as a CEO in a rural district in the southwest, I created a student advisory to engage the voices of marginalized students. We found that students ‘dropped back in’ when their assets were recognized and respected.

5 Townsend  
2:06 PM on August 8, 2014

Demonstrating through actions like these, not only words, that we believe students can and WILL succeed-in fact ARE succeeding is huge. This reminded me of a recent article in the NY Times about another successful program, working with at risk freshman students at Texas AM. The message is always about doing what it takes to know they will succeed...not ‘fleeing from academic risk.”  
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html?_r=0

lbkoz58  
2:51 PM on August 8, 2014

It’s difficult for me to respond to this without getting emotional. So many of our “at risk” students are perceived negatively but this initiative shows that a deeper analysis of inappropriate behavior, along with ”SEL” strategies can lead to motivating student engagement. When children along with adults have a history of failure, self esteem can easily be destroyed causing destructive behavior. That negative behavior for children can manifest itself by students interfering with classroom instruction. It’s easier to give up when you have a history of failure and that’s why it’s so important for teachers to “FIND A WAY FOR A CHILD/ STUDENT TO SUCCEED”!! For example a student that starts failing in class as early as September and carries that pattern for a series of months should alert an educator that an intervention is needed immediately! I often encourage teachers to assign an activity that for sure will yield positive results. Once the student experiences success, than move with baby steps to more difficult assignments. The student will realize that he or she can do the work and will welcome more challenging work.

By reading excerpts from “The Courage to Be Yourself”: (True Stories by Teens About Cliques, Conflicts, and Overcoming Peer Pressure) to my students, I too received similar feedback and full engagement from my students. They shared their stories mostly in writing. The stories were heart winching. I shared the writings with my administrators and they were surprised that the students opened up to me. Going forward I was able to establish the nurturing environment needed to facilitate
instruction with respect.

The initiative described in this article addressed Social Emotional Learning on a school-wide level and helped to build the student's self esteem by focusing on leadership skills. Little to say if more struggling/ failing schools took this approach we could begin to narrow the achievement gap and increase college and career skills in our most neediest populations.

Thank you for this post and I hope it's shared with many education policy makers, teachers, parents, school administrators at all levels and union reps.

Leeana Koznesoff

Dr. Marvin Marshall
5:39 PM on August 8, 2014

One of the most import things teachers can do is to change mindsets of kids at risk. Out self-talk drives our actions. In addition, the easiest way to promote responsible behavior is to empower. MarvinMarshall.com show how to do both.

plthomas
7:43 AM on August 10, 2014

Two things:

(1) Let's focus on the conditions that create so-called "at risk" children, instead of maintaining a culture of "fixing" broken children

(2) Let's reject deficit views of children, period

"What These Children Are Like": Rejecting Deficit Views of Poverty and Language


geonz
12:54 PM on August 14, 2014

William Raspberry wrote a column too many years back about a program at Georgia Tech that had a turnaround when they framed their "at risk" program as a selective program for leaders. We just have a boatload of trouble acknowledging "and" applying the idea that focusing on strengths -- but not ignoring the deficits -- can work.
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