

PART 1

Access to Educational Services



An Action Research Study:

CHAPTER 1

***Motivating Norms:
Increasing Motivation in Rural America***

Amy Cox

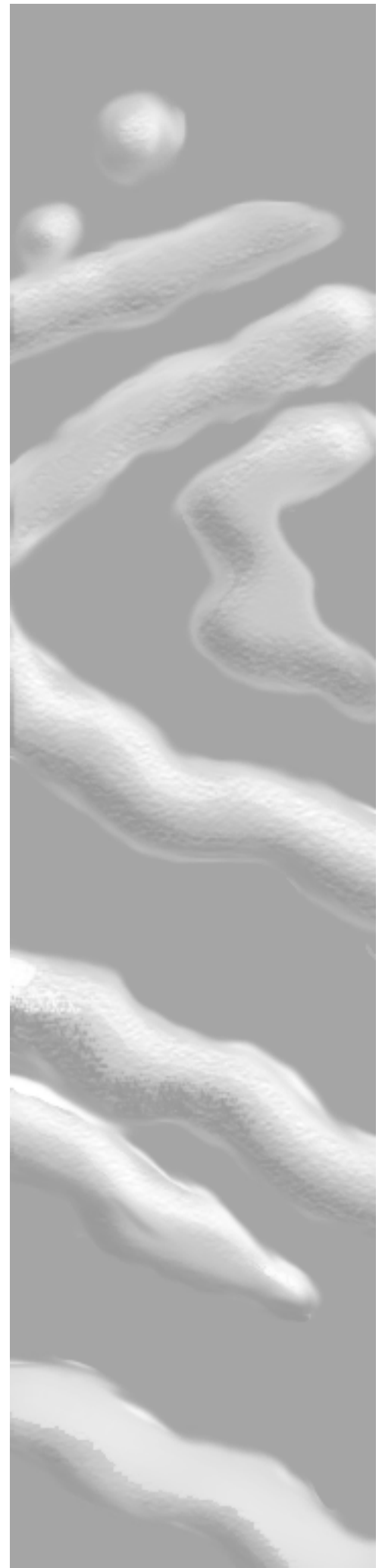
2nd Grade Teacher

Mountain Valley School

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After the survey, we compiled the results and placed posters throughout the school to inform the students of each other's goals and dreams for the future. The students were amazed at the results.

Background

Mountain Valley School is a small rural school located in the ranching community of Saguache, Colorado. Geographically it is the highest alpine valley in the world and is located in the southern part of the state between the Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Mountains. There are about 600 people living in Saguache (Sa-watch) and the surrounding area. Saguache is a Ute Indian name for Blue Earth or Blue Waters reflecting the amount of water the northern valley had in the early 1800's. Water was plentiful and it brought in farmers and ranchers, thus the economy was good. The amount of water available for farming and ranching affects the economy of the area. We are presently in the midst of a 4-year drought. Therefore, the economy has been poor. It is 50 miles from the nearest large grocery store or recreational facility, 40 miles from the nearest hospital. The community is 50% white, 49% Hispanic and 1% Indian. Seventy-five percent of the students are on free and reduced lunches. Many of the students have moved several times within the community, from low-income housing to friends or family and then back to low-income housing again. We have 150 students K-12. Class size ranges from three to 25 students. The school has been in a financial downhill slide for the last 3 years.

The researchers

Amy Cox teaches 2nd grade at Mountain Valley and has lived in the San Luis Valley for most of her life. Her family has been here for six generations. Her grandmother was born in a small log cabin here. She grew up on the same large cattle ranch that her ancestors homesteaded. She experienced the economic importance of water and the lack of it first hand. Her grandfather and father both graduated from Mountain Valley School and Amy graduated in 1974. This community is part of her life; her roots are deep.

Yvonne Morfitt is a middle/high school teacher. She has been teaching here for eight years. She teaches a variety of subjects ranging from Algebra, Social Studies, Life Skills, Science and Small Business. She grew up in large metropolitan school in the Midwest. Her high school provided plentiful opportunities and the community was middle /high class. Yvonne was the homeless liaison for our school one year and through it, she became very interested in finding out what motivates these students to learn.

Our highly mobile students

Saguache does not have a homeless shelter. The closest shelter is 55 miles away. We have a 20% homeless/mobile population. We do not have a stereotypical homeless population in our community. Our homeless students live in foster homes, or live with their grandparents, or are single parents living in low-income housing. They are eager to graduate from high school. Our school provides on-line learning to the students that cannot make it to the classroom for a semester or a year. We check a computer out to them for the extended period and we monitor their progress to help them stay on task. This works great for the teen mothers who have a new baby at home and still want to graduate with their class. They are able to keep up the coursework without the stress of finding a babysitter and being a new mother.

The first cycle

The first cycle of our research was a questionnaire. We tried to come up with questions that would give us information about the mobility in their lives. We gave the survey to the students that we considered homeless and or mobile. After compiling this, we found that these students at Mountain Valley School felt they were getting a good education, and they liked the teachers and the school. They felt well liked, and that it was easy to adjust to our school. The reasons for families moving around are generally due to lack of jobs and housing in the area. A few of the students were living in foster homes or had moved here to live with relatives

because of certain family situations. For example, a young man came to our school as a kindergartener. Now he is in the third grade. This past year he and his mom lived with his grandmother and aunt. In the fall, the grandmother lost the house and moved to a large city, four hours from here. The student and his mother then moved back with the mother's ex-husband. The relationship proved to be violent. As time passed, they moved in with a friend. Presently, they have moved back to the large city, four hours away, and live with his grandmother and aunt.

After compiling the information from this first survey, we were in a quandary. Stories like this, and the data collected in our survey, was not enough to get us motivated and into the research we wanted to do to eventually benefit our community and school. We decided to write new questions.

The second cycle

We wanted information about the student's dreams of graduation from high school and college. What would prevent them from graduating and reaching their dreams? In order to increase motivation in Mountain Valley School, we felt the students needed to be aware of what the dreams of their other classmates were and what we expected of them academically. People's perceptions of the norms are often a good predictor of what they will say or do. We decided to use social norming to test the goals our students had through another survey.

This time we gave the survey to every student in the school K-12. The students answered questions concerning the dreams and goals in their life after high school. Motivating the students to learn in order to reach their goals was our hope with the survey. We hoped to open their eyes and see that most of them have the same high goals. The result may be little or no improvement unless the students increase their level of effort. The students must learn how to achieve their goals and realize that they must do the work.

Research has shown that in order for the students to change their behavior they must believe that they have the potential to be successful. They must have certain conditions present to perform this behavior. The research outlines three of

these conditions. First, the person perceives that performance of the behavior is consistent with his or her self-image and that it does not violate personal standards. Second, the person perceives that he or she has the capability to perform the behavior under a number of different circumstances. In other words, the person has “self-efficacy” with respect to executing the behavior in question. Third, the person possesses the skills necessary to perform the behavior (Fishbein, 1995).

Popular opinion has it that the students will never amount to anything outside of Saguache, Colorado. Research from Mirochnik, McCaul, and McIntire (1991) showed students who came from low-income circumstances had lower educational aspirations than did their more economically advantaged peers. O’Hare (1988) stated that poverty rates are higher in rural America than anywhere else. Rural families with two people working are falling into poverty at a very high rate. The combination of rising tuition rates and falling family incomes may make attending college an unrealistic choice for many students. However, we found that their academic success did not correlate with their dreams and goals when they graduate from high school. One hundred percent of the students K-12 planned to graduate from high school. Seventy percent of the students planned to attend college and graduate if they could finance it. Forty percent of the students wanted to attend a small 4-year college. Eighty nine percent of the students planned to own their own homes after graduating from college. Ninety-three percent planned to own new vehicles after graduating from high school and 40% planned to marry and have children before they are 30 years old. After the survey, we compiled the results and placed posters throughout the school to inform the students of each other’s goals and dreams for the future. The students were amazed at the results. The graphs gave the students a lot to discuss. The findings generated good conversations for the students and motivated them to accomplish their goals for themselves and to motivate each other to reach their goals. The teachers realized that the students have more motivation than we actually see them doing.

An article by Robert Harris on Motivating Students (Harris, 1991) suggested that students would be much more committed to a learning activity that has value for them, either in long term or short term. They would in fact put up with substantial

immediate unpleasantness and do an amazing amount of hard work if they are convinced that what they are learning ultimately will meet their needs.

After researching the last senior class, we found that of the 15 students, 10 enrolled in college and seven planned to enroll for a second year. They had high expectations of themselves and followed through with their dreams so far. Higher education and the higher paying jobs it represents may be what are drawing the young people out of this community.

Conclusions

The cycles of participatory action research have certainly given us exciting results. We feel that motivation in our school is an ongoing research topic. We as teachers have a duty to pass on this information to the entire school and community. The parents and teachers of these children need to raise their expectations of the students as the students have done for themselves and the students will achieve better academic performance in the classroom. We must continue to let them know that the perceived norm is not really what is true. Students have high expectations of themselves and if they all know they have the same expectations that in itself will increase the motivation to learn in our school. The community could also signal its commitment to these young students' education by providing scholarships, recognizing academic as well as athletic achievement, create apprenticeships and work/study opportunities and developing venture capital for the young entrepreneurs. A school and community effort should prepare these students to leave, but to empower them to return and provide economic support to our rural community.

Amy and Yvonne will go back to their classroom this next year and have high expectations of the students. We will continue to have posters up in the school to remind the students and teachers at Mountain Valley that the students have great goals and they need to support each other in their academic achievements to attain these goals. Because of our research, we hope to increase the level of academic achievement here at our school and involve the community and parents in the students' learning.

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APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1

CO PAR Questionnaire

Are you: Male Female

Age: _____ years

Grade level: _____

Ethnicity: Anglo/White Hispanic Indian Other

1. Do you live... in town out of town
 not on a farm/ranch on a farm/ranch

2. Where do you think your parents get information about the world, your town, and your school? Choose 2 answers
 - Saguache Crescent
 - Pueblo Chieftain or the Denver Post
 - TV News
 - General TV
 - Radio
 - Friends
 - Family members
 - School
 - Church
 - Telephone
 - Internet
 - None of the above

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1

3. Where do you get your information about the world, your town and school? Choose 2 answers.

- Saguache Crescent
- Pueblo Chieftain or the Denver Post
- TV News
- General TV
- Radio
- Friends
- Family members
- School
- Church
- Telephone
- Internet
- None of the above

4. Do you think you will graduate from High School?

- Yes
- No

If no, what will prevent you from graduating?

5. How many of your friends do you think will graduate from High School?

- 0
- 1 – 3
- 4 – 6
- 7 – 9
- 10 – 15
- 15 – 20
- All of my friends

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1

6. What do you think your job will be when you graduate from High School?
7. What kind of jobs do you think your friends will have when they graduate from High School?
8. Do you think you will enroll in college?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
9. Do you think your friends will enroll in college?
- Yes
 - No
10. Do you think you will attend a:
- Community college
 - A small 4-year college
 - A large university
 - A trade school
 - Don't know what kind of school I will attend
 - Don't want to go to any more school

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1

11. What do you think your job will be when you graduate from college?
12. What do you think your friends will do for work after they graduate from college?
13. What do you think you will be driving when you are grown up? (When you are thirty.)
- Brand new vehicle
 - A used vehicle
14. What do you think you will be living in when you are grown up?
- A rental home
 - Low-income housing
 - You will own your own home
15. When you are grown up will you be:(check all that apply)
- Married
 - Single
 - Divorced
 - With children
 - Without children
16. When you are grown up will you be:
- Self-employed (work for yourself)
 - Be an employee (work for someone)
 - Not have a job
 - Living on welfare

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1

17. How much money do you think you will make when you are grown up?

- \$14,000.00
- \$30,000.00
- \$80,000.00 or more

18. How many of your friends do you think have life-long dreams?

19. What are your life-long dreams? (What do you want to be when you grow up?)

20. Do you dream about being a:

- Doctor
- lawyer
- Scientist
- Teacher
- Business owner
- clerk
- farmer/rancher
- nurse
- Fireman
- EMT
- law enforcement officer
- Wildlife officer
- Forester
- County employee
- Other. Please list _____

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1

21. Have your parents gone to college?

Yes

No

If so, for how long? _____

Do they have a college diploma? _____

Of all the adults that you like and consider a role model for your life what was their highest level of education?

22. The reason for leaving my last school was:

23. How many elementary schools have you attended? _____

24. Where or with whom do you live?

With friends

With parents

With grandparents or other relatives

A homeless shelter

An Action Research Study:

CHAPTER 2

Planning for the Impact of High Mobility

Pam Watson

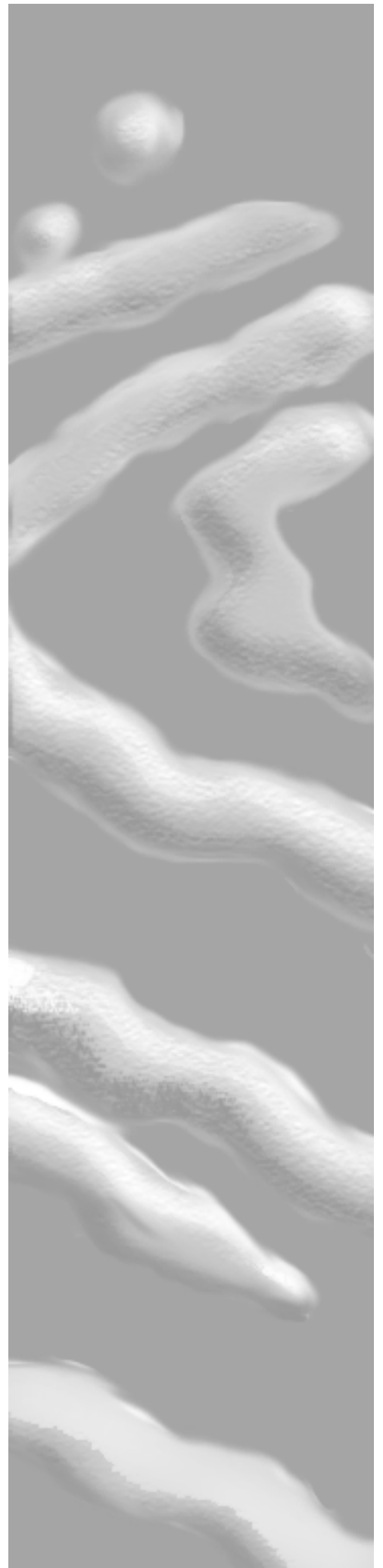
ESL Teacher

Columbine Elementary School

Ron Pflug

Principal

Columbine Elementary School



Data from our first round of interviews gave us some insight. Parents of struggling, mobile students often did not understand that their child was not performing at grade level. They tended to feel that the child was doing well in school. In addition, parents of these students had very little knowledge of additional learning opportunities that were available to their child. The parents also tended to predict that their traveling days were over and they expected their child to complete his/her education at our school.

Examining causal factors behind these findings, we asked difficult questions. Do these parents not understand that their child is performing poorly, or is it a case of parental denial? Were school staff members effectively informing parents, or were we being too tactful, as we tried not to offend?

Background

Columbine Elementary School serves approximately 360 students, grades one through four, on the high plains of northeast Colorado. The school's student population is approximately 60% Hispanic and 40% Anglo, with a continuing trend toward a larger Hispanic population. Many immigrants are attracted to the area in search of employment with the local beef plant or sugar beet industry, and many students are at risk of school failure. Contributing factors include many second-language students, a low level of parent education (the average education level of our parents falls between eighth and ninth grade), high poverty (approximately 65% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch), and a mobile population.

Through the 1990's, Columbine students performed at a low, stable level. When the state of Colorado implemented the Colorado State Assessments of Proficiency (CSAP) tests, Columbine students scored significantly below their statewide peers and test scores did not rise over time. Teaching staff morale was low as caring and hard-working teachers perceived their efforts as ineffective. Faced with possible sanctions for continued low performance, several improvement priorities emerged:

- Pursuing grants to provide more resources for students

- Using these resources to provide student interventions which a) target the needs of our students, and b) have a research base and a proven track record
- Committing to staff development which was research-based and embedded in classroom practice

This focus has resulted in significantly higher student performance, to the point where the school has been recognized by the state for its improvement and been taken off Improvement-plan status. However, there still is room for improvement, particularly with lower-performing student groups. Frustrated by the challenges mobile students present, we were eager to participate in an action research study targeting mobility. This project was an opportunity to better understand our students, and use the knowledge gained to improve our programming and raise student achievement. We were also eager to learn more about the action research process so we could apply it to other school issues in the future.

Pam Watson has been an ESL teacher at Columbine Elementary School for nine years, and Ron Pflug is in his twelfth year as school principal. This gives both a perspective on school culture and long-term student demographic and achievement trends. The school's spirit of reform and recent history of improvement have created a readiness to benefit from any data collected and a desire to use this data to benefit students.

Structure of the project

Once we defined “mobility”, our plan of action was as follows:

1. Generate a list of mobile students currently enrolled at Columbine.
2. Determine the current achievement level of these students.
3. Generate a list of all interventions currently in place at the school.
4. Interview parents of identified students to clarify such items as the student's background, the parent's perceptions of the student's success, the student's participation in school-offered intervention opportunities, reasons why students did/did not participate in interventions, and reasons why these interventions were/weren't successful. We administered a similar interview to identify mobile students.

5. Collect follow-up data to respond to new issues arising in the first collection cycle.
6. Use all data collected to reflect upon our previous assumptions and to formulate a set of truths about our students.
7. Use this knowledge to evaluate the effectiveness of our intervention programs and make improvements as necessary.

As we moved through this research project, we came across a student whose situation, we felt, was compelling enough to include as a case study. His story is included in this report.

Generate a list of mobile students

Using the study group's definition of mobility, we examined our enrollment data, expecting to find a large number of mobile students at our school. We were shocked to find relatively few students (twelve) who qualified. Many of our mobile students were so mobile that they had already moved (and so could not be included). We also had a number of students who come and go frequently. While we expected to see them again, they were not in the building at this time and so could not be included. We also found the student distribution to be a little different than we had expected:

- Six were male, six female
- Two were first graders, one second grader, six third graders, and one in fourth grade
- Seven were Hispanic, and five were Anglo

We were surprised that this sample of students was not predominately second-language in nature. Only two of the twelve were receiving ESL services and one more had recently "graduated" to a monitored status, which challenged our earlier assumption.

Determine the current achievement level of these students

Columbine School used various tools to create a “body of evidence” measuring each student’s academic performance including state CSAP tests, NWEA Levels Tests, Accelerated Reader data, Accelerated Math data, STAR tests, STAR Early Literacy Tests, John’s IRI assessments, and student writing samples scored against a CSAP rubric. Using this collection of measurements helped us measure each student’s performance level against grade-level standards.

Concerning the identified students on our list:

- Seven were below grade level
- Five were performing at grade level
- None was above grade level

These findings challenged our early assumption regarding mobility as an accurate predictor of school success, as almost half of this identified population was at grade level.

Generate a list of all interventions currently in place at the school.

The interventions/programs in place to help failing students included the following:

- Three Extended-Day classrooms (three days each week, for an hour after school)
- Homework Club (an hour after school each day, manned by volunteers from a nearby church and work-study students from the local community college)
- Daily one-on-one reading tutoring for struggling students (thirty minutes each day, with approximately 25 students tutored on a daily basis)
- Expanded summer school programming, which included individual reading tutoring.
- Migrant school services and summer programming for identified students
- Small group reading instruction (using additional staff provided by grant funding)

- Special-education services
- Library parent-involvement materials checked out for home use
- Implementation of the Lightspan program to extend learning into student homes

Interview parents and students

Surveys gathered important information from identified students and their parents. A bilingual staff member (the school’s Parent Involvement Coordinator) conducted the parent survey to assure that communication was possible with Spanish-speaking parents, and Pam Watson, who also is bilingual, conducted the student surveys. 12 parents and 12 students were interviewed, survey results were as follows:

1. How is the school year going? What is/isn’t working?

Parents	Students
All responded favorably	General satisfaction. Peer relationships were the important issues.

2. How are you/is your child doing academically?

Parents	Students
Of the seven students performing below grade level, four of those parents felt their child was doing “just fine”.	Students had more accurate perceptions of the academic success, usually agreeing with teacher views.

Research Significance: There is a need to follow up with parents and teachers regarding inaccurate parent perceptions.

3. Are you aware of school interventions in place?

Parents	Students
One parent was aware of five programs, all other parents knew of just one or two.	All students were aware of the school’s Homework Club – unaware of other interventions.

Research Significance: There is a need to communicate better with students and parents re: intervention opportunities.

4. Do you/Does your child participate in any of these programs?

Parents	Students
Three parents indicated that their child regularly attended the Homework Club. No other involvement, though parents wanted to hear more about various programs.	Six students had attended summer school or migrant school the previous summer. Eight were regular Homework Club participants. Four received daily small-group reading instruction. Six regularly check family involvement materials out from the library, one is using Lightspan materials, and one of the two students with Leap Frog access are using those materials.

Research Significance: Surveyors identified a need to examine referral processes in place for interventions – how are students selected to participate?

5. How much are these programs helping you/your child?

Parents	Students
The three parents with students in the Homework Club indicated that they felt the program was very helpful. They could not comment on other interventions, because their children were not participants.	Ten students felt that the programs were helpful; one student indicated they helped “a little”, and one does not participate (and so had no comment).

Research Significance: Programs are perceived favorably, though possibly under-utilized.

6. If you don’t participate in these programs, why is this?

Parents	Students
Three parents indicated they did not know of the programs, two parents indicated their work schedule made their child’s participation difficult.	Only one student responded. After-school transportation was an issue for him and his teacher has arranged for assistance during the school day.

Research Significance: We need to make sure that better communication won’t be hampered by other roadblocks that prevent student participation.

7. If you don’t participate, do you have suggestions re: ways these programs could be improved?

Parents	Students
No suggestions given.	One student indicated that more after-school transportation options would be helpful.

8. You have had a couple of school changes. Why have you been moving, and have these moves impacted school success?

Parents	Students
All parents indicated that moves were detrimental. A variety of reasons were given for moves, including a parent in prison and parent drug issues.	Eight students felt there was a negative impact; four felt that there was no impact. Family and financial issues were given as reasons for moves.

9. Is it more likely that you will move again or stay at our school? Would your desire to stay in this school be a factor in any contemplated moves?

Parents	Students
Two parents indicated that they would be moving again within the year, and one stated that they had planned to move but had decided not to due to because they were pleased with the school.	Five students did not feel they would be moving again, and six were unsure.

Research Significance: Students responses to this question need to be interpreted with caution, as parents don't always discuss this issue with their children. On the flip side, students sometimes misinterpret comments made by parents.

Collect follow-up data

Data from our first round of interviews gave us some insight. Parents of struggling, mobile students often did not understand that their child was not performing at grade level. They tended to feel that the child was doing well in school. In addition, parents of these students had very little knowledge of additional learning opportunities that were available to their child. The parents also tended to predict that their traveling days were over and they expected their child to complete his/her education at our school. Finally, given a chance to give suggestions to the school, these parents were unable or unwilling to do so.

Examining causal factors behind these findings, we asked difficult questions. Do these parents not understand that their child is performing poorly, or is it a case of parental denial? Were school staff members effectively informing parents, or are

we being too tactful, as we tried not to offend? To answer these questions, follow-up interviews occurred with parents and teachers.

In these interviews, the school principal directly stated that school staff was concerned because the child was not performing at grade level. Parents consistently indicated that it was contradictory to the teacher's message. The principal also followed up with the teachers, who were surprised that parents had not heard their concerns.

Use the data to reflect upon our previous assumptions and to formulate a set of truths about our students

Achievement data and the information gained from parent interviews led us to several conclusions. We first needed to re-examine our earlier assumptions, and when we did this, we discovered that several were incorrect. We did not have a large number of mobile students at our school. Twelve out of a population of 360 was a much lower incidence than we expected. We had also incorrectly assumed that our mobile students would be predominately Hispanic, with a number needing ESL services. Of the twelve students, five were Anglo, which aligned closely with the ethnic breakdown in our school. Our assumption that mobility was certain to cause academic concerns was also false, as almost half of our sample group were at grade level. These students did tend to come from impoverished backgrounds and nine of the twelve were living with one parent, so those assumptions held true with this small sample of students. We were surprised that these students tended not to take advantage of our variety of interventions. Students participated in most of these programs based on teacher referral, so it was apparent that we needed to examine this referral process. Putting programs in place did not necessarily mean that they were affecting all of our needy students.

Use this knowledge to evaluate the effectiveness of our intervention programs and make improvements as necessary.

As we examined our findings, we identified several action steps we planned to take at our building:

1. **Make the definition of “mobility” less restrictive.** This reflects our desire to look for students who experience school stress due to moves. When conducting this research, we saw a number of students who, for various reasons, did not qualify “on paper”. Some had moved twice, but not within the specified twelve months. Some moved so often that they had already left our school before we began collecting data. Some only experienced one move, but it was unusually traumatic. If the purpose of this research was to help our students, we did not want to ignore them because they were not “mobile enough”.
2. **Check with the state Department of Education regarding statewide definitions of “mobile”.** Using a simple “students in and out vs. the total population” calculation, our school suffered from a mobility rate in excess of 30%. Using the more restrictive definition developed by our research cohort, however, made our numbers much smaller. In an effort to assure “apples and apples” comparability, we would suggest that all schools calculate “mobility” similarly.
3. **Make mobility determination part of the student’s registration process.** When a new student enrolled, we wanted to check his/her mobility and make the appropriate record entry at that time. This made it easier to identify our group at any given time.
4. **Track the academic progress of mobile students.** While we did not want to assume that every mobile child would perform below grade level, we were confident that there was a relationship between mobility and achievement. By tracking mobile students in an organized manner, we could provide assistance more quickly when needed.

5. **Communicate better with parents.** Our research clearly indicated that parents of struggling mobile students did not receive information about available options. We operated with an inadequate “provide it and they will come” mentality. We put an organized procedure in place to a) inform parents about options, b) fully explain these options, and c) solicit feedback from these parents that we can use to improve our programming. It was also disconcerting that a number of these parents seemed to believe that their child was doing “just fine”. Teachers could not understand why parents did not seem as concerned as they should be, perhaps a reflection of a lack of communication on the school’s part. If a student was not at grade level, we needed to make sure that parents understood this. It is unclear whether this happened because school staff members tried hard to be tactful when sharing concerns with parents, or because parents treated this type of news with a sense of denial. However, the effect was the same. We wanted parents of struggling students to become active partners with the school, and these parents needed to feel the need to intervene on behalf of the child. In the future, teachers would receive training on creating this type of effective parent communication. The school would also develop simple documentation that showed current academic status compared to where he/she “should” be.
6. **Keep in mind that looking at a child’s academic standing can be very different from looking at his/her progress.** We also knew that we had a high number of at-risk students. We also recognized that many of these students, despite their academic concerns, were making rapid progress. This good news needed to be shared with parents.
7. **Make changes in programs and procedures to respond to what we are learning.** The study had been an interesting process, but we needed to get past interesting by using what we had learned to make a positive impact on students and their learning. Two small changes were already made as a result of our research project were a) more visual documentation of student academic progress to share with parents, and b) including transportation in our upcoming summer school program to meet the needs of our students.

We believed this organized and proactive stance with our mobile students could help them break that cycle of failure that seems so prevalent. The steps outlined above, combined with continuing data collection relative to the academic success of these students, could help students perform and would encourage parents to be more informed and effective as educational partners with the school. At the very least, we could help students be successful before they move again. Looking at the more positive scenario, we were hopeful that we could break that cycle of mobility as parents desired to establish roots with our school.

Student Mobility: A Case Study

Jorge (not his real name) came to our school for the first time as a first grader four years ago. He was a challenging student, as teachers never knew what he would say next. During his first parent teacher conference, his classroom teacher and I learned about his background. His father physically abused him and he was currently living with his grandparents. Dad was long gone and mom was in Mexico.

Over the next few years, Jorge was making good progress and his life seemed to be stable, though his behavior was still an issue. In the fall of what would have been his third grade year, Jorge was absent when school started. He and his grandparents had moved across town, and he completed third grade at another school in our district.

Soon after registration had ended the following year, I was walking by the office when the secretary caught me and said, “Mrs. Watson, guess who’s back? Jorge!” During the summer, something had occurred at home, and although Jorge’s grandparents were still living in the same house, Jorge was now living with an aunt and seven cousins. Jorge was not welcome in his grandparent’s home.

Jorge’s new living environment created a new set of issues. He was now living in an environment with other children raised to be respectful of adults and to each other. This just is not Jorge’s way, so it was no surprise that one Monday in October Jorge did not show up. After checking with the aunt, we learned that Jorge had moved to the state of Washington to stay with another aunt.

Less than a week later, Jorge was back and living with the same aunt with whom he had started the year, though he eventually returned to his grandparents when it did not work out with the aunt. His grandparents lived in another school's attendance area but within just a few blocks of our school's area, and we arranged with the transportation department to allow him to stay at Columbine.

A week before Spring Break (during CSAP administration), the school secretary received a call from the school across town saying Jorge was there registering. He had moved out of his grandparent's house over the weekend and was now living with an older sister and her husband who were expecting twins within a few weeks. He was still living in another school's attendance area, but this time district transportation was not an option. At this point, I asked Jorge what he wanted. If he did not want to attend our school I was not going to explore options. He clearly stated that he liked Columbine much better and did not want to return to the other school. School staff discussed the possibility of allowing Jorge to continue at our school for at least one more week to get him through the state assessment. Though it would have been easy to let him be someone else's headache, we knew this child needed stability. Little did we know how important this stability would prove to be over the next month and a half. The next morning was the only day we had to worry about transportation, as Jorge's sister had the twins that day, so Jorge returned to his grandparents until his sister returned home from the hospital with the babies.

We returned from Spring Break and Jorge was back with his sister. The school secretary and I had gotten permission to transport him for a day or two, until we could get him connected with a city transportation organization. Fort Morgan is a small enough community that there are no city buses. However, an organization does provide transportation for residents who either do not have vehicles or are unable to drive themselves. The fee for this service is not cheap. It would cost \$8 a day to get Jorge to and from school or a monthly-unlimited pass was available for \$70. I knew that there was no way the family could afford a pass or even to pay half of the pass, so I went to visit with the family after school that day while my principal was trying to find some funds to help this family. Ironically, when I arrived at the

sister's trailer to discuss options with her, I found the grandmother there. Before I could talk to Jorge's sister, the grandmother indicated she wanted to do everything she could to keep Jorge at Columbine through the end of the year. We decided that they could afford \$10 a month for the passes and agreed that if the school could find the rest of the money, I would be back the next day with the paperwork for the city transportation.

When I picked Jorge up the next morning, I was pleased to inform him that my principal had found some money to help buy a pass. I told him he could stay at Columbine for the rest of the year. I knew Jorge was not the kind of kid who would show his gratitude outwardly, but the lack of a smart comment and the quick nod of his head made me think he was glad. He had also given me \$3.50 in change to help pay for the pass (I learned later that this was his own money, not his sister's). He truly did want to stay at Columbine. With a little extra financial assistance from the school secretary and me, we submitted the paperwork that day. When I dropped Jorge off after school, I told him County Express (our local transportation organization) would pick him up at 7:15 the next morning and bring him to school. I thought we were all set. What I realized the next day was that I had failed to tell Jorge the County Express uses white buses, not yellow.

The next morning the secretary and I were chatting and keeping our eye open for our little friend Jorge when the phone rang. I heard her say, "Oh, really? We had made arrangements for him to ride County Express." Jorge had boarded the school bus that morning instead of County Express and had arrived at the other school. To save face, he then walked in the other building and told the secretary he was going to enroll there. Since the two secretaries had communicated with each other, she knew something was wrong. I asked her to put Jorge on the phone, and I asked one more time if he wanted to switch schools. He emphatically said, "NO!" Then I asked him if he had ridden a yellow bus or a white bus. He said, "The yellow bus, what white bus?" Our secretary drove over and picked him up at the other school, and as soon as she pulled up, Jorge was out the door, in the car, buckled up and ready to go – making us feel that the extra effort was worth it and that Jorge really did want to be

at Columbine. We worked out the miscommunication, and things ran smoothly for about a week.

The next thing we knew Jorge was back at his grandparents. Transportation was not so much of an issue because Jorge could ride the school bus to school. The twins had become very sick over the weekend and were in a Denver hospital. We called Jorge's grandparents and discovered that he would be with them for the week, so we cancelled that week's County Express services. The following week, when I contacted his sister to figure out the week's transportation, she told me the twins were still in the hospital, so Jorge would be staying with his grandparents.

The next morning school started without Jorge. We received a call later that morning, telling us they were bringing him late. The first thing he said when he saw me was, "The bus didn't come pick me up this morning." I asked him if he had stayed with his sister or his grandparents. He replied, "My grandparents took me to my sister's last night because the babies came home." I just smiled and said, "Let's call County Express". We picked up the phone and resumed the private bus service. The situation remained the same for about a month, but about two weeks before summer vacation, Jorge was suddenly back with his grandparents. He began to behave inappropriately at school, and we were wondering about this change until we learned that Jorge had made an emergency 911 phone call in response to continuing domestic violence in the home.

Conclusion

As the 2003-2004 school year began, staff members at our school felt that we had a good understanding of our students and how to best meet their needs. We knew we saw high mobility, and we knew that students suffered from a lack of a stable school home. We also felt that our mobile students were predominately Hispanic, predominately poor, with a high number coming from single-family homes and a high number qualifying for ESL services. There was agreement that high mobility guaranteed low achievement, and that our student's parents were a) aware of their children's struggles, b) aware of interventions available to the children, and

c) supportive of our efforts to raise their child's academic performance. Our school offered a number of interventions targeting struggling students, and we were confident that these interventions were providing appropriate support for our mobile population. The opportunity to participate in an action-research project would, we were sure, validate these assumptions. Little did we know that we had a great deal to learn about our students and parents. Early steps in our study aimed at collecting data on our families and students. This data clarified our status, challenged many of our earlier assumptions, and led to further data collection. At the conclusion of our study, we were able to modify many of our earlier assumptions and formulate necessary actions to address identified areas of concern.

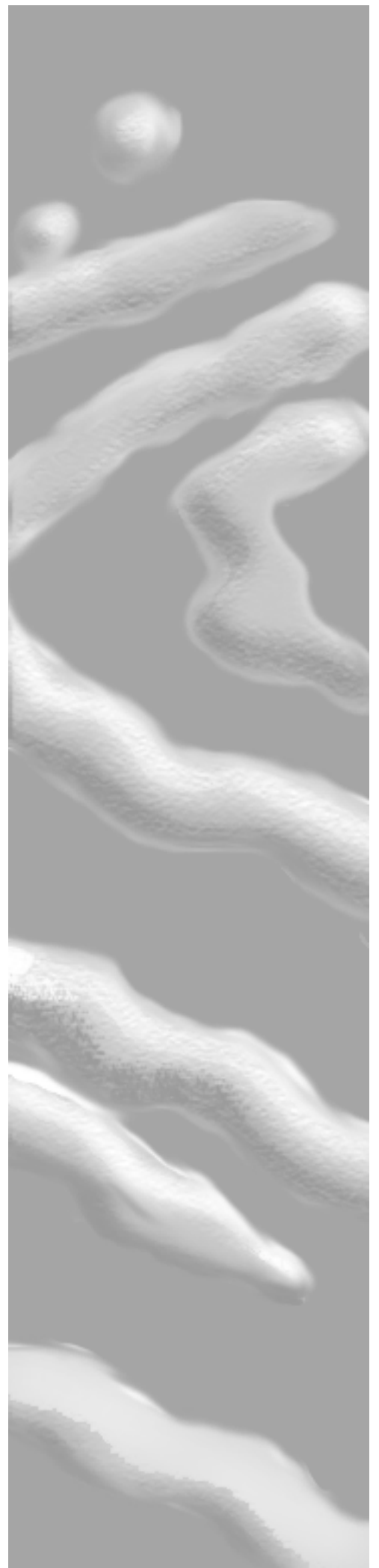
Every school faces unique challenges. The key is in the school's response to those challenges. Where will Jorge be next week? How can we prepare him to deal with factors in his life that prevents him from succeeding? We can only imagine how different this situation would have been if Jorge had been in a larger school district where solutions to these kinds of issues are not as easily resolved.

An Action Research Study:

CHAPTER 3

***Action Research within a Systemic Change
Program: A Principal's Perspective***

Brett David Drobney
Principal
Columbine Elementary School



Prior to my involvement in action research, my staff and I approached our highly mobile/homeless population in a nurturing, compassionate manner. However, we never looked closely at underlining factors that provide intrinsic motivation for high mobile/homeless students. I made a conscience effort throughout the school year to impart my action research findings along with an in depth study of poverty to increase staff knowledge around student social issues.

Background

I am the principal at Columbine Elementary School in Longmont, Colorado, which is located 37 miles northwest of Denver, Colorado near the foot of the Rocky Mountains. The city's population is approximately 78,000 people with an eclectic mix of white/blue collar and migrant workers and families. The major local employers are Con Agra turkey plant, IBM, Maxtor Technologies, Seagate Technologies, Amgen Pharmaceuticals as well as numerous small medical manufacturing companies, and agriculture.

Columbine Elementary School's ethnic breakdown is 83% Hispanic, 15% Caucasian, 1% African American, and 1% Asian. Ninety percent of our students are on free or reduced lunch and 17% are highly mobile and/or homeless. Columbine attendance boundaries encompass four homeless shelters, one federal housing complex, 60% rental properties, and a small percentage of owner occupied homes. In 1999, our school accountability team decided that systemic change was necessary to increase student achievement, raise attendance rates, and reverse community apathy. By August 2001, extra twenty days of instruction, a new school calendar that aligned with historic community/cultural needs, reduced class sizes (15:1 K-2)(20:1 3-5) and all-day everyday kindergarten classes were implemented.

Annually, Columbine was responsible for reporting results of our Systemic Change Program to the Board of Education. The report included the state assessment (CSAP) data, district/school literacy/numeracy data, attendance rates, and community involvement statistics in school events such as Back to School

Night, Parent/Teacher conferences, Family Literacy Nights, and Continuation ceremonies.

My Context

Working as an elementary teacher and principal for eighteen years, I have experienced first hand the breath and depth of Colorado's rural, suburban, and urban school communities. For the last five years, my leadership has focused on designing, implementing, and assessing a Systemic Change Program at Columbine Elementary School. Aligned with components of school improvement research (Sagor, 2000) as well as community feedback, Columbine's program provides 20 additional instructional days, all day, everyday Kindergarten, class size reduction, high quality extracurricular clubs/clinics, an employee nursery, and extensive professional development embedded in a structured, consistent instructional, nurturing environment. Since Columbine's population contains an extremely large population of free/reduced students (90%), homeless (17%), and second language learners (54%), it was essential that each child reach his/her full potential, regardless of need.

A key component of any change program is the comprehensive, ongoing data gathering and analysis to measure student achievement as well as program effectiveness. Historically, little data was gathering outside district / state assessments. However, if this program was to sustain itself, it needed a more comprehensive approach. After discussing my concerns with the school community, one area surfaced as a top priority - homeless / high mobile children. I wanted to study the effects of quality after school programming on the attendance of our most impacted students.

Coincidentally, in the third year of implementation, I responded to an email from Margie Milenkiewicz and Alana James from Colorado Department of Education soliciting applicants for an action research project (COPAR) involving homeless/high mobility students. I was ecstatic over the prospect of in depth study

of homeless/high mobility students, and more importantly, to ensure our extracurricular programming encouraged higher student attendance rates.

How did I get started?

My beginning experiences with action research provided only a small glimpse into the significance of my involvement with COPAR. Initially, my impressions vacillated between intrigue and high anxiety depending on the situation. On one hand, the opportunity to study highly mobile/homeless students within a Systemic Change Program intrigued me. Conducting relevant real-time research that directly affected our school community, aligned perfectly to our mission/vision statements. On the other hand, carving out another hour in an already overscheduled calendar was less than optimal. However, after lengthy administrative networking, and a vote of support by my family, I decided to embark on what was an enlightening journey into action research.

- First, I conducted several Internet searches on action research, which provided a framework to build my knowledge base.
- Second, I read numerous articles provided by the COPAR facilitator (Alana James) and other CDE quests to fill gaps in my learning.
- Third, I enlisted the assistance of my COPAR colleagues who imparted volumes of experience, both positive and negative, to round out my action research.
- Finally, I conducted my own action research project on highly mobile/homeless students at Columbine to test, first hand, if action research was a reliable vehicle to study student participation in a Systemic Change Program.

What was my concern?

Undertaking any change project large or small, especially in a district undergoing intense financial crisis, is a monumental challenge to say the least. In

addition to the normal issues of facilities, political maneuvering, facilitating philosophical discussions, and the usual laundry list of what ifs, it quickly became apparent that this was going to take a tremendous amount of my personal time as well as my supportive staff members. I needed specific data on each student subgroup as well as each component of our program. I wanted to gather specific data on students' achievements in the classroom as well as participation in extracurricular activities outside the instructional day. How many students were succeeding? How many were participating in extracurricular programs? Was there a correlation between participation, academic achievement and attendance? Were high achieving students growing at the same rate as homeless students? What action research results would directly affect our program?

A bigger concern was the empathic reaction from colleagues and district educators so impacted by No Child Left Behind Legislation and Colorado's new accountability standards. It seemed as if these people were hoping it would just go away rather than proactively address the plethora of issues facing our school.

Why was I concerned?

Committing to improve the lives of children has always been part of the job. However, the commitment of 200K annually from the Board of Education to support this project was quite another issue. Past restructuring attempts had failed to produce improved student achievement or increase attendance at Columbine, which set the stage for yet another level of skepticism. Could grassroots community involvement coupled with a comprehensive restructuring program make this program a success? Another concern was aligning before / after school programming with the needs of an extremely large minority / homeless / highly mobile population, without ignoring grade level and advanced students.

My overwhelming concern dealt with gathering data to prove each component of the program. Could I find enough data to support our findings at critical times to provide enough information to secure additional financial commitment from the Board of Education?

How could I present evidence to show the need to undertake the research?

Given the depth and breath of the Systemic Change Program, I limited my action research to the study of homeless / high mobile students participating in extracurricular events and its link to student attendance. Culling salient ideas from Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) as the basis for my action research, I organized a spreadsheet containing a comprehensive list of extracurricular activities at Columbine as well as K-5 participants. Once baseline data was organized, I utilized the Student Management System to compile attendance rates from the entire student population, and then extrapolate the homeless students for a comparative analysis.

After extensive data analysis, I was unable to draw any conclusions to my original question. In fact, the results showed no statistical differences between the two groups. Frustrated by my findings, I discussed my results with several professional colleagues who encouraged me to interview a sample of homeless / highly mobile families to see if they had a different perspective.

I developed a new set of interview questions with staff assistance, and embarked on a two-week search for 25 homeless/highly mobile families within our attendance area. Needless to say, it took an extraordinary amount of time (32 days) to track these families down, and two more weeks to compile the data. At the end of this exhaustive work, the conclusion was the same - no significant difference in the two groups.

What evidence could I produce to show how my actions were influencing my situation?

I collected a tremendous amount of data from multiple data gathering instruments. I also retained copious research notes from my readings, collegial

discussions, and interviews to validate action/results were influencing my situation.

My data gathering techniques included the following:

- I systematically checked district SMS attendance rates on individuals enrolled at Columbine Elementary School.
- I collected current extracurricular participation rosters weekly to maintain update information.
- I recorded my conversations with staff and parents to review opinions and perspectives on programming and attendance.
- I designed and conducted interview questions with the assistance from staff to glean information from homeless families on their opinions of extracurricular programming, focusing on their ideas to improve participation.
- I recorded my daily readings in my CO PAR binder for reflection.
- I interviewed several staff members who work extensively with homeless populations. I focused on employees with seven to ten years at Columbine Elementary School.
- I recorded three years of community survey results to glean community perspectives on programming.
- I conducted two action research cycles to gather data on highly mobile/homeless participation in after school programming.

What I learned

On the surface, It would seem that my action research as a disaster. After two cycles of action research, focusing on minimal criteria, eliminating variables, I was not able to find conclusive data to support my action research question, “Do highly mobile/homeless students who attend after school programming attend at a higher attendance rate than their peers?”

“Frustrating” was not the vocabulary used when describing my disappointment to my COPAR colleagues. I had busted my rear end to research, gather data, analyze my findings, rework my second cycle of research, chase down

homeless families, gathered more data, conducted additional data analyze, only to find more questions.

What was so perplexing about the action research was that I was getting the results I wanted, highly mobile/homeless students attending our after school programming at an extremely high rate, but I could not explain the phenomenon. Then through my mental fog came an epiphany, although it was not quantifiable or qualifiable data at all. I learned that it was not some research article or educational theory that changed the results, or how I conducted my action research, that mattered. It had to do with how I had internalized this information and projected it back to staff and the families at Columbine Elementary School that made the difference.

Prior to my involvement in action research, my staff and I approached our highly mobile/homeless population in a nurturing, compassionate manner. However, we never looked closely at underlining factors that provide intrinsic motivation for high mobile/homeless students. I made a conscious effort throughout the school year to impart my action research findings along with an in depth study of poverty to increase staff knowledge around student social issues. In addition, my action research cycles involved numerous family interviews, community agencies contacts, and attending several Columbine Elementary School community revitalization meetings to gain a comprehensive knowledge of highly mobile/homeless students. As I discovered, highly mobile/homeless students much like their stable classmates, needed something to activate internal/external motivation. They need a combination of high interest programming with educators who understood the complexities of this misunderstood population.

To illustrate the impact of COPAR on my personal perspective, I recently overheard my office secretary registering a new family. Ordinarily, I would not have thought much about this event; however, when I heard the address I automatically knew exactly the potential needs of this family as well as the support agencies that could ensure their success. As I reflected on my thinking, it surfaced volumes of research, collegial discussions, and my action research cycles. Eight months ago, I would have fumbled through a dozen community resources and

research articles just to understand the challenges of our highly mobile/homeless population. Now I react with confidence and little hesitation. I thank COPAR, Alana James and Margie Milenkiewicz for imparting their knowledge, wisdom, and patience to what has become a life changing experience.

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An Action Research Study:

CHAPTER 4

Pyramid of Interventions

A Model for At Risk Middle School Students

Vernita Mickens

Principal

Sheridan Middle School



I will never be the same after this study. I considered my knowledge base on the highly mobile student to be adequate. It was not. This project forced me to examine their lives from the inside out and determine if the appropriate infrastructures were in place to support their needs. They are not.

Background

It all began with a vision. Three years ago, I found myself as the principal of an urban middle school that was screaming for organizational change and fighting to be left alone. Attendance rates were low, test scores were sinking, and disciplinary referrals were high. This was a classic model of an ineffective school.

As I watched the grim numbers of students in academic failure, it was very disconcerting. Somehow, we had to find a way to intervene on behalf of our at-risk population of students. How could we proactively prevent a growing number of student failures as evidenced by our grade reports and state tests? How could we ensure each student was academically and behaviorally successful? How could we create a support structure and process that would catch any child that might otherwise slip through the cracks of the educational process? How could we embody “No Child Left Behind?” The answer came with a vision.

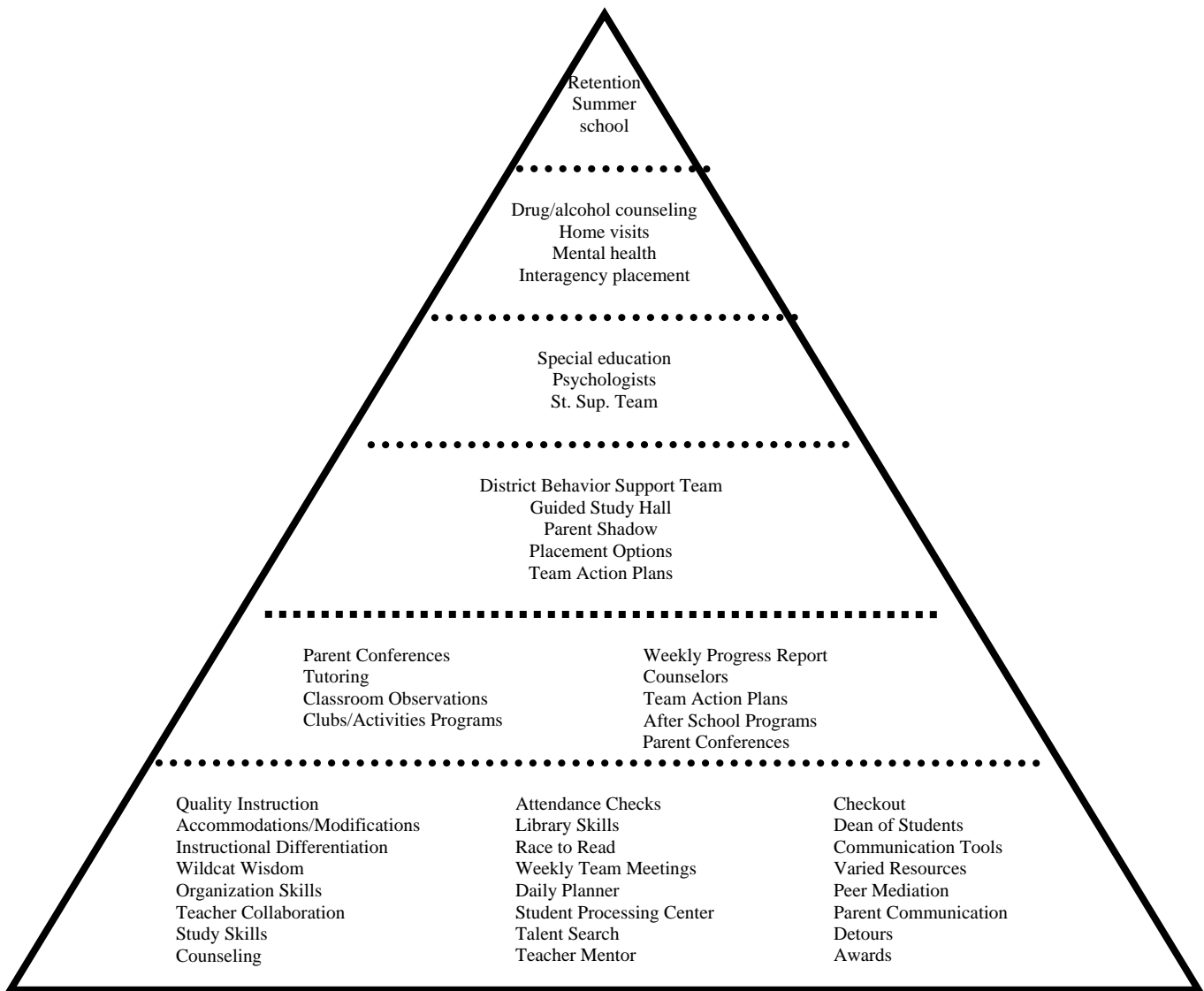
This vision was a call to action. A participatory action research group funded by the Colorado Department of Education and facilitated by the Center for Research Strategies provided access to a review of research on highly mobile students. I jumped at the opportunity. During my involvement in this group, we reviewed current research. It seemed that academic achievement directly affected factors such as low SES, children not living with biological parents, low parental educational attainment, and high levels of mobility. We were grappling with all of those factors in our school. Our free and reduced lunch rate was 70%. Over half of our parents had no more than a high school education and were proud to have it. Approximately 11% of the school population was homeless or living in substandard housing. Here was our target. If we could design a system of interventions that worked for our highly mobile population, we could measure its effectiveness with all children.

Propelled by the work of DuFour, the SMS Pyramid of Interventions was born (Eaker, 2004). The SMS Intervention model is comprised of six levels of increasingly intensive school interventions. The first level of interventions is accessible to all students without specific staff referral. It includes such things as quality instruction, study skills, reading incentive programs, and teacher mentoring. The next level results from teacher recommendations such as weekly progress reports, specific clubs, or scheduled parent conferences. The third level of interventions includes parent support in designing behavior or educational plans, attending school on Saturday, or the parent shadowing the child. Mental health placement or required counseling comprises the fourth level. Specialized classes make up the fifth level, and retention and required summer school compose the last level.

We built time into our master schedule to address student interventions on a regular basis. Each Tuesday the teachers met in grade level teams to discuss students. They recorded interventions with each student and evaluated the success of previously tried interventions on the noted behavior (See diagram on the following page).

Assumptions of the Model

1. All teachers are working consistently to direct all children toward appropriate interventions
2. All the interventions are equally effective in addressing students' needs
3. Teachers know which interventions are most appropriate depending upon the students' needs
4. Any child who is exhibiting problems will be brought to the team table and discussed
5. Parents will be willing to have their child participate in the interventions
6. Students are making a genuine effort to succeed
7. All staff believes that the model is an effective tool for identifying and directing students in jeopardy of failing



Factors Studied

-
1. Highly mobile students’ grades and what interventions influenced them
 2. Highly mobile students’ attendance and what interventions influenced them
 3. Highly mobile students’ behavior and what interventions influenced them
 4. Highly mobile students’ attitudes towards school and what interventions influenced them
 5. The kinds of interventions accessed more often
 6. Other kinds of interventions we should add to our model

Research Design

I began by identifying a sample group of highly mobile students. For the next two semesters, I would chart their grades, attendance, behavior and attitudes through school records and personal interviews. The interviews occurred twice during the year. The survey questions were as follows:

- How many times have you moved this school year?
- What effect do you believe these moves had on your grades?
- What effect did these moves have on your attendance?
- What effect did these moves have on your behavior?
- Check all the programs (interventions) in our school that you have been involved in this year.
- Which ones helped you the most and why?
- What other kinds of programs (interventions) would you like to see at school?
- How do you feel about school?
- Has your attitude about school changed this year as result of programs (Interventions) you were involved in this year? Why or why not?
- What kinds of things do teachers do that help you?

The Subjects

There were eight students in the study, and highlights from four of them follow. The students could not have been more diverse or their stories more revealing. It surprised me how much I learned about the lives of the homeless/highly mobile children and how vital an effective model of interventions is to their

emotional and academic survival. As the year progressed, this became less of a study and more of a window into the lives of my students. I found myself entirely engrossed in their stories.

Case Studies

Julia, 12: First Semester

Julia is a quiet 12-year-old girl. She does not like to talk much and hesitates after each question. She confesses that she experiences teasing about the way she talks in English. She lives with her mother and two brothers in a two-bedroom apartment not far from the school. Her mother speaks little English and works as a domestic in an expensive residential area not far from the school. Julia is living in her third home in five months of school. They began the school year living in transitional housing provided by the county before they moved in with her aunt and her family. When her mother had saved enough money, they packed their things to move into an apartment. Julia likes her extended family but does not enjoy living with them. She is glad they have their own place. She thinks the moves have interfered with her grades. She, along with her brothers, is failing two or more classes. She says part of it is that there were so many people living in their aunt's home, it was hard to concentrate or do homework. She did not utilize the after-school tutoring program because they had to go home directly after school. She has not accessed most of the higher-level interventions either. Her attendance has been consistent, due largely to the aunt who made sure the kids got to school along with her own. Her behavior in class must be exemplary as there is nothing in her behavior file to suggest she has ever had any problems in class. She thinks school is hard. She does not have many friends and cannot afford the expensive cheerleading outfit to participate in that program (\$100+). She hopes living in their new home will help her do better in school and does not know what else to hope for except she hopes they don't have to move again.

Julia: Second Semester

Julia is gone. She slipped away in late January without even returning for a formal withdrawal. Her mother called to report they were moving to California. She gave no forwarding address and no request has come for school records. She slipped away without almost any notice.

Thomas, 12: First Semester

Thomas is angry. His mother has been distraught and depressed since his father was murdered three years ago. She began using drugs openly and frequently, often encouraging Thomas and his younger siblings to join her. When social services learned of these family get-togethers, they removed all the children from the home.

Over the years, they have allowed the children to return home, one at a time, as the mother underwent treatment and followed other court ordered mandates. Thomas had tested clean for six months and received approval for an unsupervised visit during the upcoming Thanksgiving holidays. His festering anger erupted shortly before Thanksgiving, however. Suddenly, unprovoked, he assaulted another student in band class. Fully repentant after the incident, he realized this action might cause him his parental visit.

He understands why he is angry. He is angry because he wants to live with his mom and siblings. He is angry because he feels alone. He is angry with his father for dying. He is angry at the world. This is not helping his grades. Academically, he holds a 2.2 GPA. He has two F's, one in math and one in science. He says he does not get along with those teachers. His attendance since he has been in a foster home has been satisfactory, however. His foster parents ensure he is in school everyday.

Thomas's intervention checklist is blank. He does not avail himself of the after school programs. His teachers do not refer him for other interventions. He does not care about school and has told his teachers he would like to be kicked out. He likes his language arts teacher, however. He says she is nice to him and does not

yell. His face shows pain as he poses a last question for me. “Right now I just want to be with my family more than anything. You got any interventions for that?”

Thomas: Second Semester

Thomas got his wish. Over the Christmas holidays, social services returned him to his mother. By mid-January, however, we began to see disturbing changes in his behavior. His attendance dropped dramatically. He was late to school everyday and coming consistently late to classes during the day. By mid- February, he was truant from school. Calls made to his home went unanswered. Visits to his home met with silence. We knew, however that he was home. We knew that his mother was often with him. We could see the curtains swinging or hear the hush of small children. A fervent call to social services brought Thomas back to school but he returned with a large knife, making sure he showed it to several students before dropping it out of his pocket in the presence of teachers. Therefore, he got his second wish, too. He was expelled.

We have offered to provide educational services to him outside of the school environment, but he does not show up for those either. It is only a matter of time before he returns to foster care again. While Thomas was in school, he often visited with his counselors, a regular counselor and a substance abuse counselor. He held the same kind of open dialogue with them about his anger, fear, and need for belonging. The school interventions in place were obviously not effective enough to prevent his expulsion. I am compelled to ponder what kinds of interventions might have affected him successfully.

John, 12: First Semester

John is back at home with his mother. He ran away this summer to his friend’s home. Reluctantly, he agreed to go back and serve community service hours for his various offenses. He has already served more hours than he can remember; 148 hours for vandalism, 24 hours for trespassing, and 198 hours for breaking and entering. He did not get any hours for his criminal mischief charge, however. He

feels lucky for that and vows to stop hanging around some of his old friends this year.

John would prefer to live with his friend than his mom. He will not discuss why, but concedes that sometimes he does not get along with his mom. Since she lost her job last year as a convenience store clerk, things have been very hard. They lost their house and have had to move often. He has already moved twice this school year and it is only October. He is hopeful that things will turn around soon, however. His mom is in a program to learn computers. He is proud of this but says he knows more about computers than she does. In fact, he brags, she asks him for help all the time. However, he will not help her. He tells her to look it up in her books. Then he explains to me how to hack into programs that ask for a password. I am still not sure I understand how to do it, but I am convinced that he does. I am impressed with his intelligence and tell him so. He smiles broadly, inhaling the compliment like a breath of fresh air. His grades also reveal he is bright.

He does not think the moves affected his grades, attendance or behavior at school. This year he has accessed several interventions: his daily planner, student processing center, detours, counselor, psychologist, teacher mentor, moved classes, and attended Saturday school. He has not received any awards this year but got one last year. He has not accessed mental health services at the clinic since he began attending middle school but says he attended regularly in elementary school.

John is ambivalent about school. He likes it but does not like it. Sometimes he wants to come to school and sometimes he does not. Spoken like a true middle school student. His attendance shows he is usually here, but he has ten days of suspension. In fact, he received a suspension the first week of school for disrupting class. His behavioral referrals are substantial to be so early in the year, including disrupting class, vandalism, truancy, horseplay, violence/assault, disrespecting peers, willful disobedience, sexual harassment, excessive defiance, substance use, gang related activities and drawing inappropriate items. I am curious if we have the appropriate interventions in place to address his numerous issues.

John: Second Semester

John is feeling lonely these days. The friends he ran away with last summer have moved to California. His mom recently completed her schooling and is actively looking for a job at this time. He has not had any run-ins with the police since last summer so he thinks he is doing well and figures that maybe his friends were not a good influence. John has accessed more interventions than any of the other subjects. This is perhaps because he has a Special education case manager, a social worker, and a probation officer. Each of them follows his progress closely and checks in with him periodically. He also started boxing a month ago. I cannot help but wince when he tells me that. He notices that and assures me that it does not hurt and he never fights without gear. He just pays attention to trying to hit his opponent. He spars with a 15-year-old kid who is in the same weight range. He grins famously as he brags that he could spar with a 25-year-old man if he is in the same weight range and he cannot wait for the opportunity. He wants to fight professionally and is told he is very promising. He thinks this activity also helps his ADHD. He believes this intervention is changing his whole outlook. His attendance and grades have improved and his behavioral referrals are half of what they were first semester. He is confident he will end this year successfully and I cannot help but share his optimism.

Ethan, 13: First Semester

Ethan thinks this is going to be a good year. He just returned to Colorado after living with relatives in Oklahoma. He was there with his grandparents, aunts, and uncles while his mother was serving time in jail on outstanding warrants. He liked living there where he had relatives who looked out for him. In Colorado, they do not have any family. However, his mother felt there was more opportunity for their family here. The small town in Oklahoma did not hold the promise of employment. She also likes being independent of her parents.

He has already moved four times this year. They started the year in a shelter where they lived for a month. Next, they moved to a domestic violence shelter for

three weeks. He admits it was hard to get to school during that time. Next, they transferred to another shelter before having to move to Oklahoma. He does not believe the moves affected his grades or behavior. He does think it affected his attendance. When they were moving, his mom could not always get a babysitter for his two and a half year old sister. He would stay home and watch her while his mom made all the other arrangements or unpacked things. He did not mind and enjoyed watching his sister. He thinks a good intervention for him might be having someone else baby sit for siblings, however.

Ethan: Second Semester

School feels harder for Ethan right now, although his grades and attendance have improved. Mom is taking classes to be a nurse's assistant. She wanted to do medical billing but owed money from her last school. I am amazed at his resiliency considering his circumstances this year.

He thinks the interventions that helped him this year were individual projects like his science fair experiment. He also appreciated his language arts teacher, Ms. Rummel, checking in with him frequently to ask if he was having any problems or needed any help. If he could change anything about the pyramid, he would add more interesting choices for elective classes. Ethan is hopeful about the success of this year and believes some of the interventions on the pyramid contributed to his optimism.

Interventions this year have included the daily planner, visiting the counselor, assistance from the homeless liaison, study hall and summer school. He says he went to a mental health counselor at the school clinic last year but has not done so this year. Despite his hardships, he reports he likes school and his classes. He is looking forward to another successful year.

The Results

The SMS Pyramid of Interventions met mixed results in terms of its effectiveness. It is difficult to determine if Julia's departure was because she only

accessed one intervention. Thomas was referred to almost as many interventions as John yet met with complete academic and behavioral failure, while John began to flourish. Ethan, with only three interventions, and many more housing moves, was a model student.

It was clear to me by the end of this study that the number of interventions accessed was not nearly so important as the quality and appropriateness of the interventions for each student. That would be an area of greater exploration for further action research.

What I learned

I will never be the same after this study. I considered my knowledge base on the highly mobile student to be adequate. It was not. This project forced me to examine their lives from the inside out and determine if the appropriate infrastructures were in place to support their needs. They are not.

I view my at risk students with greater empathy, understanding and sense of determination to assist them than ever before. It was a valiant effort on our part to begin a process to ensure the success of all students including the highly mobile students; tackling the challenge of No Child Left Behind at full force. However, the problems that surround this unique population of at risk students were far more complex than I had originally imagined. My learnings went far greater than the scope of this project:

- Children will still slip through the cracks if there is not an entrenched approach to raising the level of knowledge, awareness, and supportive school policies and procedures about at risk highly mobile children to staff and students. This must include ongoing training with staff and structures to ensure that the school environment is inclusive, welcoming and familial.
- Challenge the model's assumptions. The values inherent in school policies, practices and procedures should align with the values evident in the model. We will need to regularly visit, reinforce and celebrate the values that support its idealism.

- Resiliency is not an option in the urban community. It is a fundamental survival skill as critical as reading. The poignant question is not if to teach it, but how. This in itself is an important intervention.
- Interventions are not effective if they remain invitational. Some simply must be mandated. We will lose children in our system if we expect them to access interventions or wait for staff to initiate them without more careful monitoring.
- We need to be strategic about which interventions we use. Certain interventions are more specific to homeless/highly mobile populations and others best used for criminal offenders, gang affiliations, physical, emotional abuse, etc. If we strategically are aligning students with interventions that meet specific needs, we can be more successful in assisting them.
- We need to develop a rubric that will assess the quality of our interventions.
- The best intervention is people who care. Give me a staff of caring people and I will show you a successful school. The children in this study who were successful were ultimately more successful because somebody cared and refused to give up. A more extensive menu of interventions will not change behavior, attitude or approach. It is the touch of kindness and the acts of high expectations, with tiered levels of support to meet them, which prevents failure.
- The SMS Pyramid is not comprehensive. I am not sure it ever will be or even if it should be. The students came up with interventions we had not considered in its development. There were other interventions in place that we had not listed, largely because we had never envisioned them as interventions before. The interventions currently in place are too general. This study has certainly changed my perspective and definition of intervention. I recognize now that an intervention can be as deliberate as a conference or as simplistic as a pat on the back.
- Finally, I learned that the challenge of the urban school in meeting the needs of highly mobile children and all children subject to the tyranny of poverty is how to meet individualistic needs in a pluralistic system. The focus of the

emerging urban school and therefore the focus of reform within a school must be on serving the community and uplifting the family as a means to uplift the child with interventions that support the whole family, with staff who do not merely exercise interventions, but serve as interventions.

The research that began with a vision has stirred yet another vision. This time, the pyramid of interventions is geometrically accurate. It is three-dimensional with interventions for students, parents, and staff in support of increased achievement. The very nature of participatory action research inquiry is its cyclical configuration that brings you back to more thoughtful questions and meaningful responses. It is exciting to know that each time you aim at a target; you get closer to the mark. Thanks to the inquiry process, this time my aim is straighter, my target clearer, and my vision much sharper.

Conclusions and Reflections

It is the last week of May and I am witnessing students who have faced significant challenges present their Continuation speeches. They have been asked to articulate the skills and knowledge they have developed through their learning experiences. They must explain how their skills and knowledge acquired, how they were able to overcome their obstacles, and how they will use that knowledge in the future. As the scene unfolds before me, I am giddy with pride and excitement.

The students are confident and articulate speakers. They exhibit a broad and varied vocabulary range that demonstrates an extensive range of learning in all academic areas. They chuckle about their experiences in community learning projects and discuss future projects they intend to initiate. Their inner resiliency is evident in their stories. They also share the familiar background stories of poverty, foster homes and mobility. Most importantly, they describe their ascent of hope: teachers who taught and re-taught until they understood, tutors who cared, study halls that brought structure and serenity to chaos, counseling that healed, academic

support classes that brought greater understanding, summer school that enriched and supported their learning, recognition that celebrated their accomplishments.

With a contented smile, I reflect that the programs they refer to are no accident. Rather, they are part of a strategic deliberated effort on the part of the SMS staff to intervene on behalf of all children. Five years before, the staff began with dogged determination to leave no child behind or allow them to slip through the crevices of the educational process. It began by developing an intervention model that included all interventions currently in place in the school and a coordinated process for accessing them before a student fails.

References

Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & Burnette, R. (2002). *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*. Bloomington, Indiana: National Education Service.

Permission Letter

Dear Parents,

Your child has been selected to participate in a research project at Sheridan Middle School. We would like to find out how well we are assisting all children in school. We have a number of different programs designed to help kids who might be at risk for failing school. Your child may be involved in some of these programs already. They include programs such as the reading lab, special clubs, or weekly progress reports. We would like to talk with you and your child about how well they are working. Our questions should not take more than fifteen minutes.

Their names and other personal information will be kept confidential and not published in any form. Thank you in advance for your cooperation. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Your Partner in Educational Excellence,

Vernita Mickens
Principal

Please sign below if you would not like your child to participate in the study.

Parent /Guardian

Date

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 4

Charting Services

	Julia	Thomas	Sam	John	Cathy	Ethan	Brandon	David
Planner				X	X	X		X
Parent Conf	X	X						X
Dean								X
SPC		X	X	X	X		X	
Detours		X	X	X	X		X	
Counselor		X	X	X			X	
Placement				X			X	
Study Hall			X		X	X	X	
Parent Shadow				X			X	
Special Ed				X			X	
Police		X					X	
Substance Counseling		X			X		X	
Home Visit							X	
Reading Lab							X	
Summer School							X	
Athletics							X	
Homeless Liaison						X		
Comm. Tool					X			
Teacher Mentor				X				
Awards				X				
Saturday School			X	X				
Psychologist				X				