

WANTED:

Youth Work Principles in Schools



By Karen Pittman, July 2008

Seven students recently joined me for breakfast in a windowless conference room in Des Moines to talk about “the high school dropout crisis.” They were experts: Five had dropped out. Another had come very close.

All were now in school – most in small, alternative schools. The youngest was 16, the oldest 20. At least four were participants in Jobs for America’s Graduates, a resource that they found extremely valuable and that some cited as the reason they were still in school.

My goal was to get them to talk about “the problem” in their own words. Why did they leave school? Why did they return? What’s different this time? Later that day, they would join me on stage at Iowa’s Dropout Prevention Summit, where we would recap our discussion for those going home to create action plans for addressing “the problem.”

Here, from that conversation, is the youths’ expanded list of the “Rs” for education:

Relationships. They left because of bad or absent relationships and returned because of good ones. All felt that it was easier to fit in and feel known in smaller schools. They also felt that both the teachers and students in these schools tried harder to build a community there.

Respect. One student’s story of leaving school because she was so upset about being repeatedly ignored by a teacher led to a lengthy discussion about the level of disrespect that is tolerated in schools: Teachers disrespecting students. Students disrespecting teachers. Students disrespecting each other.

Relevance. The youths reiterated the commonly cited need to connect learning to life. Two of them talked of the value of learning about how to write résumés and conduct themselves in job interviews. A third made it clear that what he liked about his new school was that the teachers made history material relevant by using better teaching methods – asking students not just to read the textbook, but to pick topics, do Web research, make comparisons to their lives. “The work is actually harder, but I like it better and learn more,” he said. “They let us explore for ourselves.”

Reality. Each of the seven youths worked. One lived in a homeless shelter. Some had long commutes. One had assumed guardianship for a sibling. They were adamant that they aren’t looking for sympathy, but find it challenging when teachers assume that school is the only thing going on in their lives and refuse to make exceptions.

Rules. Attendance and suspension policies got the most air time. They all agreed that flexible hours and attendance policies would be enormously helpful and could reduce dropout rates. “Sometimes I’m late for school because I don’t get home from work until 2 a.m. I oversleep,” said one youth. “If I’m late too much I get detention. But I can’t stay afterschool because I’ll be late for work.... At some point you start to ask ‘why bother?’ ”

Resources. Every one of the youths told a story about teachers or youth workers who made the effort to help them or others get what they needed. The most powerful stories reflected the culture of the school. “They call if you don’t come,” one said. “They sent a cab to pick me up.”

Roles. One of the Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) participants talked about the importance of not just getting but giving help: “As a JAG project, we opened a store inside the school so kids could get clothes and supplies that were donated. I started staying at school in the afternoon because I wanted to work in the store. It felt good to help.”

Rigor. A few needed extra help, but all understood the value of being prepared for work or college. One talked about the dual enrollment courses he was taking and how great they were. Two didn’t know about the dual enrollment program and thought everyone should know that they could be taking college classes in high school.

The youths were great, but the questions from the adults at the summit were the most telling: “How does your school manage flexible hours?” “What would you recommend that teachers to do differently?” We ran out of time before we could finish fielding questions.

There is a dropout summit coming your way. By the end of 2009, every state and more than 50 cities will host summits sponsored by the America’s Promise Alliance.

Get ready. Help young people have a real voice in these events. Help them do research. Review the recommendations about “what works” and the written opinions. Develop alternative recommendations. Document their own “Rs”.

The principles of good youth work apply everywhere. Help young people get them (and you) into their schools. Don’t wait until breakfast to start.

Information about the summits can be found at <http://www.americaspromise.org/APAPage.aspx?id=9172>.

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Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment, which has written the newly released Dropout Prevention Summit Planning Guide aimed at increasing public awareness of the nation’s dropout and college-readiness crisis and at helping cities and states prepare for the summits they will be hosting over the next two years. [View the Dropout Prevention Summit Guide](#).

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