

Apollo High School: Achievement Through Self-Esteem

By making school a place that meets students' basic needs, one California high school is motivating at-risk students to strive for success.

Apollo High School, located in a large suburban school district in Simi Valley, California, provides an alternative program for 400 at-risk students—students who have not succeeded in a traditional high school environment. At Apollo, our goal is to increase students' self-esteem, in the belief that self-esteem *produces* achievement. To help students build their self-esteem, Apollo staff provide them with the four A's: Attention, Acceptance, Appreciation, and Affection.

In most high schools, students are perceived as the major source of problems. At Apollo, we consider the *system* the major source of problems; our goal is to improve the system with students' help.

Students at Apollo participate in establishing rules and share in the responsibility of enforcing them. Meetings are held throughout the year for students to express their opinions and feelings about their experiences at school. Every teacher at Apollo has over 300 hours of training in learning styles, group process, communication skills, classroom management techniques, effective discipline methods, and problem-solving skills. Everyone on our staff seeks to involve students

Of Students Entering Apollo High School . . .

80 percent missed more than 70 percent of their class the previous semester.
60 percent failed two or more classes the previous semester.
50 percent are working two or more grade levels below their ability.
80 percent use drugs weekly.
30 percent are on probation.
30 percent come from alcoholic families.
20 percent have attempted suicide.

And After They Enter . . .

78 percent improve their attendance.
20 percent use drugs weekly.
5 percent are on probation (after one year).
86 percent graduate from high school.

Fig. 1: Summary of Survey Results, 1985–88

in their own learning while building supportive relationships. Thus, students at Apollo are empowered: their ideas and suggestions are respected and valued by staff.

Control Theory

Recently William Glasser, author of *Control Theory in the Classroom*, has been meeting with the staff on a regular basis to support our work. According to Glasser, all human behavior results from the individual's attempts to satisfy five basic needs: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun.

Glasser stresses that at-risk students do not have positive pictures of school or learning and, until they do, will not work in school. Therefore, teachers and administrators must structure the school environment so that students' basic needs are met.

Creative Solutions

With control theory as a framework, we have found creative solutions to problems common to all secondary schools.

- One student's chronic tardiness improved dramatically after his class-

mates and their principal held a surprise class in his bedroom at 8:00 a.m.

- Obscene graffiti on school walls decreased markedly after students painted murals on the walls—a solution suggested by students.

- Students caught using alcohol or drugs on campus are not suspended but instead are given help to discontinue use. Students receive credit for attending on-campus programs of Alcoholics Anonymous, Teens with Alcoholic Parents, and Narcotics Anonymous. School personnel transport students to off-campus treatment centers when necessary.

- Fighting among students is handled not with punishment but with *talking* that uncovers causes and prevents problems from recurring. Conflicts are treated as opportunities to develop listening techniques and other communication skills.

- Nonproductive students are motivated by instruction tailored to their learning styles and interests.

Evidence of Success

There is some hard evidence that the Apollo approach is working. Figure 1 shows the results of a three-year (1985–88) survey of Apollo students.

We will not help at-risk students by merely “stepping up” the programs that have failed them in the past—by creating tougher academic standards, a longer school day and year, and more homework. Instead, we must focus our efforts on the students themselves. Unless schools meet students’ basic needs, they will fail to motivate them to strive for success. At Apollo High School, we are trying to ensure that students find school—and learning—experiences that satisfy their needs. □

Reference

Glasser, William (1986) *Control Theory in the Classroom*. New York: Harper & Row.

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