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SUCCESS CENTRAL: IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM TO MEET THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE LEARNERS IN A CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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Catholic Central High School

Catholic high schools are among the most effective educational environments in the United States. Often celebrated as comprehensive and college preparatory, the typical Catholic high school boasts of its graduation rate, percentage of college-bound seniors, National Merit finalists, athletic prowess, and scholarship awards. This article pursues a relatively new theme for most Catholic high schools: creating an environment responsive to the needs of diverse learners. Following a school-within-a-school model, one Catholic high school in the Midwest designed and implemented a program to serve students with special needs. Their insights, struggles, and vision form the basis of this article which chronicles a success story worthy of replication.

Knock, knock, knock! The rapping at the schoolhouse door calling for change (Comer, 1988; Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984) seemed meant for the public sector. A loud rap for them; a faint rap for us. After all, 95% of the students graduating from Catholic Central High School (CCHS) go on to and are successful in college and university programs.

Knock, knock, knock! The rapping became a little louder when the Archdiocese of Cincinnati (1995) published the following policy on inclusion:

Persons with disabilities are to be offered opportunities to participate in school and/or parish religious education programs to the maximum extent appropriate. (Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1995, #700.03)

The Archdiocesan policy cited as its basis quotes from both the 1978 and the 1988 pastoral statements of the U. S. Bishops. The quote from 1978 read, "care should be taken to avoid isolation...as far as possible persons with disabilities should be integrated with normal catechetical activities" (United States Catholic Conference, #25); from 1988, "the challenge to Catholic educators is to strengthen Catholic special education opportunities" (United States Catholic Conference, #23). These were lofty goals and clearly within the mission of CCHS, but the resources for such an undertaking were felt to be lacking.

Knock, knock, knock! The rapping on CCHS's door became louder and louder as students with disabilities and their parents began asking to be admitted. Many of these students with disabilities had attended Catholic elementary schools and now wanted to continue their education in a Catholic high school. Some students, those classified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) and who came with an individualized education plan (IEP), were provided tutoring one period per day by the local public school district. Students who were not identified as SLD were not provided the extra help they needed to be successful. Parents, teachers, and students became frustrated because students were not achieving as expected. The message became clear; CCHS must find a way to serve these students.

SPECIAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE

In 1991, a Special Education Committee was created to address the learning needs of incoming freshmen. The first priority of this group was to list what Catholic Central High School would look like if all students' needs were being met. The committee generated the following list:

- Students would get individualized help when they needed it.
- Students would feel a strong sense of self-esteem and a sense of motivation and self-direction.
- Students would know their strengths and weaknesses and would seek out help when needed.
- Students would be offered a variety of ways to learn the same concept.
- Students would have competency in computer usage, including spell check and grammar check.
- Students would be able to express themselves both orally and in writing to convey logical, organized thoughts.
- Students would not experience continuous failure and frustration, but would instead feel a sense of accomplishment.

- Adaptations would be made by teachers to meet students' needs (i.e., tape recorded classes, longer time for tests, fewer questions on tests, a scribe to take student's notes)
- Students would have developed appropriate study skills (i.e., organization, listening, test taking, memory, finding main ideas).
- Students would develop skills that would enable them to be successful in the working world.
- Students would be comfortable relating to others in social contexts and have the opportunity to practice these skills.
- Students would gain a sense of control over their lives leading to a vision of what they would do after high school.
- A variety of general courses would be available to meet these students' needs at the junior and senior levels, should they choose not to attend the Joint Vocational School.
- Curriculum would be designed with a wide variety of ability levels in mind.
- Technology would be used to assist students with their learning needs.
- Tutors would be available for one-on-one consultation.

The committee took a two-pronged approach to investigating the resources needed to create CCHS as a place where all students' needs would be met. To establish a knowledge base for understanding the teaching and learning strategies needed to support students with differing learning needs (i.e., attention deficit disorders, right-brained learners, and at-risk learners), a literature search was conducted. To get a practical grasp on the realities of implementing a program to meet the needs of diverse learners, visits were made to other Catholic high schools that were serving students with special needs.

Initial and ongoing reading about the brain and how it learns (Jensen, 1998; Lyons & Languis, 1985; Schnitker, 1972; Sprenger, 1999; Vitale, 1982) enabled the faculty to maintain a focus on the importance of investigating the relationship of the teaching approach to student learning. Understanding a relationship was only part of the equation, however. The challenge was how to address that relationship in the classroom and for which students. Literature on the meaning of and strategies for accommodating attention deficit disorders (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994; Lerner & Lerner, 1991; Rief, 1993; Smith, 1995) led to the understanding that a balance between well-designed instruction and a well-monitored medication regime often proved successful for those students. The readings also pointed out clearly that there were no easy answers. To be successful, teachers had to change their teaching approach.

Visits to other schools helped to analyze how they were meeting the special needs of their students and which aspects of these programs could be implemented at CCHS. Schools visited included Alter High School in Kettering, Ohio; Purcell-Marian High School in Cincinnati, Ohio; Cathedral

High School in Indianapolis, Indiana; and Central Catholic High School in Toledo, Ohio. A common characteristic of these schools' programs was a caring, supportive school environment, a climate in which students and faculty were expected to value and support the gifts each had to offer, no matter how different from one another. It was felt that CCHS had also created such a school climate. Two other contributing factors to these schools' successes in serving diverse learners were teacher collaboration and curricular adaptations. CCHS experienced a certain amount of sharing among faculty, but not collaboration in the sense that two teachers would jointly plan, deliver, and evaluate lessons and student learning (Friend & Cook, 1996). Teachers also differed in their approaches to curriculum delivery; however, these differences tended to be based on teacher style or preference, not on learner need. A faculty inservice agenda was set.

Inservices were designed to provide faculty with the understanding and tools needed to work with academically challenged students (Chalmers & Wasson, 1993). Inservices included programs addressing learning styles and teaching styles (Armstrong, 1994a, 1994b), accommodations and adaptation of curriculum (Weaver, Landers, & Adams, 1991), and instructional approaches (Wood, 1992). Through a grant provided over several years, individual teachers and groups of teachers participated in classes jointly sponsored by the Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Office and the University of Dayton. These classes included Understanding ADD/ADHD, Teaming to Meet Special Learning Needs in Catholic Schools, Strategies for Inclusion, and Problem Solving Techniques. Several teachers also attended a statewide conference on inclusion. From these roots the Success Central program was born.

SUCCESS CENTRAL PROGRAM

The Success Central program was designed as a school-within-a-school for freshmen students who had experienced little academic success in the past and who may or may not have a label or an IEP. Characteristically, most of these students exhibited poor organizational skills and poor attention spans. A full-time Success Central coordinator was hired to organize the program. This person was a retired public school teacher who had expertise in math and English and was extremely proficient in working with academically challenged students.

The program was limited to 15 incoming freshmen students and was originally designed to help students in the ninth and tenth grades. The summer before entering CCHS, Success Central students participated in a one-month math and reading enrichment program. The program was designed to help students maintain reading and math skills over the summer. It also provided students the opportunity to take practice math, reading, writing, sci-

ence, and citizenship proficiency tests that all students must pass in order to graduate. Additional benefits included building a support group among themselves, learning the physical layout of the school building, and dispelling the fear of their first day of school.

Success Central students were scheduled into classes with other students, but all Success Central students had identical schedules which allowed the coordinator to function as a co-teacher in math, English, and science classes. All students in the classes with Success Central students received binders, assignment notebooks, and folders to assist them with their organizational skills. When the Success Central coordinator was not in class, she was available for tutoring students in the program.

As part of the Success Central program, each student's parents were provided biweekly reports from all of the student's teachers. The parents were encouraged to keep in close contact with the Success Central coordinator concerning their child's progress. They were asked to ensure that their son or daughter had a special place and time to study each night.

When problems with a specific student arose, meetings were held with all of that student's teachers. In some instances, an informal learning plan was written for a student. Depending on the nature of the problem, parents and the student or the student alone was involved in the meeting. The first year of the program, the teachers of Success Central classes were specifically chosen for their ability to work with academically challenged students.

At the end of their freshman year, some Success Central students elected to enter the college prep track, others elected the basic level courses, and some took a combination of both. At the end of the sophomore year approximately 33% of the Success Central students chose to attend the joint vocational school for their junior and senior years. The remaining 67% posed a new challenge because they were still in need of support and there was no program designed for juniors and seniors. After a review of the support needed by these students, the coordinator continued to offer test-taking strategy instruction and tutoring in needed areas during the junior and senior years.

The Success Central program has been in place for five years. The first students to enroll in Success Central were members of the class of 1999. This also was the first CCHS class that was required to pass the Ohio Ninth Grade Proficiency Tests to graduate from high school. Some of the Success Central students struggled more than their classmates did to pass the proficiency tests; however, by the end of their senior year, all Success Central students completed all requirements for graduation, including the proficiency tests.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Academically, the students in the Success Central program from the class of 1999 maintained an average cumulative G.P.A. of 2.12 on a 4.0 scale, and all

but two have been accepted and are attending postsecondary programs. Students who have followed this initial group are progressing in a manner similar to the first group. The best testimonials to the success of the program come from the students' perspectives.

A student with learning disabilities appreciates getting better grades and having teachers who "understand when I don't comprehend something right away." Another student comments on getting help when it is needed "when I have trouble with certain classes or assignments." To graduate from CCHS was the goal of another student—a goal accomplished. Several other students talk about "gaining the discipline to do homework and to learn study skills." A student who needed the program only for the freshman and sophomore years commented on how it "helped me make the transition from elementary school to high school. Success Central gave me the tools and support to get through high school and prepare me for college."

Parents of Success Central students also see the strengths of the program. Parents appreciate the ongoing support given, the test-taking strategies taught, and the independent problem-solving skills modeled by the coordinator. They appreciate the academic support, but value more highly the self-awareness students acquire (i.e., "my son did not even know what he had within himself; he took what he had learned and became more independent; his self-esteem flourished"). One parent expresses the pain of watching her child struggle and the security in knowing that her daughter had an advocate in the coordinator and was receiving the skills needed to be successful in her struggle.

BENEFITS TO TEACHERS

General educators talk about how teaming has been a positive experience. Working with the Success Central teacher was helpful in better meeting the needs of all students. Teaming in the classroom provided immediate attention to students who needed it. There was a general feeling of being able to accomplish much more student success than could have been done alone. Teachers cited student organizational skills as being much improved and students feeling good about school and their own abilities. Some teachers saw the students as becoming, "Yes, I can!" kids, amazing both themselves and their teachers."

From an administrative point of view, the Success Central program has made a difference not only in the students who are in the program, but also in the entire school. Teachers have begun to look at their teaching methods and the meaning of learning and through this analysis have adapted how they teach both for Success Central students and all of their students. There is an excitement about learning and how all students can be helped to learn. The teachers also experience a joy when they have seen students struggle and then

see them succeed. The faculty has grown along with the Success Central program and has developed an openness and willingness to work with students of all ability levels. Without the faculty's hard work, dedication, and love for students and the work of the Success Central coordinator, the Success Central program would not have been the success that it is.

CONCLUSIONS

The Success Central program has made a difference in the lives of the students. Many have experienced successes that they and their parents never dreamed they could achieve. They learned skills in this program that will serve them well beyond high school whether they go to college or enter the job market. Once students began to experience success, their accomplishments began to increase. The basis for this was the building up of their self-confidence. They have come to realize that no one can defeat them but themselves. They know that it takes hard work to reach their goals, but they also know that it is possible.

The vision set by the Special Education Committee in 1991 has been realized. Student needs are being met. Students are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They have developed a sense of self, a sense of motivation, and self-direction. Frustration and failure have been diminished. Teachers are designing curriculum with a wide array of abilities in mind. This is not to say that there is no room for improvement. There is always a new challenge; each learner presents a unique set of strengths and needs.

Success Central has been successful and will continue to be successful through the united efforts of administration, faculty, parents, students, and especially the Success Central coordinator. The program confirms the belief that all students can learn, given the proper support and environment. Students are able to find this at Catholic Central High School.

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