Enhancing Supportive Learning Environments and Student Achievement through Project ALERT
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No Time for Prevention?
A colleague of mine is returning to teach at her old middle school again after a year stint at the elementary school. When she sees her old colleague Manuel, a popular and highly effective sixth grade science teacher, she notices that he seems depressed and lacking energy. She asks him about his service learning project. Each year his entire class builds a dog house which is then donated to the local animal shelter. He explains that with the new testing mandates, there is no longer any time for that project. Next, she asks what happened to the beautiful fish tank which used to adorn his room. He explains that it was seen as a safety hazard and that he had to get rid of it. Finally she asks how his drug prevention program is going. He replies that they had to discontinue it this year since “there’s no time for that – we have to get our kids to pass these tests.”

In these days of increasing Federal and State accountability, schools are straining under the enormous pressure to produce results in the form of high test scores. Simultaneously, educators must deal with the complex issues confronting our youth today such as alcohol and other drug use; the prevalence of violence and gangs, teen pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases; and the high rates of truancy, dropout and suspension. There is an urgent demand for programs, strategies and policies which mitigate these barriers to learning and address the realities of our students’ lives.

Many educators understand that the best curriculum and the most professionally prepared teachers in the world can not reach or teach students who aren’t there physically or mentally. Yet as Project ALERT educators, we are often confronted with the perception that our prevention programs are taking time away from core academic instruction in the classroom and competing for demands on teachers’ time.

Given this dilemma, what are we as health educators to do?

Making the Case for Supportive Learning Environments
Improving student achievement is not a mystery. Multiple research studies on high student performance point to specific factors in the school environment which promote resiliency and self-efficacy in students including supportive relationships with teachers and other adults; positive incentives and student recognition; supporting high expectations for all children; educating the “whole” child; celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity; communicating and involving parents and attention to health and safety (Education Trust, 2001; The Center for Public Education, 2005; Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2005).

As educators, it is imperative that we clearly and cogently make the case that schools need to create safe and supportive learning environments in order to achieve academic success for all students. Supportive learning environments can be defined as “The creation of a caring,
rigorous and relevant learning community that provides support to all learners in aiding them to achieve at their highest potential” (Holtz Frank, 2004). As Urban (1999) states, “Unless students experience a positive and supportive climate, some may never achieve the most minimum standards or realize their full potential”.

According to Holtz Frank (2004), there are seven key research-based elements of supportive learning environments.

- **Element 1: Safety of the Physical Plant** which involves an inclusive team of parents, students, and diverse school faculty in comprehensive planning to address the components of a safe environment.
- **Element 2: Shared Leadership Practices** involves intentional practices which distribute the responsibility and accountability for student success throughout the school community.
- **Element 3: Structured Personalized Learning Communities** which build in structural supports such as advisory, mentoring, transition, looping, small class and school size to provide a more individualized approach to the school environment.
- **Element 4: Student Centered Learning Practices** which employ techniques of cooperative learning; relating learning to real life; opportunities for students to assess their own progress and set goals; opportunities for students to receive guided feedback; and multicultural competence.
- **Element 5: Caring Relationships and Sense of Community** which emphasizes high expectations for all students, a positive school climate, students’ sense of support from adults, and faculty’s sense of community.
- **Element 6: Schoolwide Positive Discipline and Self-Management Practices** that provides daily positive reinforcement and explicit teaching of behavioral expectations, self management practices and social skills along with systemic support for consistent and equitable enforcement of rules.
- **Element 7: Active Student, Staff, Family, and Community Involvement** that involves an inclusive sense of a learning community with meaningful opportunities for participation from all sectors of the community.

**Indicators for Identifying Critical Gaps in Prevention Programming**

These elements of supportive learning environments do not act in isolation but rather interact to form an integral and systemic whole. The following indicators can be used as part of school improvement efforts to enhance student achievement, in determining whether or not the school is adequately addressing some of the core components of supportive learning environments (Holtz Frank, 2004, p.70 - 76). Health educators can use the results of these questions to identify potential gaps and suggest research-based alternatives for addressing these gaps, such as Project ALERT. Notice how many of these practices are taught and reinforced through the Project ALERT curriculum and the eight teaching strategies.

**Student centered instruction and assessment practices are employed.**
Are teachers trained in student centered learning techniques?
Are students encouraged to control their own learning through contracting and goal setting?
Are students given opportunities for self-assessment and performance based feedback?  

**Cooperative learning is effectively utilized.**  
Are teachers trained in techniques of effective use of cooperative learning strategies?  
Are heterogeneous ability groupings applied more often than homogenous groupings?  
Do students learn social skills along with content?  

**Students receive individualized performance feedback.**  
Are teachers trained in providing effective feedback tied to student performance?  
Are teachers trained in giving effective positive reinforcement and personal recognition to students?  

**Multicultural Competence**  
Do faculty and students receive training in multicultural competence?  
Do faculty and students learn how to interact fairly and equitably with others of different race, ethnicity, and gender?  
Do faculty and students actively monitor attitudes and actions to avoid stereotyping or biased behavior?  
Do faculty and students demonstrate ability to relate to diverse populations?  

**Positive, high expectations for all students**  
Does faculty exhibit high expectations for all students and families?  

**Students experience support from adults**  
Do students report that teachers and other adults in the school care about them?  
Do students report that teachers praise them?  
Do students report that teachers listen to them?  
Do students report having opportunities to make decisions?  

**Positive decision making, self management, and social skills are taught.**  
Is curriculum taught using evidence based practices?  
Are skills taught including effective communication techniques, goal setting, self management, resistance skills, and stress reduction?  
Is there daily reinforcement of decision making, self-management, and social skills?  
Are self management practices actively employed in the school and classroom?  
Are skills and concepts infused across curriculum?  

**Positive classroom management.**  
Are positive behaviors explicitly taught and reinforced?  
Are positive behaviors consistently recognized and rewarded?  
Are interactive teaching strategies employed?  
Do students have input into classroom rules?  
Are students engaged as classroom managers?  
Is student input actively solicited and incorporated into schoolwide rule making?  

**Linking Project ALERT to Supportive Learning Environments**  
Given the current emphasis on school safety and discipline and the need for a safe and supportive school environment as a prerequisite to learning, a strong case can be made for the primacy of using Project ALERT to support student learning and promote pro-social behavior. The research based strategies employed in Project ALERT are integral to effective
implementation of positive discipline techniques and interventions. Let’s look specifically at how these elements of supportive learning environments are interwoven with Project ALERT’s teaching strategies.

The eight key teaching strategies of Project ALERT are:

1. **Resistance self efficacy.**
   Student’s belief that he or she can effectively resist negative social pressures is constantly reinforced throughout the curriculum.

2. **Active Student Involvement and Practice**
   Students have opportunities to engage in shaping and directing their learning through the use of techniques and learning methodologies that employ multiple intelligences.

3. **Modeling**
   Project ALERT skillfully emphasizes healthy role modeling by peers and encourages a group climate of mutual respect.

4. **Reinforcement**
   The conscious use of positive feedback is provided by the educator and directly tied to student performance.

5. **Validation**
   Honest, clear statements are voiced by the teacher, which acknowledges the challenges that adolescents face.

6. **Proximal Goals**
   Students are explicitly directed towards the acquisition of short term, achievable goals and the skill of goal setting.

7. **Respect**
   The teacher models and reinforces positive communication skills and contracts with the group to engage in mutually respectful behaviors.

8. **Enthusiasm**
   Teachers model genuine energy and excitement, which serves to motivate and engage students in the learning process.

The heart of any behavior management system in schools should start with a preventative approach through the active teaching of prosocial behaviors. Research on Project ALERT has shown that teaching social skills to students results in greater levels of prosocial behavior and a heightened ability to resist negative social influences (Ellickson & Bell, 1990).

High performing schools base their approach to safety and discipline by promoting a culture of high expectations and a focus on achievement through practices that encourage “self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem” (Carter, 2000). Instead of punishing students for not conforming to the codes of conduct, effective schools create and teach positive expectations and norms of respect between faculty, teachers and students.

Project ALERT begins by contracting with students regarding expected behaviors and inviting student input into the classroom contract. Each lesson begins through the explicit statement of proximal goals for students. Personal goal setting is considered by behavioral change theorists as the cornerstone of the intrinsically motivated individual. This key social
skill is integral to the self-management of behaviors which encompass core elements of both positive discipline and student-centered learning.

When students have active opportunities to self-direct their learning by establishing personal goals through a formal contract, they are more likely to persist in the face of adversity and to achieve the desired goal. These same strategies are applied to learning the skills of resisting negative social influences in successful drug prevention programs (Holtz Frank, 2004, p.54).

Lessons allow for the grouping of students into heterogeneous teams that perform specific tasks and actively involve students in the learning process. Many teachers have adapted these methodologies for use in core subject areas to allow for more active engagement in student-centered learning.

Subsequent lessons follow the established pattern of promoting task groups to learn cooperatively. Critical thinking is encouraged through the analysis of social pressures to use drugs. Teachers encourage and motivate students to learn and believe in their own ability to make healthy decisions, thereby increasing their sense of self-efficacy. This is a core motivational factor in learning of any sort, particularly for low-achieving students.

The curriculum and interactive teaching methodologies employed in Project ALERT enhance students’ interest and focus by rooting the subject matter in students’ own lived experiences. This increased relevance translates to more successful student outcomes and the development of critical thinking skills.

Students actively practice the skills of resisting peer pressure to use tobacco and other drugs through role playing. Subsequent lessons reinforce this skill and build upon students’ prior learning to strengthen the students’ sense of confidence and self-efficacy in making healthy decisions. Role playing appeals to many of our kinesthetic learners who may be less inclined towards the predominately auditory and visual learning styles employed in most classroom-based instruction. Role playing invites active involvement and participation and serves to model and reinforce appropriate behavioral norms.

Trigger videos provide another important teaching vehicle, utilizing older students as positive role models and informal “mentors” in the modeling of pro-social behavior. Peer teaching components of Project ALERT serve to reinforce student’s self-esteem and self-efficacy and promote youth leadership. This intentional use of peers as positive role models builds a greater connection between peers, promotes a positive school climate and a stronger sense of community.

How exactly might these key teaching strategies be directly helpful to teachers and administrators concerned about test scores? These strategies promote not only effective pro-social skills and self-management practices for students, but provide structural supports in creating a more positive and supportive environment for learning. This is good news for educators because positive student behavior and a supportive learning environment translates into more time spent in the classroom by students as active learners, less time spent by staff on managing class behavior, fewer discipline referrals and decreased absenteeism caused by drug usage and other health compromising behaviors.
The appropriate and timely use of Project ALERT in the classroom setting can do much to enhance supportive learning environments within the school, which is a critical aspect of promoting student achievement. Together, Project ALERT educators, classroom teachers and school administrators can work collaboratively to promote the academic, emotional, and social success of the whole child.