

The Student and Staff Support Team and Child Development

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The Student and Staff Support Team (SSST) works to ensure that the developmental and academic needs of every student are met. This chapter follows the journey of a Florida elementary school through implementation of the Comer Process and establishment of a Family Enrichment Center that has become a learning place for all students and their parents.

Great successes are often achieved through small steps and a slow process; such is the story of our school. The story begins in the summer of 1996, when I became principal of Charles R. Hadley Elementary School. My new school was located in a low socioeconomic area in the northwest section of Miami, Florida. The school had approximately 1250 students, in Grades pre-K–5, most of them new immigrants from many Latin American countries and the Caribbean. About 94 percent of the students were Hispanic, 45 percent of them had limited English proficiency (LEP), and about 76 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The school was beginning implementation of the Comer Process and was providing fragmented services to meet a wide range of students' needs. These

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services were being provided on a small scale and were not adequate to meet the community's needs. In a small corner of the Media Center, services were provided through the Charles Hadley Involving Parents Successfully Program. This program was a school initiative that provided instructional resources, assistance with homework, and referral to support agencies for students and parents. These services were provided by a paraprofessional for an hour every afternoon. This attempt was valuable but insufficient to meet the needs of the students and parents.

During the 1997–1998 school year, the school received Title I and Title VII funds. As a Comer school, we found these additional resources to be instrumental in providing the support to the students and staff that would facilitate each child's development in the school and provide the assistance the parents needed in order to make this a reality. Specifically, we created a Family Enrichment Center using a combination of the federal and school funds. This center has been central to our efforts to enhance the development of every child in our school.

THE WORK OF THE SSST

At the beginning of every school year, teachers are provided with an individual profile of each of our 1,250 students. This profile contains information on the English proficiency level, participation in exceptional education programs (or any other programs), reading and math levels, writing proficiency, standardized and criterion referenced test scores, and special needs of every child in the classroom.

To ensure that every child's potential is developed and individual needs are met, everyone in the school is a potential member of the Student and Staff Support Team (SSST). Who attends which SSST meeting depends on the needs being addressed. An SSST team meeting can include classroom teachers, parents, administrators, special area teachers, exceptional education teachers, a counselor, a social worker, a psychologist, and social agencies' representatives or other personnel as needed. Members of the SSST team attending specific meetings are those directly involved in the child's education and/or with vested interests in the academic program. Our team adheres to both district and state guidelines regarding confidentiality standards for student records and information.

The work of the SSST begins on the Friday prior to the opening of the school year. This is Get Acquainted Day, when the school offers an opportunity for parents to meet with school personnel. This activity allows parents to visit the school, become familiar with the school plant, and receive an orientation on school procedures before the school year begins. Another opportunity is provided on the Hadley First Day Celebration that takes place the first day of school. Students participate in a wide range of activities to establish a positive connection with the school from the outset. Parents are also invited to share in the festivities. These activities promote trust and the positive relationships that are essential among parents, students, and school personnel. During these functions an informal needs assessment is conducted, and parents share their goals and the special needs of their children.

The school provides many opportunities for the SSST to meet and share information. Students' needs are discussed at weekly grade-level meetings and monthly across-grade-level meetings. The classroom teachers and other student service

personnel attend these meetings. Academic reviews are performed, and students not meeting academic and other standards are identified.

Students identified as having special needs are reviewed in-depth by the SSST. Services provided include assessments such as a language survey, academic review, and social history. Other services include tutorial classes (on Saturdays and before, during, and after school), counseling, and psychological services.

THE FAMILY ENRICHMENT CENTER

For parents to be able to help their children, we created a Family Enrichment Center to provide assistance with inservice training and on-site adult education classes. The center is staffed with a full-time teacher and four community involvement specialists. Through the center, all school services are integrated to meet the needs of the students with optimum return.

To maximize these services, the center is open daily from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The center provides in-service training in a wide range of topics, including benchmarks for each grading period that students at each grade level need to meet, as well as how parents can help their children with the required state tests. These workshops are provided by grade level in English and in Spanish. In addition to these services, the community involvement specialists perform periodic home visits to lend assistance to the parents, make them aware of available resources, and inform them of students' progress. We hold parent conferences regularly and schedule additional conferences every time a student is not meeting standards or is in need of special services.

MEETING THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS

In order to meet the physical, social, and mental health needs of the students, the school secured the cooperation of Children's Hospital, the Children's Psychiatric Center, and Bright Horizons. The hospital provides families with free immunizations, physical check-ups, and follow-ups at school or at the hospital. The other two centers provide ongoing counseling and psychological services both at the school and at their offices to students and families who need assistance in adjusting to their new environment, coping with home and social problems, and resolving conflicts.

Academic needs are assessed and met by a team of professionals utilizing a wide range of instructional and motivational techniques, special programs, and individualized instruction. Students who do not make progress in spite of all this assistance are referred to the Child Study Team. This team is composed of the classroom teacher, the parent, the counselor, an administrator, and special area teachers and/or other professionals that the team deems necessary to best meet the child's needs. The team reviews the student's performance and needs and suggests alternative strategies to be implemented for a period of two weeks. At the end of that time, the effectiveness of the implemented strategies is assessed and recommendations are made either to continue with the suggested strategies or to employ alternative strategies, which will be revisited within three weeks.

Among the alternative strategies and services provided, we include student academic reviews with an emphasis on strengths, assessment of learning modalities,

vision and hearing screenings, assessment of home environment, social and medical histories, in-school counseling for the student and the parents, assistance with homework for parents and students, parenting skills training, and referrals to mental health and medical services. If progress is not made after these strategies have been implemented and monitored for the prescribed amount of time, a complete battery of psychological testing is requested. The team then analyzes the results, and a recommendation based on the results is made for placement in the appropriate program. The SSST continues monitoring the student's progress. As soon as it is recommended, the child will be mainstreamed. Throughout this process, support and counseling are provided to the student and the family as needed.

PARENTAL PARTICIPATION

The arrival as immigrants to a new country can be stressful and a real cultural and social shock. The newcomers have to struggle with economic survival, language acquisition, and adjusting to a new way of life. At the same time as they are struggling with the new environment, they must find inner strength to support their family in surviving in this country. A feeling of isolation, helplessness, and frustration prevails among the majority of them.

Even though the school had begun the implementation of the Comer Process, parental support was fragmented and inadequate. The three guiding principles of no-fault, consensus, and collaboration needed to be extended to the parents and the community. Our work began by reaching out to one parent at a time. We established an open door policy and ensured a warm and inviting atmosphere throughout the school, and the parents began responding by becoming more involved in school affairs.

It was evident that many resources needed to be found and integrated to meet the needs of the many parents coming to school. The school has 1,250 students, and each year an average of 600 parents visit the Family Enrichment Center created as a result of this effort. The faculty wrote a grant that was funded through Title VII, and at the same time, the school received Title I funds. By integrating all these resources into the school budget, the dream of fully implementing the Comer Process became a reality.

A key factor in the success of the center was the full involvement of all stakeholders. Most important to its effectiveness was to find staff members who would buy into the Comer philosophy. A teacher who had created a parent center with me at my previous school was persuaded to embark on this venture at my new school. A critical aspect in her selection was her empathy with parents and her conviction that families are essential in developing the whole child. In turn, with the assistance of the entire staff, two parent trainers and two community involvement specialists were enlisted.

A survey was conducted among all parents not only to determine their needs but also to identify the strengths and talents they could contribute to the school. Based on the survey, in-service training was developed and services were provided. At the same time, a series of motivational techniques were implemented to maintain parent interest and involvement. The school became a learning place for all students and parents. Some motivational techniques included creating a lending library and having a monthly recognition program for students and parents who use the library. Students who read the most books are recognized on closed-circuit television, and

receive a certificate and a gift from our Dade partners. Parents are rewarded for visiting the center by entering their names in a raffle for a gift donated by our Dade partners. This is also done on closed-circuit television during the monthly recognition program. Door prizes are provided for the parents who attend in-service training and meetings. To encourage parent attendance at district and regional meetings, the PTA rents a bus to provide transportation. We provide small gifts to parents and sing and play games on the bus to make trips more enjoyable. As a result, Charles R. Hadley always wins the trophy for best parent attendance at meetings.

In developing the concept of a Family Enrichment Center, we had the idea of providing an environment of peace and comfort (which sometimes is lacking in our society). We wanted the school to be a comfort zone, a safe haven for all, a home away from home, where a no-fault approach and collaboration were the keys to enter.

AN INCLUSION MODEL FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Being an exceptional education student can bring feelings of inadequacy and frustration to a child. Children think they are different and feel labeled. As a result, their self-concept is low and they sometimes simply give up. Struggling with this problem, and trying to provide an environment that would be supportive of children, the SSST tackled this global issue. An inclusion model was proposed. This model would provide a setting in which the special needs of these students would be met without identification or labeling. A team consisting of a regular classroom teacher and an exceptional education teacher staffed each inclusion classroom. Special care was taken to select a team whose members could complement each other and support the goals of the program. The student population of these classrooms consists of 50 percent regular students and 50 percent exceptional education students. A visitor to the classrooms would find it very difficult to distinguish the regular students from the exceptional education students. High standards are set for all students. This model has proven so successful that some students in the exceptional education inclusion classes have qualified directly for the gifted program because of their high test scores on standardized tests. A significant fact is that the regular students assigned to these classrooms are students that are unmotivated and whose academic level is below grade level. One can only imagine the quality of the instruction taking place in these classrooms and the support provided to achieve these results.

HOME LEARNING PACKAGES

Approximately 94 percent of the student population is Hispanic from many Latin American countries and the Caribbean, and their ties to their homelands tend to be very strong. Frequently, they and their families travel back to their countries for extended periods of time. In spite of this, the children are expected to achieve at the same level as students who remain in school year-round. To compound this problem, when they return, the students need a refresher course in their basic skills and in their newly acquired English language skills.

In an attempt to resolve this schoolwide concern, the SSST recommended the development of Home Learning packages that were utilized by our students to take with them to their home country. These packages have proven so successful that all students work with them during extended holidays. Students complete and return the packages upon their return to school.

CELEBRATING OUR SUCCESS

Adopting the School Development Program was instrumental in Charles R. Hadley's success story. The Comer Process provided the structure through which all school programs and services became integrated under the "Comer Umbrella." By implementing the three guiding principles and maintaining a focus on the child through the six developmental pathways, the school has received both state and national recognition.

Hadley was one of nine schools out of 372 Miami-Dade County public schools to receive a grade of A from the Florida School Accountability System during the first year that the system was implemented in 1998–1999. The school also received this grade in 2000–2001 and again in 2002–2003. For being graded A, the school obtained Florida School Recognition funds to provide incentive bonuses for employees and incentives for the students. The school was also selected to receive performance pay during the 2003–2004 school year. Three elementary schools in each of the six regional centers were selected. In our regional center there are 34 elementary schools, and Hadley was one of three selected to receive performance pay. As a result of performance pay, all instructional staff at the school will receive a stipend of 5 percent based on their salaries. In addition, the school was recognized as one of the top 20 schools in the state of Florida—one of seven in Miami-Dade County Public Schools to achieve this honor. Schools were selected for sustained academic achievement and best practices implemented at the school. Charles R. Hadley student achievement data and best practices are published on the Internet at the Web site www.floridaschoolreport.org.

These achievements are even more remarkable due to the high percentage of immigrant families and the neighborhood's low socioeconomic status. The Comer Process provided the tools by which innovation and positive interpersonal relationships have flourished, making the school a center for quality education and a place with open doors to our community, where everyone can feel welcome.