Where Everybody Knows Your Name

As part of their attempt to redesign their city's troubled downtown high school, educators created a freshman academy to help ninth-graders make a smoother transition from middle school to high school. Through targeted academic and emotional support, the freshman academy faculty members promised to become so involved in the lives of their students that no one would be left behind. In the words of the principal, the school would be "a place where everybody knows your name."

BY HOLLY HOLLAND AND KELLY MAZZOLI

In 1997 leaders of an industrial conglomerate pledged $10 million to resurrect a troubled urban high school that their family had built for the city of Gladston (the pseudonym for a midsized midwestern city) 60 years before. The donation — believed to be one of the largest gifts ever offered to a single public school — gave educators and civic leaders a chance to redesign the school by creating a series of academies focusing on different career paths that students could choose to follow.

HOLLY HOLLAND is the author of Making Change: Three Educators Join the Battle for Better Schools (Heinemann, 1998) and the editor of Middle Ground magazine, published by the National Middle School Association. KELLY MAZZOLI, assistant editor of Middle Ground magazine, also writes curriculum guides and newsletters for education organizations. This article is reprinted by permission from The Heart of a High School: One Community’s Effort to Transform Urban Education, by Holly Holland and Kelly Mazzoli, published by Heinemann, a division of Reed Elsevier, Inc., Portsmouth, N.H. The book can be ordered directly from Heinemann at 1-800/793-2154 or www.heinemann.com. List price is $23.50 (all online orders placed with a credit card receive a 10% discount). ©2001, Stark Education Partnership, Inc.
FOR THE TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS, THE TASK WAS EXHILARATING AND OVERWHELMING.
Central to the plan was a new freshman academy to help ninth-graders make a smooth transition from middle school to high school. The freshman academy sprang from the belief that urban students would rise to the level of expectations set for them and that, with the right kind of academic and emotional supports, they could compete with the best of their peers.

During its pilot phase, the 1999-2000 school year, the freshman academy was slated to accept about one-third of the ninth-graders from the school district. Officials planned for the academy eventually to serve all the freshmen in the system. Students would attend the freshman academy for half a day — a morning or an afternoon session — and spend the rest of the time at their regular high schools.

For the teachers and administrators at the freshman academy, the task was both exhilarating and overwhelming. They had to find ways to keep disengaged students from dropping out of school, construct assignments and tests that would enable all students to reach higher standards of learning, and build a school culture that would encourage both adolescents and adults to focus on continuous improvement — objectives that most urban schools in America have failed to meet.

THE REALITIES OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

Teaching urban high school students is not for those who quickly back down from challenges. Americans still like to think of a high school classroom as a Norman Rockwell painting come alive. A stern but benevolent teacher stands in front of the classroom, the flag unfurls above a chalkboard filled with perfect penmanship, and the students sit in their neat rows of desks and listen attentively as she speaks. The view is pure nostalgia, not a reality in Gladston — or in most other communities across the nation.

What today's high school teachers see when they look out at the sea of students is a hodgepodge of hormones, hairstyles, and heredity. They also see reflections of what lies beneath: abuse, fear, optimism, pain, alienation, distrust, confidence, failure, and a wide range of characteristics and attitudes born of the circumstances that each person has been fortunate to experience or forced to endure.

It isn't fair to pigeonhole urban high school students. Many come from good homes, try hard in school, and move through life without generating controversy. But their opposites are well represented, too. Such students test authority, sabotage the progress of their peers, confound their advocates, and engage in as many risky behaviors as necessary to blot out the hurt and disappointment in their lives. They don't know how to relate to other people, how to dress for public functions, how to stick with something past the point of frustration, or how to apply for a job. One freshman academy teacher refers to the worst of them as “haters,” students who walk into the classroom so full of misery and rage that they attack first and count their victims later.

NOT JUST ACADEMICS

The freshman academy faculty not only accepted the challenge of teaching 330 members of this widely divergent group but also promised to become so involved in their lives that no one would be left behind. The emphasis on relationships was supposed to be one of the distinguishing features of the academy. In the words of Program Leader Janey Lewis, 'the academy was to be “a place where everybody knows your name” — or, more precisely, a place where everybody knows your business: who your friends are, how well you are performing in English class, and whether you ate supper the night before.

To outsiders who hear her promoting the academy's ideals, Lewis' mantra can sound as trite as an inspirational slogan printed on posters and coffee mugs. She tries to ignore such skeptics. Lewis knows that, although students have a legal obligation to attend school until age 16, they will not listen or learn unless they connect to the heart of a high school.

"Some people think this is just about academic results, but it's not," Lewis said halfway through the first semester.

"What would happen if you were scared half to death twice?"
"We’ve fed kids who’ve come to school hungry. We’re dealing with the whole person. There are human issues — emotional, mental, physical. We have to deal with those first and convince the students that we care."

Research backs up her views. The Search Institute, a national nonprofit organization that works to promote healthy adolescent development, reviewed data from thousands of student surveys throughout the country and concluded that “schools that nurture positive relationships among students and among students and teachers are more likely to realize the payoff of more engaged students achieving at higher levels.”

Expanding on this research in the book Great Places to Learn: How Asset-Building Schools Help Students Succeed, adolescent development specialists Neal Starkman, Peter Scales, and Clay Roberts said they found consistent data that academic success is strongly related to a student’s social competence and adaptability to various environments. The critical response from schools is a combination of emotional caring and intellectual challenge. “Students with such skills and attitudes as stress management, self-control, self-direction, and personal responsibility have high academic achievement levels,” the three wrote. “This leads some researchers to say that student progress on social competence, even more than intellectual measures, ‘might be the best primary measure’ of academic success.”

Many freshman academy students don’t have the attributes that Starkman and his colleagues talk about in Great Places to Learn because they have had such unpredictable parenting and uneven educational experiences.

“Those kids are so shortsighted,” science teacher Adam Hynes explained one day. “Their horizon is so limited because of their urban environment or their home. It’s like being in a whiteout. They’re so used to looking at their toes, they can’t see there’s more out there. They have very little outside perspective.”

To fully understand their students, the freshman academy educators looked to the Search Institute for guidance. The organization has developed a prescription of 40 essential building blocks that young people need to successfully navigate the course from dependent adolescence to self-sufficient, socially responsible adulthood. These “developmental assets” include basic foundations that begin at home, such as a personal commitment to learning, attention to positive values, socialization skills, and a positive identity. Such “internal assets” need to be bolstered by an outside infrastructure called “external assets.” External supports include positive experiences such as parental involvement in children’s personal and academic lives, a strong neighborhood environment, and a community that endorses and provides its youth with consistent boundaries and expectations.

Scott Peterson, dean of students at the freshman academy, had hoped that all of the ninth-graders would be able to complete a survey, “Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors,” at the beginning and end of the 1999-2000 school year so the staff could compare the results. He also had hoped to compare the freshman academy students with a “control” group of nonacademy ninth-graders, following both groups over four years to see if the freshman academy practices had expanded the students’ developmental assets. However, with so many other competing demands to get the faculty trained and the new building opened on schedule, there wasn’t time to identify the two groups. Freshman academy students did not complete the Search Institute survey until the end of the 1999-2000 school year, which made Peterson’s desired comparisons impossible.

The survey results — which the school received in September 2000 — confirmed what Peterson, Hynes, and many others had surmised: most freshman academy students didn’t have adequate assets, either internal or external. On average, the freshman class of 1999-2000 had only 18 of the 40 assets in their lives. Fewer than 20 students reported having more than 30 assets, which is the ideal minimum, according to researchers.

“We were particularly deficient in the area of community support that exists in our town,” Peterson said of the survey results. “We have this great community turnout when you have sporting events, but when you talk about members of the community mentoring kids or about kids having an adult besides their parents that they really connect with, we were particularly deficient.”

The results also showed how assets matter. Students who reported having 10 or fewer assets experienced triple the average number of high-risk behaviors — such as drug and alcohol use, cigarette smoking, sexual relationships, violence, and truancy — displayed by students with 21 to 30
assets. The survey also showed that the students who have the fewest assets engage in only half the number of positive behaviors exhibited by their asset-rich peers. Positive behaviors measured include maintaining good health habits, avoiding dangerous activities, engaging in leadership roles, and succeeding academically, among others.

Although they didn’t receive this detailed information until the start of the second school year, the freshman academy faculty members followed their earlier hunches and began providing extra support services to students at the beginning of the pilot year. Some of those services came in the form of cultural field trips that included visits to theatrical productions where students had to dress appropriately and learn proper etiquette. They visited work sites and local college campuses to understand what the world beyond high school looks like. And teachers helped organize formal meals, including a Thanksgiving dinner at the academy, so that these teenagers — many of whom had never eaten anywhere better than a fast-food joint — could learn various social graces, such as how to set a table and seat guests. Lewis said teachers intentionally set up the meals inside the academy because “the schoolhouse is supposed to be a safe place. For those kids who didn’t know appropriate social behaviors, it was a place to save face.”

Students seemed to appreciate the sum of their combined academic and social experiences. “I learned to be respectful of my elders,” one student said of his year at the freshman academy. “And how to be responsible and how to be with people other than my friends.”

“I learned that everything doesn’t go your way, and you can’t just quit,” another student reflected.

The freshman academy “is harder than Jefferson,” said Jeremy, a 16-year-old freshman, without any hint of complaint. Freshman academy teachers “expect more of you. You have more responsibility here.”

The freshman academy staff members believe that these comments showed that students were learning good “people skills” through strong relationships with adults they trusted. Although the educators did not succeed in reaching every student during the pilot year, the end-of-the-year results would show that they had made extraordinary progress with many students.

“It’s a different kind of school here,” acknowledged Zack, a freshman who frequently tested the limits of the faculty’s pledge to help every student succeed. “They care about kids. I like it.”

That endorsement didn’t come from a teenager whom anybody would be glad to teach. Zack was one of the toughest turnarounds the staff attempted. By the end of the first semester, he was failing many of his classes, moving to a new teaching team because of so many discipline infractions on the first one, and threatening to give up or blow up nearly every day. But no matter how hard he struggled or spun out of control, he never felt ignored. At his regular high school, he had admittedly slept through class without interference from teachers, but at the freshman academy, Zack knew that the adults would not let him slip by.

“That wouldn’t happen here,” he said with a knowing grin.

Many of Zack’s classmates admitted sleeping through or skipping classes at their regular high schools but said they didn’t try the same stunts at the freshman academy. Part of the reason is that, with no more than 175 students in attendance in the morning or afternoon sessions, the freshman academy was small enough to feel close-knit. Absent students were noticed and missed. Teachers also moved beyond traditional classroom duties by calling students’ parents, visiting students at home, working with them after school, and counseling them throughout the day, trying any strategy they could think of to overcome the indifference that drives students to drop out, or figuratively check out, of school.

“I like the support the teachers give you,” said 15-year-old Tameka. “If you need something, they don’t brush you off — they help you; they don’t put you down. It’s so many people there [at her regular high school] that they don’t notice you. You have to do something for the whole school before they notice you. Like here, at the freshman academy, some girl, her mother died, and they gave her condolences, and they told us when the funeral would be. That was nice.”

The freshman academy leaders believe, and research confirms, that when students such as Tameka feel demeaned, dismissed, or denied a voice in their educational experiences, they often detach themselves from the process entirely. And although many teenagers are loath to admit it, they prefer a school in which the adults monitor their whereabouts.

“Many of the students I know . . . do not have this sense of a school community backing them up. Too many of my peers don’t think that they matter. . . . This is what they need most, just to be bombarded with the idea that people do care,” Colorado high school senior Sara Pierce wrote in the foreword to Great Places to Learn. “Very rarely will students turn away from the opportunity to form connections or become involved, if they are invited and made to feel welcome. . . . School must be more than just a place to learn . . . it should be a place to belong.”

That’s a commonsense message, but putting it into practice is hard work. Many high school students are so far behind in what educated people consider appropriate emo-
tional and intellectual development that it's almost impossible to reach them without assigning (and paying) more adults to work in schools. These students need people who can provide a range of related services, from mentoring to modeling manners. Like it or not, many teenagers today never learned why school is important. In a me-first society that so often puts immediate gratification ahead of long-term goals, many young people don't know why they should bother to build a record of academic achievement. They hear about high school dropouts who became Internet millionaires or about sports superstars who bypassed college for the pros but don't stop to consider the odds against the same things happening to them. Or they see drug dealers drive by the neighborhood in expensive cars but don't think about the prison terms or violence that also come with the job.

These attitudes can be particularly maddening to teachers who not only learned to honor educational distinction but also joined a profession that would enable them to pass those same values on to others. It frustrates them to constantly encounter academic apathy in their classrooms. And as hard as they try, teachers can't do it all, despite what states and communities demand. Educators today need lots of help from administrators and outside advisors who understand the dynamics of instruction and the frequently irritating behavior of adolescents.

MEETING STUDENT NEEDS

At the freshman academy, the person who is always ready to step in to meet students' needs is Scott Peterson. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Mr. Peterson," Zack explained. "I'm in gratitude to him."

Ask many freshman academy students, particularly boys, why they try to overcome perpetual truancy, classroom misdeeds, or academic laziness and "Mr. Peterson" is usually part of the answer. (Girls tend to lean on guidance counselor Mimi Cantrell or other female faculty members.) Students know that, technically, Peterson is not a teacher in his role as the academy's dean, but titles and technicalities aren't particularly relevant to teenagers. Relationships are.

Constantly on the move during the school day, Peterson pulls one student out of class to discuss behavior issues, tends to another sent to the office for a dress-code violation, and comforts a dejected-looking boy by giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder and a "You doin'
creation. Peterson acknowledges that his actions have earned him detractors who view his vigilance as a nuisance, resent his interference, and accuse him of being biased in favor of students.

"I respect every person in this building professionally," Peterson said, recognizing the occasionally uneasy alliance. "Before the end of the year, I'm going to write a letter to each staff member, saying, 'If I've pissed you off during the year, I'm sorry, but I was looking at the situation from the kids' perspective.' The relationship with the kids is not 50/50 in the inner city. It's not about the adults' self-esteem. It's about the kids."

Although he may have critics among the freshman academy teaching staff, Peterson has the full support of many others. English teacher Ellen Jackson said she believes Peterson's detractors are guilty of "not buying into what this school is about." She wonders what teachers expect Peterson to do when "all these kids have known for 15 years is punishment, punishment, punishment."

Science teacher Hynes agrees. "This school is largely about relationships with students and teachers, and only when you build that can you make a change academically," he said, adding that teachers who complain about Peterson's approach don't have much ground to stand on if they turn their classroom discipline over to him.

"Here's the deal," Jackson said, summing up her support of Peterson. "You don't have to agree with the administration, but once you turn it over to them, it's your fault. You can always go in and talk to Scott, and you'll get consideration and you'll get respect."

Peterson doesn't dwell on criticisms that come his way. He's too busy targeting policies and practices that he considers detrimental or unfair. For example, he became incensed when the school district adopted the recommendation of a former local FBI chief-turned-school-district-security-director that students should pay a $5 fine every time they came to class without their required laminated identification badges. If students didn't have the money for the fine, they were supposed to go home to get it. Not surprisingly, as Jefferson and Lincoln administrators found out, many students left school and did not return.

"You know, you're trying to teach a kid physics, you're already in an adversarial relationship, then you gotta check for their badge and send them home because of that?" Peterson said hotly. With a monetary punishment, he said, the students who don't have the money will just stay home. Rather than enforce a policy that interfered with their efforts to connect with and teach students, Peterson and several freshman academy teachers usually chose to drive the teenagers home so they could get their badges and quickly return to class.

Another time, when a freshman academy teacher wanted to punish a group of students who had not pushed their chairs under the tables after class as directed, Peterson suggested that she might explain her reasoning to the students instead of issuing a decree that they would consider just another ridiculous institutional rule.

He and other staff members advocated for students in a variety of ways during the school year. For example, instead of excluding students whose families couldn't afford for them to participate in extracurricular activities, Peterson and other teachers often paid their fees. One student, accustomed to earning good grades in middle school for low-quality work, became a behavior problem when his freshman academy teachers held him to higher standards of performance. Peterson counseled the boy and helped him see that his teachers didn't blame him or consider him stupid; they wanted him to push himself. By the end of the year, the boy was learning to accept the challenge and was earning As and Bs.

Peterson noticed that another student's standardized test scores revealed knowledge and skills greater than his low grades would indicate. It turned out that the student had suffered severe emotional abuse at home and was so distrustful of adults that he alienated his teachers so they couldn't get close to him. Hundreds of mentoring hours later, Peterson broke through the student's emotional wall and persuaded him to consider achieving closer to his potential.

Another time, after discovering that a student was intentionally misbehaving to earn after-school detentions rather than go home to a parent he feared, Peterson added the boy to his personal triage list.

In terms of parent involvement, "there's no in-between," Peterson said. "Either it's good or there's nothing there."

There were many successes at school during the pilot year, but some days there were just "too many fires to put out," he said. Midway through the school year, Peterson worried that he was overextended and emotionally spent. Colleagues shared their concerns that he was taking on too much. In one of the rare moments when he would admit that he sometimes felt defeated, Peterson wondered whether he should leave his administrative post and return to the classroom. "I think I could have a greater impact on them if I was their teacher, because you have that day-to-day interaction with them," he said. "You know, you're not just seeing them when they're in trouble." Then, as if all he needed was to express the thought to overcome it, Peterson quickly sat up and changed his tune. "But I'm committed. I'm definitely committed to carrying this thing through until wherever it is we end up," he said.
The good news is that most days Peterson had help from his colleagues on staff. Sometimes their collaborative support was so powerful that it literally protected the teenagers from harm. Near the end of the school year, a female student entered the freshman academy office, crying hysterically. She reported that a peer at her regular high school had threatened her life, saying she would drive by the academy after classes were dismissed to shoot her. Lewis and Peterson quickly notified the faculty of the potential disaster. One teacher stayed in the office to comfort the girl, and the others posted themselves around the school building as students left to board buses, erecting a human fence to protect one of “their kids.”

AN ACADEMIC SAFETY NET

On another occasion, math teacher Gary Rosenberger stepped in to provide critical academic care to students. Lewis had hired the 29-year veteran of the Gladston school system as the freshman academy’s math tutor. The position was designed as a sort of safety net, an extra faculty member to keep students from progressing to more advanced high school math courses without first understanding the basics. Rosenberger was to pull struggling students out of class and provide them with individual or small-group attention. But because he was not assigned to a specific teaching team or group of students, he spent the first semester working in isolation and regretting that he had joined the academy staff. When students received their grades after the second nine-week period, however, Rosenberger not only seized an opportunity to save some students from failure but also resurrected his belief in the freshman academy’s purpose and potential.

He designed a “credit recovery” program targeting students who were in danger of losing their freshman-year math credit. (This process would later become one of Chief Education Officer Denise Bannister’s major efforts to spread the freshman academy’s reforms throughout the Gladston school system.) Rosenberger persuaded 16 students to enroll in the program, which required them to stay after school for 90-minute sessions five evenings a week working both independently and one-on-one with him (he volunteered his time) on basic computation exercises and advanced word problems. Participants and their parents had to sign a contract agreeing to specific expectations of behavior, attendance, and outcomes. Six of Rosenberger’s initial group dropped out, but the remaining 10 stuck with the rigorous program and developed sound math skills; seven of them passed their regular high school math classes for the year.

Ryan was one who succeeded. The freshman was failing algebra at Lincoln High School when Rosenberger stepped in and persuaded Ryan’s counselor to move him to a pre-algebra course so that he could build a better foundation for algebra. The counselor agreed. Encouraged, Ryan decided to attend Rosenberger’s credit recovery class. Soon after, his outlook on school soared along with his grades.

"Here [at the freshman academy], they give you second chances," Ryan said. "If they didn’t give us second chances, most of us probably wouldn’t be here now. We’d be in trouble."

All 10 students who completed Rosenberger’s course did so with a grade of 90% or higher. In addition to their results in the credit recovery course, those students and others who periodically took advantage of Rosenberger’s help at the urging of their freshman academy teachers posted improved scores on the state proficiency tests administered in the spring of 2000. The morning after they received the test results from the state, one team of teachers and students greeted Rosenberger with a standing ovation and a surprise breakfast.

Rosenberger minimized his role in the program’s success and praised the students instead. A former struggling student himself, Rosenberger said he

"I'm sorry, Mary, but I've decided to go on and pursue my doctorate in bioengineering."
told the freshmen he was guiding that they could pass the proficiency test; they simply needed to refresh their understanding of basic concepts and remember to break word problems into manageable steps before trying to solve them. His experience demonstrates that educators, like the adolescents they teach, need to feel that they belong to their schools.

TECHNOLOGY AND ENTHUSIASM

Teacher Clyde Dalrymple also did his part to connect to students whom he viewed as needing more positive role models in their lives. For Dalrymple, the hook was technology. A staunch supporter of integrating computers and related equipment into every subject, he often annoyed his colleagues who were too overloaded with the demands of troubled teenagers and the pressures of proficiency tests to be vigilant about making technology connections in every class. Dalrymple could also be abrasive with other teachers, which alienated them instead of encouraging them to find ways to include him in their team planning.

But he was clearly effective with students. Intent on taking advantage of teenagers’ interest in technology, he introduced a wide range of electronic applications, including computerized academic portfolios, multimedia presentations using sound and animation editing, and Web page designs. And he did it with such gusto that even the most apathetic students took notice.

“That’s the beauty of virtual reality,” Dalrymple boomed one afternoon as he marched around the technology lab gleefully explaining his latest cyber-fascination to students. “You don’t even need to leave the classroom and you can see places you might never visit.”

Dalrymple frequently opened his computer lab after school, including organizing a technology event to showcase students’ work for parents and the community. For some students, Dalrymple’s enthusiasm brought special joy to their learning. “And Mr. Dalrymple, well it’s like every time we go in that class we learn something new,” a student named Kristina told an audience of nearly 200 Gladston educators in May 2000 as she explained the benefits of attending the freshman academy. “That’s all we do in there is learn.”

“I learn the most in technology,” a student named Edward said one afternoon in the freshman academy lobby, “because he [Mr. Dalrymple] talks to you and you learn more. It’s the class I like ‘cause I like computers.”

During the technology demonstration event that Dalrymple sponsored, a freshman named Marcus sat at a computer seeking an audience with everyone who passed, eagerly demonstrating his knowledge of Web page design and Internet research. “I just love computers,” Marcus said, beaming at his machine. “I want to be a computer programmer when I grow up.”

DISAPPOINTMENTS

For all their triumphs, the freshman academy faculty members were not universally successful. One student who enrolled in the freshman academy was so deeply troubled and involved in gang activities that extensive efforts by his teachers couldn’t prevent his regular high school from expelling him at the end of the first semester. Although he intervened to help a persistently truant student whose mother needed him to care for his four younger siblings while she worked, Peterson wasn’t able to keep the boy from failing his classes. English teacher Ellen Jackson worked diligently with Peterson to help another student — a 17-year-old freshman — overcome his academic and social barriers. Despite repeated attempts to make up for the huge void in the boy’s home life and prior schooling, Jackson and Peterson couldn’t turn him around in time. The four academic credits he earned were not enough to elevate him to sophomore status. Peterson lamented another student who failed every class at the freshman academy — despite the ratio of one adult for every 10 teenagers — because his academic skills were weaker than the faculty had the time or the talents to improve.

One student, who had nearly exhausted the patience of his teachers with repeated misbehavior and refusal to complete assignments, offered a surprising suggestion. “They [the academy] should have an after-school class to learn more about college and careers and what you need to do,” he said. “Not for credit, but just to learn.”

Freshman academy faculty members tried to start several after-hours activities for students, including intramu-
r al sports. But they lacked money, volunteers, and space to do everything they wanted. When school district transportation officials wouldn’t provide bus service for students at Lincoln to return to the freshman academy in the afternoon to serve detention or to work on computers, Peterson added personal driver to his list of duties until he eventually persuaded officials to relent and provide the transportation.

‘I WANT TO BE AT SCHOOL’

One of Peterson’s most successful projects was Sunset School, which he based on a similar program in Baltimore. It was designed as an alternative to sending students out of the classroom as punishment for bad behavior. Whether students are made to sit in a school conference room for the remainder of the day or stay home for three days because of suspensions, Peterson believes these traditional methods of detention contribute to delinquency. Many students consider out-of-school suspension “an attractive option,” he said, because there are no adults at home to monitor their behavior. These same students are often in danger of failing; he wants to keep them in school, where they might learn. Likewise, he said, the high number of repeat offenders at in-school suspension programs suggests some weaknesses in that method of punishment, which typically involves no clearly defined structure or purpose.

During supervised after-school sessions at Sunset School, students had to write personal reflections about their misbehavior and come up with goals to improve it. They also had to complete assignments missed because of their outbursts in class and to study for any subjects on the state proficiency tests they had not yet passed. Peterson agreed with teachers that students needed to experience repercussions when they intentionally broke school rules, but he argued that only by eliminating lapses in learning could the staff significantly reduce behavior problems and provide the support system students were seeking.

As word spread among students that getting sprung from class was no longer an option, many complained that the alternative plan was unfair. And, as spring approached, ill-behaved students who wanted to enjoy the warm weather accused teachers of making an unreasonable number of Sunset School referrals.

“I asked your teachers to rein you in and get you to focus on academics because that’s what we’re about here,” Peterson told a class one Friday afternoon. “We’re not trying to stifle you; we just need to stay focused. And by the way, have a good weekend.”

Sunset School wasn’t an unqualified success, but it worked for most of Peterson’s customers. During the 2000-2001 school year, the school system extended Sunset School to the two high schools and made plans to eventually carry it to the district’s middle schools.

Edward was a familiar face during the early days of the freshman academy’s Sunset School. A year earlier, he had moved to Gladston from one of the roughest parts of Chicago. His first semester at the freshman academy included several run-ins with teachers and an out-of-school suspension from his regular high school for getting involved in a fight he said he “just couldn’t walk away from.” After spending more than a few afternoons at Sunset School, however, Edward’s behavior began to improve. “It helped me get focused,” he said, acknowledging that the grandmother he lived with in Gladston during his freshman year was strict and supportive but probably needed a little help caring for a teenage boy by herself.

By the end of the second semester, Edward was staying after school periodically, but not to serve punishments. Instead, he worked for the school janitor or helped technology teacher Dalrymple with various projects to earn his required community service hours. And despite being identified as a student at risk of failing, Edward passed his freshman year with two credits to spare.

Perhaps the biggest beneficiary of Sunset School and of Peterson’s brand of support was Zack. The midyear move to a different teaching team helped him turn a corner, but on many days, Zack still lapsed into delinquency. One day, after he had been warned that another serious infraction would lead to an out-of-school suspension, Zack broke the rules again. He approached Peterson and frantically pleaded for a Sunset School sentence instead. “Please don’t suspend me,” Zack begged his mentor. “I don’t want to go home. I want to be at school.”

His words resonated deeply with Peterson. Zack’s pleading contained the implied message that the staff at the freshman academy had succeeded in showing him that school was where he belonged. He had earned enough credits by the end of the term to advance to the 10th grade. Two weeks before he left the freshman academy, Zack told Peterson that he finally had started enjoying school.

“Well, that’s good,” Peterson said, laughing. “It took 175 days, but we got there.”

1. All names are pseudonyms.
4. Ibid., pp. vii-viii.