

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: RETHINKING MENTAL HEALTH AND LITERACY FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

New York University
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Afternoon Work Group Suggestions

Advocacy for Youth and Families

Question: Students with disabilities involving emotional disturbance leave school at much higher rates than other students. What efforts might be undertaken to create viable pathways to graduation for these students who have dropped out, or are at risk of dropping out, of school?

- Engage student and caregivers to help them identify school-related or other activities that will help them stay in school.
- Create relationships between schools and community-based agencies (mental health, substance abuse, after-school programs) and establish links to resources for students and their families.
- Provide individualized tutoring with learning specialists during the school day.
- Set up peer mentoring within schools to support students at risk of dropping out.
- Enlist support from PTA to address the problem of disconnection from school.
- Educate students and families about graduation requirements.
- Implement accelerated credit program to allow students to advance to higher grade level for older students.
- Advocate against testing and/or supplement student performance through student portfolio.
- Better train teachers to work with students at risk of dropping out.

Question: Immigrant students, particularly English Language Learners (ELLs) face many unique challenges in the school system. What can we do to better support immigrant students and their families in their educational pursuits?

- Educate parents (in their language) about the rights of all children to an educational evaluation, school-based services, and safety in schools despite legal status.
- Provide culturally competent advocates and other staff to help families navigate school system.
- Identify leaders in immigrant communities and resources for immigrant families.
- Enhance Office of Parent engagement in DOE to outreach and address needs of immigrant families.
- DOE should consider collaborating with local community, faith-based and other organizations in immigrant neighborhoods to better address needs of immigrant families.
- DOE should address necessity for school translators; student should not act as translator for family.
- Educate all school staff on particular needs and challenges facing immigrant families.

Question: What can mental health agencies (and schools, when applicable) do to promote youth voice so that young people can acquire skills in grass-roots organizing, self-advocacy, and self-expression in order for them to play an integral role in the life and culture of the local community and beyond?

Advocacy in mental health organizations:

- Hire youth advocates in programs
- Create agency culture that encourages collaboration with youth in relation to activities, treatment, and community involvement.
- Train young people on how to advocate for themselves and develop internships within advocacy organizations

Enhance positive approaches to working with young people:

- Develop curriculum to effectively teach independent living skills in high schools and community-based organizations; one component should emphasize accessing community resources.
- Ensure that services are culturally competent
- Teach skills that young people can bring to their communities.
- Develop commitment to implementing strength-based approach in school or agency.

Question: How should schools support young adults with mental health needs so that they remain in school and graduate with the skills necessary for higher education or successful employment?

Increase access to mental health and academic counseling:

- Create outreach strategies to young people and provide group counseling to address their isolation. Consider diverse therapeutic interventions, i.e. art, music, animals, film, photo, plants, etc.
- Decrease student/guidance counselor ratio.
- Identify students who are struggling to meet state requirements and implement team assessments to evaluate student, incorporating emphasis on strengths, and providing resources to student/family.

Enhance curriculum to promote skill mastery and graduation:

- Include life skills component.
- Raise level of self-confidence through mastery of a particular skill, i.e. art, video, etc. Create a portfolio for every student emphasizing achievements in one or more areas.
- Create opportunities for real world experience, i.e. internships, trade programs, etc.
- Gather statistics on how many students cannot/do not meet state requirements and advocate for academic programs that can support them in their academic pursuits.
- Offer peer training and student leadership programs.
- Restructure IEP Diploma to create real linkages to Regents diploma.

Family participation:

- Provide transportation for evaluations, appointments, etc. to ensure family participation. Implement more creative outreach strategies.
- Create mandatory student/family participation in transition process.

Making Literacy Relevant to Marginalized Youth

Question: What might be the strengths or survival skills of young people who have been marginalized due to involvement with the courts, child welfare or other oppressive conditions? How can these strengths be creatively integrated into a literacy program to make it relevant, especially for youth who have disconnected from academic pursuits, or who have a large gap between age and reading level?

- Young people rely heavily on their peers, especially in the context of street life. Integrate networking / solidarity strategies into curriculum.
- Identify students who played some kind of leadership role while on the street or in jail/prison and channel these skills into leadership development for class as a whole, including opportunities for students to teach class.
- Integrate street smarts and related abilities into curriculum, i.e. problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation skills (sales). Apply these abilities to survival skills in the adult world, i.e. financial independence, locating and maintaining employment, daily living skills, building trust, etc.
- Use classics that students can identify with and present this material in language that is meaningful to them. Engage them in discussions around, or act out, for example, Huck Finn, Hamlet, Joan of Arc, Greek Myths.
- Encourage students to read inspiring memoirs that focus on the life of a young adult, e.g. Anne Frank and write their own life stories.

Question: How might the criminal justice system—including the courts, pre-trial detention centers, alternative to incarceration programs, probation, parole, jail, or prison—promote education?

Assessments and services:

- Ensure use of in-depth, comprehensive assessments of learning disabilities and mental health/substance abuse disorders for court-involved youth.
- Mental health programs need to be made available to young people with court involvement who do not necessarily present with Axis I diagnosis.
- Implement appropriate mental health assessment and learning disorder evaluations to ensure that general education students do not get referred inappropriately to special education.

Provide incentives:

- Students doing well in academic programs could earn release from suspension programs. Along these lines, getting GED could be linked to earlier release from jail or prison.
- Create incentives/rewards for program staff to foster education.

Increase emphasis on academics:

- Create a culture for court-involved youth that promotes education by i) implementing effective curriculum in jails/prisons - Employ tutors/teachers with (Or provide training in) solid understanding of the challenges facing this population to enhance engagement in educational pursuits; ii) making explicit the link between education and employment to provide relevancy for academic pursuits; iii) developing interdisciplinary relationships between educators, parole and corrections officers and train them in the ways in which education reduces recidivism.

- Upstate systems: account for credits, i.e. make sure young person gets credits when incarcerated and leaving facility.
- Educational plan should be in place before young person is discharged from jail or prison; Steer young people toward GED or Regents Diploma.
- Create more literacy programs for older teenagers/young adults with low literacy levels.

Question: It has been shown that family involvement greatly increases the chances of success (preventing relapse, recidivism) for a young person who has been court involved. How might agencies/organizations involve families and other supports to further this young person's educational pursuits?

- When a young person so desires, engage whole family in literacy skill attainment. Reach out to family and bring services to them. Family members might be experiencing shame around their own literacy challenges. Outreach must therefore be sensitive in order to preserve parental competency. Take into consideration cultural factors that would affect family and student engagement.
- Engage family in discussion around young person to enhance support. This will help parents to not feel blamed for young person's court involvement or literacy level; they can become positive agents of change in the young person's life.
- For homeless youth, train staff in family dynamics and the ways in which life on the street has impacted on the young person in terms of self-esteem, ability to trust, abuse, etc.

Question: What kinds of incentives might be implemented to encourage young people who are disconnected from school to attend—and ideally graduate from—an educational program?

- Create non-traditional innovative classroom space, i.e. a basketball court, a theater, a science laboratory, bank, kitchen, etc., one that does not replicate authoritative structure of public school classrooms. Make educational experience pleasurable, fun, and practical.
- Think in terms of multiple kinds of literacy, i.e. financial, using good judgment (analytical), computer/technological, following directions, filling out an application.
- Make educational program financially viable for potential students by supplementing with lunch and metro cards. Use stipends in appropriate manner, i.e. while stipends might initially engage students and make it financially possible to go to school, they should not substitute for real academic/personal motivation. Contract on individual basis with students and emphasize academic performance.
- Validate achievement on an on-going basis and implement a tiered system within program to recognize accomplishments. This can help raise student's self-esteem when he or she advances to the next level.
- Create connections between learning and vocation/employment.
- Link student with a mentor to promote engagement and inspiration.
- Ensure that student has support (therapeutic, case management) while in literacy program.

Bridging Secondary and Higher Education

Question: Adjustment to the demands of higher education can become complicated by a disability. What can college/university disability offices (or staff in other training programs) do to support students with psychiatric disabilities?

Raise awareness around the challenges of disabilities on the faculty and staff level:

- Educate professors, researchers, teaching assistants, and resident assistants about mental health disorders and emotional and cognitive difficulties and the ways in which they can impact on academic performance and well-being.
- Involve teaching staff in individualized plans for students with disabilities and identify skills, supports and accommodations, e.g. if more time is needed for assignments, help with note taking, need to record lectures, etc.
- Structure classrooms to better meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Promote a culture of prevention and mental health in students:

- Educate students about their rights and resources in relation to disabilities (VESID, Independent Living Center, etc.) and how to advocate for them.
- Dedicate time during orientation to educate students about mental health and wellness so they can increase self-awareness, identify warning signs in others, and know what support services are available on campus. Aid students to gain understanding of key transitional phases during which they might benefit from support: i) the first weeks of adjustment to the new academic setting, ii) facing academic challenges, or iii) during period of crisis.
- Dedicate time to outreach, such as posting periodic reminders through email, regular mail, school newspaper, and informing students about support services on campus.

Enhance support services:

- Wellness centers should provide support for students through on-going drop-in groups and individual counseling throughout the year. Such support groups can help students adjust to the real expectations of college life and navigate social and academic challenges. It is recommended that support be balanced with holding the student accountable for his or her actions and academic performance.
- Establish case management system to facilitate linkages to more extensive services, when needed.
- Create and/or maintain links with support systems external to campus. To this end, colleges and universities should cultivate relationships with local hospitals and agencies to facilitate referral process.

Question: What kinds of formal and informal mechanisms might be implemented between institutions that serve transition-age youth (high schools, community mental health agencies, etc.) and local community colleges and universities to create a bridge between secondary and higher education?

- Optimize referral process so that community mental health and other agencies can link student to appropriate services in college prior to registration.
- Inform student about possibility of signing consents upon entering college to allow that institution to confer with the student's psychiatrist, etc.

- Involve mental health agencies, when appropriate, in individual wellness plan to maximize support and accommodations.
- Cultivate relationships between high schools and college admissions offices to promote chances for a person with a disability to enter college when he or she exhibits suitable academic potential.

Question: How can high schools and mental health agencies encourage the option of post-secondary education, including college, vocational training, etc.? What links can staff and young people create between their own programming/curriculum and continuing education to further their strengths, knowledge, and skills?

- Provide students with peer role models, i.e. young people who have established an educational/career goal and who are engaged with that goal or achieved it. These students or graduates could be identified by a college and linked to high schools and community-based organizations to talk about their experiences.
- Prepare students for higher or continuing education by offering pre-readiness classes in the areas of time management, organization, finance planning, career exploration (link specific study or extra-curricular activity to vocation or profession), and technology, especially computer skills involving research and word processing.
- The Department of Education and mental health agencies should inform students of college fairs and encourage them to attend so that can become aware of options and programs available to them. These fairs should be user-friendly, and provide students with opportunity to talk with college students, admissions personnel, etc.
- Guidance counselors should engage the whole person, not only educational-related facets of individual and emphasize the fact that a given college may provide intra-murals in a particular sport or boasts of an effective student government. Such activities may create additional incentives for students.
- Educate students about the many options of financial aid that are available to them in higher education.

Question: What are the most important contributions that colleges and universities can make to young people in public schools, including Districts 75 and 79, and in community mental health agencies about higher education?

- Colleges should provide equal opportunities for students with disabilities and mainstream youth. They can encourage academic success for students with disabilities by providing opportunities for student shadowing (such support might include accompanying a student to class and other college-related events during a designated time period).
- College should inform students about wrap-around services in their application packets and during college fairs; this could provide incentives for students with disabilities to enroll.
- Colleges could invite young people to stay in campus dorm for the weekend (targeted orientation).
- Colleges/universities could partner with high schools to establish mentoring programs to educate students about the opportunities that college affords and options that exist for flexible enrollment (e.g. part-time, etc.).
- Allow prospective students to attend a class

Integrating Mental Health and Education

Question: What activities could promote literacy in a mental health setting?

- Language: lyrics, poetry, diary.
- Musical: learning instrument.
- Visual: photography (young people take pictures and discuss why they chose that particular shot, what feelings picture arouses, etc), drawing, painting.
- Technological: computer software, using the web, interactive software with literacy component.
- Sensory: culinary art.
- Financial: Create a general store in agency that will encourage students to use literacy and math skills in incremental process. Supplement with learning to start one's own business: run the company; hire employees, hiring firing, fill orders, customer service, etc.
- Theatrical: dramatic expression.
- When engaging in problem-solving or decision-making approaches, use writing as component of activity, i.e. writing down pros and cons, conclusions drawn, etc.
- Make books available; comic books, memoirs, multi-levels.

Question: How might a school or community mental health agency involve young people in their communities to enhance literacy skills?

- Educate young people about the community, its resources, and how they might participate: for example, invite local organizations/leaders to speak about their work and required education/skills to pursue certain vocations.
- Artistic expression: invite community members to art shows at agency that may have a narrative component, i.e. description of art object; what inspired its creation, etc. Possibly a local art gallery will host the show.
- Create intergenerational groups; teach elderly to use internet.
- Develop volunteer and other "trial" get-your-feet-wet opportunities.
- Engage Big Brother/Big Sister organization to recruit individuals who will help out in school environment to assist with reading and chaperone on field trips.
- Encourage community businesses to make donations so that each student has adequate school supplies.
- Actively link students to literacy resources in community.
- Buddy student with a literate peer and have them engage in creative activities that will foster motivation for education.

Question: What can be done in a school environment to engage young people in learning when they are, for example: a) serving detention, b) having difficulty concentrating, c) faced with other circumstances that isolate them from usual classroom activity?

- Create group focused on transforming behavior that is interfering with academic performance. Use role playing to engage students in group setting.
- Promote open-door policy at administrative level so that young people can give specific feedback and influence educational and other policies.

- Ensure that students have access to assessment for mental health and learning disabilities; mental health services, at least for screening purposes, should be on site at schools.
- Promote opportunities for youth centered approaches, i.e. youth leadership groups or clubs, for mutual support and positive change.
- Educate teachers to identify signs of mental illness/emotional distress.
- School should be more proactively refer and facilitating links to services.
- Reading should always be encouraged, especially when student is serving detention or is suspended.
- Students must receive all materials distributed in their absence from class.

Question: What kinds of partnerships might exist between schools and community mental health agencies to facilitate re-integration into the school system for someone who has dropped out? How can programs and staff coordinate efforts to meet the mental health and educational goals of youth across systems?

- Ensure that all school-based personnel including administrators, support staff, parent coordinator, and teachers are aware of and understand local community resources and mental health services.
- Formally connect local schools with mental health programs; on a regular basis mental health providers should present on mental health concerns, needs and resources.
- Facilitate involvement with VESID for the purpose of vocational evaluation and pursuit of educational and vocational goals.
- Guidance counselors should follow up with students after referrals have been made to community mental health services to encourage engagement. Promote teacher involvement, when appropriate.
- Mental health providers need to find out what happened in school environment that created alienation in young person: at a minimum, teachers and clinicians need to speak each others' basic language.
- Teachers require training to enhance competencies in mental health assessment etc.; use a train-the-trainer model so that a resident expert exists at schools; arrange technical support from mental health trainers to sustain knowledge and skills.
- Police officers should be trained in engagement skills to facilitate connections with young people and support linkage to mental health agencies.
- Mental health agencies should work in tandem with law enforcement and community leaders to address problems involving youth.