

**Colorado  
Educators  
Study Homeless  
and Highly  
Mobile Students**



**Colorado Department of Education**

**Center for Research Strategies**

**2005**



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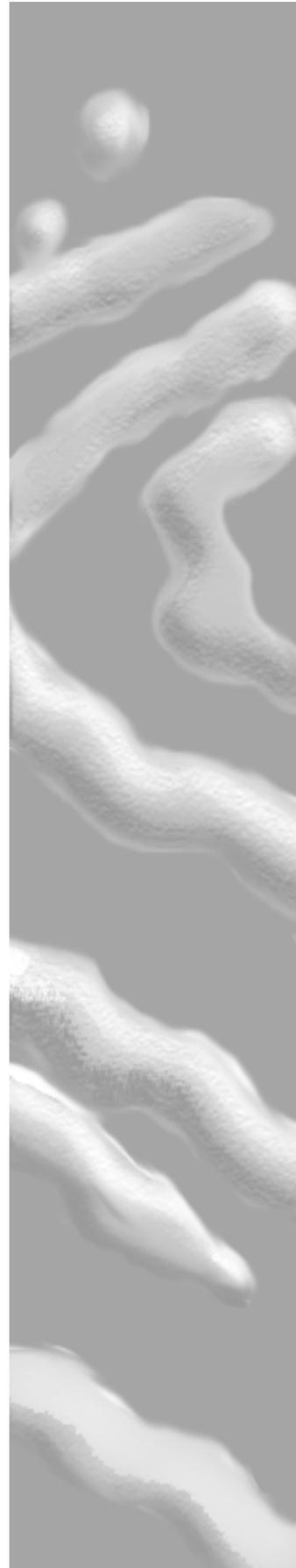
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## FOREWARD

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Teachers wonder how to teach students who come and go. Nurses express frustration in delayed medical records due to frequent student movement. Principals worry when a student comes to school without a warm jacket or sufficient food to eat. Shelter providers cringe when they talk with youth who dropped out rather than feel unwelcome at their high school.

“These children do not experience residential mobility as an aberration or anomaly; it is an ongoing characteristic of their life” (P. D. Lopez, 2002). This is the reality for many children and youth who experience homelessness. However, complacency and inattention to the lives of these young people must turn to thoughtful and intentional problem solving and decision-making. Comprehensive action needs to expand at national, state and local levels, not only through research centers at universities but with local partnerships among schools, shelters and community and faith agencies.

Today, the increasing number of children and youth identified as homeless or highly mobile challenges schools in unique ways. Issues of inconsistent attendance, missing academic records, and transportation to school are but a few. Youth living on their own have greater challenges when their lack of credits and legal guardianship bumps up against school systems traditionally not structured to address the complexity of their individual needs.

In 2003-04, the Daniels Fund, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education and the Center for Research Strategies, sponsored a yearlong professional development opportunity for school teams to focus on homelessness and high mobility issues using participatory action research. A total of 17 teachers, principals, a school social worker and an education director at a youth shelter comprised this cohort for the school year. The expectations of the “Colorado Participatory Action Research”, or COPAR, project were demanding, as it required six full days of class work supplemented with individual research, planning and implementation in between class sessions. Self-reflection and dialogue among the group members and with the facilitator was integral to the flow of the project.

At year's end, each of the nine sites reported their processes, insights and conclusions. Their heartfelt stories of action and research comprise the following chapters. They detail their yearlong engagement, questions, struggles, ahas! and action steps. In varying degrees, the COPAR project brought about gained knowledge, changed attitudes and forward movement for the group members to be advocates for this specific population of students.

Each chapter tells a different story, written for other teachers, administrators and community-based leaders. The COPAR concerns, questions and problems are as varied and layered as each local setting. Hopefully, these examples may become an invitation or challenge to ask and study questions about student homelessness and mobility in your own schools and communities. Like ripples, when a rock is dropped into a pond, ideas stimulate ideas; optimism nurtures optimism; solutions foster solutions and change prompts change.

We thank the pioneering 17 COPAR participants. Each individual saw a need and took personal responsibility to respond with the intent to improve both the educational and social experience for homeless and highly mobile students. Special acknowledgement goes to Regis University for graciously providing a meeting space throughout the year. We also recognize and appreciate the multi-tasking skills of four conscientious AmeriCorps volunteers, Charlotte Nolan, Stephanie Smith, Tracesea Slater, and Nate West, who each assisted with various components of the COPAR Project over the past three years.

“One’s mind, once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions.”

~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

**Margie Milenkiewicz**

State Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

Colorado Department of Education

March 1, 2005

## INTRODUCTION

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Emily Alana James, Ed.D.

*Colorado Educators Study Homeless and Highly Mobile Students* captures the participation, action and research of an energetic group of Colorado educators studying educational practices for homeless and highly mobile students.<sup>1</sup> The Colorado Participatory Action Research (CO PAR) project spanned the 2003-2004 school year, and embarked on new territory in both action research and professional development for these 17 educators.

The following 11 chapters describe their varied and diverse action research projects. This book is neither an academic tome nor a prescriptive “how to” guide. It represents the unique perspectives of 17 educators who tell their stories in their own words, about their experiences and the ways the CO PAR group influenced each other. These examples are an indication of what is possible when school administrators work with teachers in their schools to investigate the complex social and educational issues with highly mobile and homeless students.

The COPAR teams represented both administrators and teachers, and the diversity of educational settings found across Colorado. One rural school district participated with three elementary schools from two “small towns” with populations ranging from 11,000 to 72,000. Four suburban schools participated in the study, including two elementary and two middle schools. Finally, one elementary, one charter high school, and a homeless shelter for unaccompanied youth represented urban communities. Immigration emerged as a common theme for all of the CO PAR schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Our definition of a highly mobile student was “a student that had experienced two or more enrollment changes in any given year that did not correlate to normal school change because of advancement”.

While every story is different, in general, participants engaged in two to four cycles of action research. They studied their school environments and then worked as a group to surface the assumptions that they held going into the project and to embrace larger perspectives on educational practices needed for these students. Then the educators planned their first cycle of action, measured the outcomes of that action and brought those results back to the group for further suggestions. The projects were varied, and while some were more obviously successful than others, they all displayed ingenuity and resourcefulness and were specifically geared to solve the issues presented in their schools.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to facilitate this group. I was interested in using participatory action research to study educational practices for highly mobile and homeless students, as well as exploring the use of participatory action research as a professional development tool for educators. CO PAR intersected these two areas of investigation, both of which are not widely studied. Educational practice for homeless and highly mobile students is almost non-existent in educational literature. At the same time, school districts are encouraged to implement long-range professional development projects, yet the use of participatory action research (PAR) as data driven professional development is not common.

To begin using participatory action research to study educational practices, the CO PAR projects considered the current, available literature on educational practice that addressed the needs of homeless and highly mobile students. I summarized the literature review into three domains of practice. The “Three Domains Framework” address: 1) access to educational services, 2) welcoming school culture and 3) flexible instructional strategies. CO PAR participants validated the “Three Domains Framework” and in many ways improved upon the educational practice in their schools for this disadvantaged population of students.

Simultaneous to their work, I studied the use of PAR methodology as professional development. My research found that this project increased the professional accountability of the participants to their school districts and communities. It was also successful in increasing their knowledge about homelessness and high mobility, involving participants in advocating for these

students and engaging them in improving educational practice in their behalf (James 2005).

A table is provided to help the reader quickly reach the chapters of greatest interest, either because of their similar role of administrator or teacher, the similarity of the size of their community or the area within these domains that they studied. These categories overlapped throughout the projects and teachers worked with administrators on others. Not every educator studied all three domains.

**Table 1: Outline of CO PAR projects by demographics and Three Domain Framework educational practices**

Access to Educational Services	Welcoming School Culture	Flexible Instructional Strategies
<b>Rural Administrator and Teacher</b>		
<b>Chapter 1</b> Project focused on increasing student motivation.		
<b>Small Town Administrators and Teachers</b>		
<p><b>Chapter 2</b> Principal worked with teacher to uncover issues related to numbers and services for mobile children.</p> <p><b>Chapter 2</b> Bilingual education teacher worked with her principal to uncover issues related to numbers and services for mobile children.</p> <p><b>Chapter 3</b> Principal looked for significance between enrollment in services and attendance.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 5</b> Principals interviewed every parent who enrolled their children mid year.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 6</b> Teacher started an after-school tutoring program.</p> <p><b>Chapter 7</b> Teacher worked to increase academic achievement for homeless and highly mobile children.</p>
<b>Urban/Suburban Administrators</b>		
<p><b>Chapter 4</b> A middle school principal develops case studies of her most mobile students in order to understand the impact of her pyramid of services implemented to improve their education.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 5</b> Principal worked with homeless shelter and opened a welcoming center.</p>	

**Table 1: Outline of CO PAR projects by demographics and Three Domain Framework educational practices (Continued)**

<b>Access to Educational Services, Welcoming School Culture And Flexible Instructional Strategies</b>
<b>Suburban Teachers</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b> Teacher worked with literacy coach and started the “lunch bunch”.
<b>Chapter 9</b> Two teachers investigated the early experiences of students transferring into their schools and encouraged a more formal welcoming structure.
<b>Urban Administrator and Teacher</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b> Urban charter school investigates the backgrounds of their students to determine the role of high mobility of the population in their school.
<b>Urban Homeless Shelter Administrator</b>
<b>Chapter 11</b> Homeless shelter administrator surveys unaccompanied youth to determine the qualities they would look for in a future charter school.

Chapter 1 is written by two teachers (one wears an administrative hat as well) from Saguache, Colorado. Amy was teaching a split-level class during the 2003 – 2004 school year and Yvonne found herself as homeless liaison for her small school district as she taught in the high school. The largest grade in their school at the time had fifteen students. Their chapter shares their journey into the complexity of welcoming and motivating students in rural schools.

In Chapter 2, the principal/teacher team from Fort Morgan, Colorado investigated issues of mobility in small towns. Ron and Pam describe not only the many ways their data disabused them of their assumptions, but also the complexities schools may face with any single mobile child.

A small town principal writes Chapter 3 from a school that has been very successful in turning around academic issues faced within his community. Brett describes the difficulties of action research and the deep understanding that

developed from an otherwise difficult process. In Chapter 4, Vernita, a middle school principal, tells about how CO PAR changed her perspective on homeless and mobile students forever.

In Chapter 5, three elementary principals, Julie from the small town of Longmont, Lynn from the suburban area of Commerce City, and Dave from the urban city of Colorado Springs, share the outcomes of their investigations through interviews of the families that entered their schools midyear.

Two teachers tell their individual stories in Chapters 6 and 7. Jason describes the joys of “adding one more thing” to his already busy teaching schedule and how an after-school tutoring group added to his experience as a teacher. In Chapter 7, Tobey explores the complex issues involved in what originally seemed a straightforward investigation into academic efficacy for this population.

Chapters 8 and 9 show the perspective of educators in suburban settings. In Chapter 8, Rebecca and Dana tell about how their experiment with “the lunch bunch” made their school culture more welcoming and brought the issues of homelessness to their district as a whole. In Chapter 9, Jennifer S. and Jennifer R. investigate what is known about homelessness and high mobility in their school, welcome their own students more comprehensively, and ultimately suggest new procedures in their schools for tracking these students.

A principal and social worker team from a charter school in Denver, PS1 write Chapter 10. They describe the difficulties they faced getting a database in place to track their students’ home backgrounds and their resulting understanding of the diversity within their school.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Steve discusses unaccompanied youth and his survey process to understand the necessary qualities for a school engaged in reaching these students and being flexible enough to meet their needs until they complete their diploma.

This book recognizes the hard work and contributions of the first cohort that used PAR to study homeless and highly mobile students. This project will expand in

future years to reach educators in more states, participating in similar work on line. This book is published under a Creative Commons license (see <http://creativecommons.org>) to allow free use by all interested in the topics discussed within. The copyright is held in common between the Colorado Department of Education and the Center for Research Strategies (see the copyright page for details). This format for license was out of our belief in sharing information about the educational issues of disadvantaged students therefore allowing us to gift this initial growth and knowledge to others. This form of copyright also allows us to offer our new knowledge without creating the type of disturbance that may be brought about by commerce. We hope that this distribution will allow it to be widely read and disseminated to all.

I encourage readers that have questions about the chapters, the CO PAR project, or participatory action research as professional development, to contact me at [alanajames@earthlink.net](mailto:alanajames@earthlink.net). From all of us involved with CO PAR, we hope that you find this text useful, perhaps inspiring, in your own journey in working with or studying issues related to homeless and highly mobile students.

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## **PART 1**

# **Access to Educational Services**





**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 1**

***Motivating Norms:  
Increasing Motivation in Rural America***

**Amy Cox**

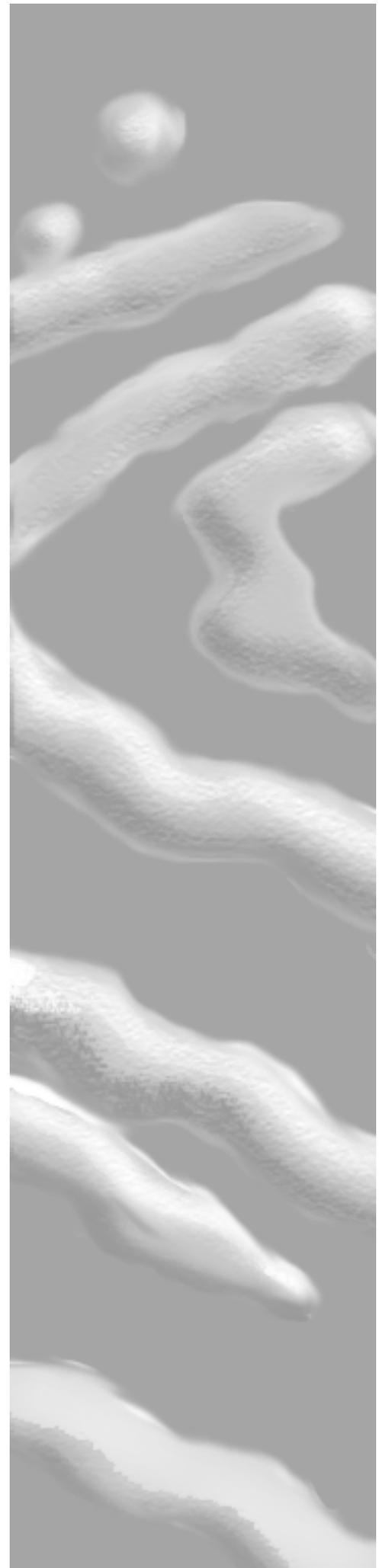
**2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher**

**Mountain Valley School**

**Yvonne Morfitt**

**Middle/High School Teacher**

**Mountain Valley School**



*After the survey, we compiled the results and placed posters throughout the school to inform the students of each other's goals and dreams for the future. The students were amazed at the results.*

## **Background**

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Mountain Valley School is a small rural school located in the ranching community of Saguache, Colorado. Geographically it is the highest alpine valley in the world and is located in the southern part of the state between the Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Mountains. There are about 600 people living in Saguache (Sa-watch) and the surrounding area. Saguache is a Ute Indian name for Blue Earth or Blue Waters reflecting the amount of water the northern valley had in the early 1800's. Water was plentiful and it brought in farmers and ranchers, thus the economy was good. The amount of water available for farming and ranching affects the economy of the area. We are presently in the midst of a 4-year drought. Therefore, the economy has been poor. It is 50 miles from the nearest large grocery store or recreational facility, 40 miles from the nearest hospital. The community is 50% white, 49% Hispanic and 1% Indian. Seventy-five percent of the students are on free and reduced lunches. Many of the students have moved several times within the community, from low-income housing to friends or family and then back to low-income housing again. We have 150 students K-12. Class size ranges from three to 25 students. The school has been in a financial downhill slide for the last 3 years.

## **The researchers**

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Amy Cox teaches 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at Mountain Valley and has lived in the San Luis Valley for most of her life. Her family has been here for six generations. Her grandmother was born in a small log cabin here. She grew up on the same large cattle ranch that her ancestors homesteaded. She experienced the economic importance of water and the lack of it first hand. Her grandfather and father both graduated from Mountain Valley School and Amy graduated in 1974. This community is part of her life; her roots are deep.

Yvonne Morfitt is a middle/high school teacher. She has been teaching here for eight years. She teaches a variety of subjects ranging from Algebra, Social Studies, Life Skills, Science and Small Business. She grew up in large metropolitan school in the Midwest. Her high school provided plentiful opportunities and the community was middle /high class. Yvonne was the homeless liaison for our school one year and through it, she became very interested in finding out what motivates these students to learn.

### **Our highly mobile students**

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Saguache does not have a homeless shelter. The closest shelter is 55 miles away. We have a 20% homeless/mobile population. We do not have a stereotypical homeless population in our community. Our homeless students live in foster homes, or live with their grandparents, or are single parents living in low-income housing. They are eager to graduate from high school. Our school provides on-line learning to the students that cannot make it to the classroom for a semester or a year. We check a computer out to them for the extended period and we monitor their progress to help them stay on task. This works great for the teen mothers who have a new baby at home and still want to graduate with their class. They are able to keep up the coursework without the stress of finding a babysitter and being a new mother.

### **The first cycle**

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The first cycle of our research was a questionnaire. We tried to come up with questions that would give us information about the mobility in their lives. We gave the survey to the students that we considered homeless and or mobile. After compiling this, we found that these students at Mountain Valley School felt they were getting a good education, and they liked the teachers and the school. They felt well liked, and that it was easy to adjust to our school. The reasons for families moving around are generally due to lack of jobs and housing in the area. A few of the students were living in foster homes or had moved here to live with relatives

because of certain family situations. For example, a young man came to our school as a kindergartener. Now he is in the third grade. This past year he and his mom lived with his grandmother and aunt. In the fall, the grandmother lost the house and moved to a large city, four hours from here. The student and his mother then moved back with the mother's ex-husband. The relationship proved to be violent. As time passed, they moved in with a friend. Presently, they have moved back to the large city, four hours away, and live with his grandmother and aunt.

After compiling the information from this first survey, we were in a quandary. Stories like this, and the data collected in our survey, was not enough to get us motivated and into the research we wanted to do to eventually benefit our community and school. We decided to write new questions.

### **The second cycle**

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We wanted information about the student's dreams of graduation from high school and college. What would prevent them from graduating and reaching their dreams? In order to increase motivation in Mountain Valley School, we felt the students needed to be aware of what the dreams of their other classmates were and what we expected of them academically. People's perceptions of the norms are often a good predictor of what they will say or do. We decided to use social norming to test the goals our students had through another survey.

This time we gave the survey to every student in the school K-12. The students answered questions concerning the dreams and goals in their life after high school. Motivating the students to learn in order to reach their goals was our hope with the survey. We hoped to open their eyes and see that most of them have the same high goals. The result may be little or no improvement unless the students increase their level of effort. The students must learn how to achieve their goals and realize that they must do the work.

Research has shown that in order for the students to change their behavior they must believe that they have the potential to be successful. They must have certain conditions present to perform this behavior. The research outlines three of

these conditions. First, the person perceives that performance of the behavior is consistent with his or her self-image and that it does not violate personal standards. Second, the person perceives that he or she has the capability to perform the behavior under a number of different circumstances. In other words, the person has “self-efficacy” with respect to executing the behavior in question. Third, the person possesses the skills necessary to perform the behavior (Fishbein, 1995).

Popular opinion has it that the students will never amount to anything outside of Saguache, Colorado. Research from Mirochnik, McCaul, and McIntire (1991) showed students who came from low-income circumstances had lower educational aspirations than did their more economically advantaged peers. O’Hare (1988) stated that poverty rates are higher in rural America than anywhere else. Rural families with two people working are falling into poverty at a very high rate. The combination of rising tuition rates and falling family incomes may make attending college an unrealistic choice for many students. However, we found that their academic success did not correlate with their dreams and goals when they graduate from high school. One hundred percent of the students K-12 planned to graduate from high school. Seventy percent of the students planned to attend college and graduate if they could finance it. Forty percent of the students wanted to attend a small 4-year college. Eighty nine percent of the students planned to own their own homes after graduating from college. Ninety-three percent planned to own new vehicles after graduating from high school and 40% planned to marry and have children before they are 30 years old. After the survey, we compiled the results and placed posters throughout the school to inform the students of each other’s goals and dreams for the future. The students were amazed at the results. The graphs gave the students a lot to discuss. The findings generated good conversations for the students and motivated them to accomplish their goals for themselves and to motivate each other to reach their goals. The teachers realized that the students have more motivation than we actually see them doing.

An article by Robert Harris on Motivating Students (Harris, 1991) suggested that students would be much more committed to a learning activity that has value for them, either in long term or short term. They would in fact put up with substantial

immediate unpleasantness and do an amazing amount of hard work if they are convinced that what they are learning ultimately will meet their needs.

After researching the last senior class, we found that of the 15 students, 10 enrolled in college and seven planned to enroll for a second year. They had high expectations of themselves and followed through with their dreams so far. Higher education and the higher paying jobs it represents may be what are drawing the young people out of this community.

## **Conclusions**

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The cycles of participatory action research have certainly given us exciting results. We feel that motivation in our school is an ongoing research topic. We as teachers have a duty to pass on this information to the entire school and community. The parents and teachers of these children need to raise their expectations of the students as the students have done for themselves and the students will achieve better academic performance in the classroom. We must continue to let them know that the perceived norm is not really what is true. Students have high expectations of themselves and if they all know they have the same expectations that in itself will increase the motivation to learn in our school. The community could also signal its commitment to these young students' education by providing scholarships, recognizing academic as well as athletic achievement, create apprenticeships and work/study opportunities and developing venture capital for the young entrepreneurs. A school and community effort should prepare these students to leave, but to empower them to return and provide economic support to our rural community.

Amy and Yvonne will go back to their classroom this next year and have high expectations of the students. We will continue to have posters up in the school to remind the students and teachers at Mountain Valley that the students have great goals and they need to support each other in their academic achievements to attain these goals. Because of our research, we hope to increase the level of academic achievement here at our school and involve the community and parents in the students' learning.

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**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 2**

***Planning for the Impact of High Mobility***

**Pam Watson**

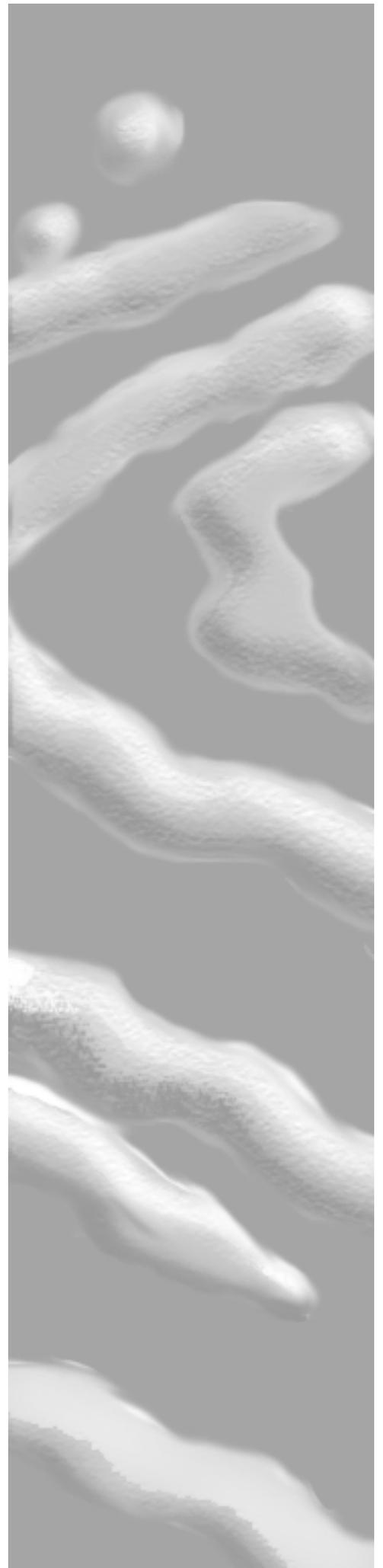
**ESL Teacher**

**Columbine Elementary School**

**Ron Pflug**

**Principal**

**Columbine Elementary School**



*Data from our first round of interviews gave us some insight. Parents of struggling, mobile students often did not understand that their child was not performing at grade level. They tended to feel that the child was doing well in school. In addition, parents of these students had very little knowledge of additional learning opportunities that were available to their child. The parents also tended to predict that their traveling days were over and they expected their child to complete his/her education at our school.*

*Examining causal factors behind these findings, we asked difficult questions. Do these parents not understand that their child is performing poorly, or is it a case of parental denial? Were school staff members effectively informing parents, or were we being too tactful, as we tried not to offend?*

## **Background**

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Columbine Elementary School serves approximately 360 students, grades one through four, on the high plains of northeast Colorado. The school's student population is approximately 60% Hispanic and 40% Anglo, with a continuing trend toward a larger Hispanic population. Many immigrants are attracted to the area in search of employment with the local beef plant or sugar beet industry, and many students are at risk of school failure. Contributing factors include many second-language students, a low level of parent education (the average education level of our parents falls between eighth and ninth grade), high poverty (approximately 65% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch), and a mobile population.

Through the 1990's, Columbine students performed at a low, stable level. When the state of Colorado implemented the Colorado State Assessments of Proficiency (CSAP) tests, Columbine students scored significantly below their statewide peers and test scores did not rise over time. Teaching staff morale was low as caring and hard-working teachers perceived their efforts as ineffective. Faced with possible sanctions for continued low performance, several improvement priorities emerged:

- Pursuing grants to provide more resources for students

- Using these resources to provide student interventions which a) target the needs of our students, and b) have a research base and a proven track record
- Committing to staff development which was research-based and embedded in classroom practice

This focus has resulted in significantly higher student performance, to the point where the school has been recognized by the state for its improvement and been taken off Improvement-plan status. However, there still is room for improvement, particularly with lower-performing student groups. Frustrated by the challenges mobile students present, we were eager to participate in an action research study targeting mobility. This project was an opportunity to better understand our students, and use the knowledge gained to improve our programming and raise student achievement. We were also eager to learn more about the action research process so we could apply it to other school issues in the future.

Pam Watson has been an ESL teacher at Columbine Elementary School for nine years, and Ron Pflug is in his twelfth year as school principal. This gives both a perspective on school culture and long-term student demographic and achievement trends. The school's spirit of reform and recent history of improvement have created a readiness to benefit from any data collected and a desire to use this data to benefit students.

### **Structure of the project**

---

Once we defined “mobility”, our plan of action was as follows:

1. Generate a list of mobile students currently enrolled at Columbine.
2. Determine the current achievement level of these students.
3. Generate a list of all interventions currently in place at the school.
4. Interview parents of identified students to clarify such items as the student's background, the parent's perceptions of the student's success, the student's participation in school-offered intervention opportunities, reasons why students did/did not participate in interventions, and reasons why these interventions were/weren't successful. We administered a similar interview to identify mobile students.

5. Collect follow-up data to respond to new issues arising in the first collection cycle.
6. Use all data collected to reflect upon our previous assumptions and to formulate a set of truths about our students.
7. Use this knowledge to evaluate the effectiveness of our intervention programs and make improvements as necessary.

As we moved through this research project, we came across a student whose situation, we felt, was compelling enough to include as a case study. His story is included in this report.

### **Generate a list of mobile students**

---

Using the study group's definition of mobility, we examined our enrollment data, expecting to find a large number of mobile students at our school. We were shocked to find relatively few students (twelve) who qualified. Many of our mobile students were so mobile that they had already moved (and so could not be included). We also had a number of students who come and go frequently. While we expected to see them again, they were not in the building at this time and so could not be included. We also found the student distribution to be a little different than we had expected:

- Six were male, six female
- Two were first graders, one second grader, six third graders, and one in fourth grade
- Seven were Hispanic, and five were Anglo

We were surprised that this sample of students was not predominately second-language in nature. Only two of the twelve were receiving ESL services and one more had recently "graduated" to a monitored status, which challenged our earlier assumption.

## **Determine the current achievement level of these students**

---

Columbine School used various tools to create a “body of evidence” measuring each student’s academic performance including state CSAP tests, NWEA Levels Tests, Accelerated Reader data, Accelerated Math data, STAR tests, STAR Early Literacy Tests, John’s IRI assessments, and student writing samples scored against a CSAP rubric. Using this collection of measurements helped us measure each student’s performance level against grade-level standards.

Concerning the identified students on our list:

- Seven were below grade level
- Five were performing at grade level
- None was above grade level

These findings challenged our early assumption regarding mobility as an accurate predictor of school success, as almost half of this identified population was at grade level.

## **Generate a list of all interventions currently in place at the school.**

---

The interventions/programs in place to help failing students included the following:

- Three Extended-Day classrooms (three days each week, for an hour after school)
- Homework Club (an hour after school each day, manned by volunteers from a nearby church and work-study students from the local community college)
- Daily one-on-one reading tutoring for struggling students (thirty minutes each day, with approximately 25 students tutored on a daily basis)
- Expanded summer school programming, which included individual reading tutoring.
- Migrant school services and summer programming for identified students
- Small group reading instruction (using additional staff provided by grant funding)

- Special-education services
- Library parent-involvement materials checked out for home use
- Implementation of the Lightspan program to extend learning into student homes

### Interview parents and students

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Surveys gathered important information from identified students and their parents. A bilingual staff member (the school’s Parent Involvement Coordinator) conducted the parent survey to assure that communication was possible with Spanish-speaking parents, and Pam Watson, who also is bilingual, conducted the student surveys. 12 parents and 12 students were interviewed, survey results were as follows:

**1. How is the school year going? What is/isn’t working?**

Parents	Students
All responded favorably	General satisfaction. Peer relationships were the important issues.

**2. How are you/is your child doing academically?**

Parents	Students
Of the seven students performing below grade level, four of those parents felt their child was doing “just fine”.	Students had more accurate perceptions of the academic success, usually agreeing with teacher views.

**Research Significance:** There is a need to follow up with parents and teachers regarding inaccurate parent perceptions.

**3. Are you aware of school interventions in place?**

Parents	Students
One parent was aware of five programs, all other parents knew of just one or two.	All students were aware of the school’s Homework Club – unaware of other interventions.

**Research Significance:** There is a need to communicate better with students and parents re: intervention opportunities.

**4. Do you/Does your child participate in any of these programs?**

Parents	Students
Three parents indicated that their child regularly attended the Homework Club. No other involvement, though parents wanted to hear more about various programs.	Six students had attended summer school or migrant school the previous summer. Eight were regular Homework Club participants. Four received daily small-group reading instruction. Six regularly check family involvement materials out from the library, one is using Lightspan materials, and one of the two students with Leap Frog access are using those materials.

**Research Significance:** Surveyors identified a need to examine referral processes in place for interventions – how are students selected to participate?

**5. How much are these programs helping you/your child?**

Parents	Students
The three parents with students in the Homework Club indicated that they felt the program was very helpful. They could not comment on other interventions, because their children were not participants.	Ten students felt that the programs were helpful; one student indicated they helped “a little”, and one does not participate (and so had no comment).

**Research Significance:** Programs are perceived favorably, though possibly under-utilized.

**6. If you don’t participate in these programs, why is this?**

Parents	Students
Three parents indicated they did not know of the programs, two parents indicated their work schedule made their child’s participation difficult.	Only one student responded. After-school transportation was an issue for him and his teacher has arranged for assistance during the school day.

**Research Significance:** We need to make sure that better communication won’t be hampered by other roadblocks that prevent student participation.

**7. If you don’t participate, do you have suggestions re: ways these programs could be improved?**

Parents	Students
No suggestions given.	One student indicated that more after-school transportation options would be helpful.

**8. You have had a couple of school changes. Why have you been moving, and have these moves impacted school success?**

Parents	Students
All parents indicated that moves were detrimental. A variety of reasons were given for moves, including a parent in prison and parent drug issues.	Eight students felt there was a negative impact; four felt that there was no impact. Family and financial issues were given as reasons for moves.

**9. Is it more likely that you will move again or stay at our school? Would your desire to stay in this school be a factor in any contemplated moves?**

Parents	Students
Two parents indicated that they would be moving again within the year, and one stated that they had planned to move but had decided not to due to because they were pleased with the school.	Five students did not feel they would be moving again, and six were unsure.

**Research Significance:** Students responses to this question need to be interpreted with caution, as parents don't always discuss this issue with their children. On the flip side, students sometimes misinterpret comments made by parents.

**Collect follow-up data**

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Data from our first round of interviews gave us some insight. Parents of struggling, mobile students often did not understand that their child was not performing at grade level. They tended to feel that the child was doing well in school. In addition, parents of these students had very little knowledge of additional learning opportunities that were available to their child. The parents also tended to predict that their traveling days were over and they expected their child to complete his/her education at our school. Finally, given a chance to give suggestions to the school, these parents were unable or unwilling to do so.

Examining causal factors behind these findings, we asked difficult questions. Do these parents not understand that their child is performing poorly, or is it a case of parental denial? Were school staff members effectively informing parents, or are

we being too tactful, as we tried not to offend? To answer these questions, follow-up interviews occurred with parents and teachers.

In these interviews, the school principal directly stated that school staff was concerned because the child was not performing at grade level. Parents consistently indicated that it was contradictory to the teacher's message. The principal also followed up with the teachers, who were surprised that parents had not heard their concerns.

### **Use the data to reflect upon our previous assumptions and to formulate a set of truths about our students**

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Achievement data and the information gained from parent interviews led us to several conclusions. We first needed to re-examine our earlier assumptions, and when we did this, we discovered that several were incorrect. We did not have a large number of mobile students at our school. Twelve out of a population of 360 was a much lower incidence than we expected. We had also incorrectly assumed that our mobile students would be predominately Hispanic, with a number needing ESL services. Of the twelve students, five were Anglo, which aligned closely with the ethnic breakdown in our school. Our assumption that mobility was certain to cause academic concerns was also false, as almost half of our sample group were at grade level. These students did tend to come from impoverished backgrounds and nine of the twelve were living with one parent, so those assumptions held true with this small sample of students. We were surprised that these students tended not to take advantage of our variety of interventions. Students participated in most of these programs based on teacher referral, so it was apparent that we needed to examine this referral process. Putting programs in place did not necessarily mean that they were affecting all of our needy students.

**Use this knowledge to evaluate the effectiveness of our intervention programs and make improvements as necessary.**

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As we examined our findings, we identified several action steps we planned to take at our building:

1. **Make the definition of “mobility” less restrictive.** This reflects our desire to look for students who experience school stress due to moves. When conducting this research, we saw a number of students who, for various reasons, did not qualify “on paper”. Some had moved twice, but not within the specified twelve months. Some moved so often that they had already left our school before we began collecting data. Some only experienced one move, but it was unusually traumatic. If the purpose of this research was to help our students, we did not want to ignore them because they were not “mobile enough”.
2. **Check with the state Department of Education regarding statewide definitions of “mobile”.** Using a simple “students in and out vs. the total population” calculation, our school suffered from a mobility rate in excess of 30%. Using the more restrictive definition developed by our research cohort, however, made our numbers much smaller. In an effort to assure “apples and apples” comparability, we would suggest that all schools calculate “mobility” similarly.
3. **Make mobility determination part of the student’s registration process.** When a new student enrolled, we wanted to check his/her mobility and make the appropriate record entry at that time. This made it easier to identify our group at any given time.
4. **Track the academic progress of mobile students.** While we did not want to assume that every mobile child would perform below grade level, we were confident that there was a relationship between mobility and achievement. By tracking mobile students in an organized manner, we could provide assistance more quickly when needed.

5. **Communicate better with parents.** Our research clearly indicated that parents of struggling mobile students did not receive information about available options. We operated with an inadequate “provide it and they will come” mentality. We put an organized procedure in place to a) inform parents about options, b) fully explain these options, and c) solicit feedback from these parents that we can use to improve our programming. It was also disconcerting that a number of these parents seemed to believe that their child was doing “just fine”. Teachers could not understand why parents did not seem as concerned as they should be, perhaps a reflection of a lack of communication on the school’s part. If a student was not at grade level, we needed to make sure that parents understood this. It is unclear whether this happened because school staff members tried hard to be tactful when sharing concerns with parents, or because parents treated this type of news with a sense of denial. However, the effect was the same. We wanted parents of struggling students to become active partners with the school, and these parents needed to feel the need to intervene on behalf of the child. In the future, teachers would receive training on creating this type of effective parent communication. The school would also develop simple documentation that showed current academic status compared to where he/she “should” be.
6. **Keep in mind that looking at a child’s academic standing can be very different from looking at his/her progress.** We also knew that we had a high number of at-risk students. We also recognized that many of these students, despite their academic concerns, were making rapid progress. This good news needed to be shared with parents.
7. **Make changes in programs and procedures to respond to what we are learning.** The study had been an interesting process, but we needed to get past interesting by using what we had learned to make a positive impact on students and their learning. Two small changes were already made as a result of our research project were a) more visual documentation of student academic progress to share with parents, and b) including transportation in our upcoming summer school program to meet the needs of our students.

We believed this organized and proactive stance with our mobile students could help them break that cycle of failure that seems so prevalent. The steps outlined above, combined with continuing data collection relative to the academic success of these students, could help students perform and would encourage parents to be more informed and effective as educational partners with the school. At the very least, we could help students be successful before they move again. Looking at the more positive scenario, we were hopeful that we could break that cycle of mobility as parents desired to establish roots with our school.

### **Student Mobility: A Case Study**

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Jorge (not his real name) came to our school for the first time as a first grader four years ago. He was a challenging student, as teachers never knew what he would say next. During his first parent teacher conference, his classroom teacher and I learned about his background. His father physically abused him and he was currently living with his grandparents. Dad was long gone and mom was in Mexico.

Over the next few years, Jorge was making good progress and his life seemed to be stable, though his behavior was still an issue. In the fall of what would have been his third grade year, Jorge was absent when school started. He and his grandparents had moved across town, and he completed third grade at another school in our district.

Soon after registration had ended the following year, I was walking by the office when the secretary caught me and said, “Mrs. Watson, guess who’s back? Jorge!” During the summer, something had occurred at home, and although Jorge’s grandparents were still living in the same house, Jorge was now living with an aunt and seven cousins. Jorge was not welcome in his grandparent’s home.

Jorge’s new living environment created a new set of issues. He was now living in an environment with other children raised to be respectful of adults and to each other. This just is not Jorge’s way, so it was no surprise that one Monday in October Jorge did not show up. After checking with the aunt, we learned that Jorge had moved to the state of Washington to stay with another aunt.

Less than a week later, Jorge was back and living with the same aunt with whom he had started the year, though he eventually returned to his grandparents when it did not work out with the aunt. His grandparents lived in another school's attendance area but within just a few blocks of our school's area, and we arranged with the transportation department to allow him to stay at Columbine.

A week before Spring Break (during CSAP administration), the school secretary received a call from the school across town saying Jorge was there registering. He had moved out of his grandparent's house over the weekend and was now living with an older sister and her husband who were expecting twins within a few weeks. He was still living in another school's attendance area, but this time district transportation was not an option. At this point, I asked Jorge what he wanted. If he did not want to attend our school I was not going to explore options. He clearly stated that he liked Columbine much better and did not want to return to the other school. School staff discussed the possibility of allowing Jorge to continue at our school for at least one more week to get him through the state assessment. Though it would have been easy to let him be someone else's headache, we knew this child needed stability. Little did we know how important this stability would prove to be over the next month and a half. The next morning was the only day we had to worry about transportation, as Jorge's sister had the twins that day, so Jorge returned to his grandparents until his sister returned home from the hospital with the babies.

We returned from Spring Break and Jorge was back with his sister. The school secretary and I had gotten permission to transport him for a day or two, until we could get him connected with a city transportation organization. Fort Morgan is a small enough community that there are no city buses. However, an organization does provide transportation for residents who either do not have vehicles or are unable to drive themselves. The fee for this service is not cheap. It would cost \$8 a day to get Jorge to and from school or a monthly-unlimited pass was available for \$70. I knew that there was no way the family could afford a pass or even to pay half of the pass, so I went to visit with the family after school that day while my principal was trying to find some funds to help this family. Ironically, when I arrived at the

sister's trailer to discuss options with her, I found the grandmother there. Before I could talk to Jorge's sister, the grandmother indicated she wanted to do everything she could to keep Jorge at Columbine through the end of the year. We decided that they could afford \$10 a month for the passes and agreed that if the school could find the rest of the money, I would be back the next day with the paperwork for the city transportation.

When I picked Jorge up the next morning, I was pleased to inform him that my principal had found some money to help buy a pass. I told him he could stay at Columbine for the rest of the year. I knew Jorge was not the kind of kid who would show his gratitude outwardly, but the lack of a smart comment and the quick nod of his head made me think he was glad. He had also given me \$3.50 in change to help pay for the pass (I learned later that this was his own money, not his sister's). He truly did want to stay at Columbine. With a little extra financial assistance from the school secretary and me, we submitted the paperwork that day. When I dropped Jorge off after school, I told him County Express (our local transportation organization) would pick him up at 7:15 the next morning and bring him to school. I thought we were all set. What I realized the next day was that I had failed to tell Jorge the County Express uses white buses, not yellow.

The next morning the secretary and I were chatting and keeping our eye open for our little friend Jorge when the phone rang. I heard her say, "Oh, really? We had made arrangements for him to ride County Express." Jorge had boarded the school bus that morning instead of County Express and had arrived at the other school. To save face, he then walked in the other building and told the secretary he was going to enroll there. Since the two secretaries had communicated with each other, she knew something was wrong. I asked her to put Jorge on the phone, and I asked one more time if he wanted to switch schools. He emphatically said, "NO!" Then I asked him if he had ridden a yellow bus or a white bus. He said, "The yellow bus, what white bus?" Our secretary drove over and picked him up at the other school, and as soon as she pulled up, Jorge was out the door, in the car, buckled up and ready to go – making us feel that the extra effort was worth it and that Jorge really did want to be

at Columbine. We worked out the miscommunication, and things ran smoothly for about a week.

The next thing we knew Jorge was back at his grandparents. Transportation was not so much of an issue because Jorge could ride the school bus to school. The twins had become very sick over the weekend and were in a Denver hospital. We called Jorge's grandparents and discovered that he would be with them for the week, so we cancelled that week's County Express services. The following week, when I contacted his sister to figure out the week's transportation, she told me the twins were still in the hospital, so Jorge would be staying with his grandparents.

The next morning school started without Jorge. We received a call later that morning, telling us they were bringing him late. The first thing he said when he saw me was, "The bus didn't come pick me up this morning." I asked him if he had stayed with his sister or his grandparents. He replied, "My grandparents took me to my sister's last night because the babies came home." I just smiled and said, "Let's call County Express". We picked up the phone and resumed the private bus service. The situation remained the same for about a month, but about two weeks before summer vacation, Jorge was suddenly back with his grandparents. He began to behave inappropriately at school, and we were wondering about this change until we learned that Jorge had made an emergency 911 phone call in response to continuing domestic violence in the home.

## **Conclusion**

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As the 2003-2004 school year began, staff members at our school felt that we had a good understanding of our students and how to best meet their needs. We knew we saw high mobility, and we knew that students suffered from a lack of a stable school home. We also felt that our mobile students were predominately Hispanic, predominately poor, with a high number coming from single-family homes and a high number qualifying for ESL services. There was agreement that high mobility guaranteed low achievement, and that our student's parents were a) aware of their children's struggles, b) aware of interventions available to the children, and

c) supportive of our efforts to raise their child's academic performance. Our school offered a number of interventions targeting struggling students, and we were confident that these interventions were providing appropriate support for our mobile population. The opportunity to participate in an action-research project would, we were sure, validate these assumptions. Little did we know that we had a great deal to learn about our students and parents. Early steps in our study aimed at collecting data on our families and students. This data clarified our status, challenged many of our earlier assumptions, and led to further data collection. At the conclusion of our study, we were able to modify many of our earlier assumptions and formulate necessary actions to address identified areas of concern.

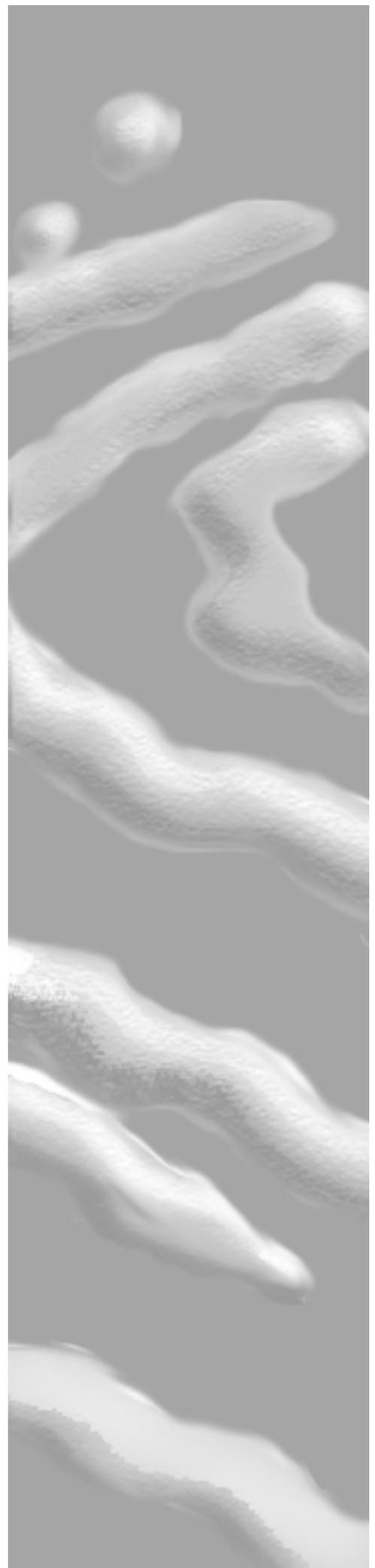
Every school faces unique challenges. The key is in the school's response to those challenges. Where will Jorge be next week? How can we prepare him to deal with factors in his life that prevents him from succeeding? We can only imagine how different this situation would have been if Jorge had been in a larger school district where solutions to these kinds of issues are not as easily resolved.

**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 3**

***Action Research within a Systemic Change  
Program: A Principal's Perspective***

**Brett David Drobney**  
**Principal**  
**Columbine Elementary School**



*Prior to my involvement in action research, my staff and I approached our highly mobile/homeless population in a nurturing, compassionate manner. However, we never looked closely at underlining factors that provide intrinsic motivation for high mobile/homeless students. I made a conscience effort throughout the school year to impart my action research findings along with an in depth study of poverty to increase staff knowledge around student social issues.*

## **Background**

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I am the principal at Columbine Elementary School in Longmont, Colorado, which is located 37 miles northwest of Denver, Colorado near the foot of the Rocky Mountains. The city's population is approximately 78,000 people with an eclectic mix of white/blue collar and migrant workers and families. The major local employers are Con Agra turkey plant, IBM, Maxtor Technologies, Seagate Technologies, Amgen Pharmaceuticals as well as numerous small medical manufacturing companies, and agriculture.

Columbine Elementary School's ethnic breakdown is 83% Hispanic, 15% Caucasian, 1% African American, and 1% Asian. Ninety percent of our students are on free or reduced lunch and 17% are highly mobile and/or homeless. Columbine attendance boundaries encompass four homeless shelters, one federal housing complex, 60% rental properties, and a small percentage of owner occupied homes. In 1999, our school accountability team decided that systemic change was necessary to increase student achievement, raise attendance rates, and reverse community apathy. By August 2001, extra twenty days of instruction, a new school calendar that aligned with historic community/cultural needs, reduced class sizes (15:1 K-2)(20:1 3-5) and all-day everyday kindergarten classes were implemented.

Annually, Columbine was responsible for reporting results of our Systemic Change Program to the Board of Education. The report included the state assessment (CSAP) data, district/school literacy/numeracy data, attendance rates, and community involvement statistics in school events such as Back to School

Night, Parent/Teacher conferences, Family Literacy Nights, and Continuation ceremonies.

## **My Context**

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Working as an elementary teacher and principal for eighteen years, I have experienced first hand the breath and depth of Colorado's rural, suburban, and urban school communities. For the last five years, my leadership has focused on designing, implementing, and assessing a Systemic Change Program at Columbine Elementary School. Aligned with components of school improvement research (Sagor, 2000) as well as community feedback, Columbine's program provides 20 additional instructional days, all day, everyday Kindergarten, class size reduction, high quality extracurricular clubs/clinics, an employee nursery, and extensive professional development embedded in a structured, consistent instructional, nurturing environment. Since Columbine's population contains an extremely large population of free/reduced students (90%), homeless (17%), and second language learners (54%), it was essential that each child reach his/her full potential, regardless of need.

A key component of any change program is the comprehensive, ongoing data gathering and analysis to measure student achievement as well as program effectiveness. Historically, little data was gathering outside district / state assessments. However, if this program was to sustain itself, it needed a more comprehensive approach. After discussing my concerns with the school community, one area surfaced as a top priority - homeless / high mobile children. I wanted to study the effects of quality after school programming on the attendance of our most impacted students.

Coincidentally, in the third year of implementation, I responded to an email from Margie Milenkiewicz and Alana James from Colorado Department of Education soliciting applicants for an action research project (COPAR) involving homeless/high mobility students. I was ecstatic over the prospect of in depth study

of homeless/high mobility students, and more importantly, to ensure our extracurricular programming encouraged higher student attendance rates.

### **How did I get started?**

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My beginning experiences with action research provided only a small glimpse into the significance of my involvement with COPAR. Initially, my impressions vacillated between intrigue and high anxiety depending on the situation. On one hand, the opportunity to study highly mobile/homeless students within a Systemic Change Program intrigued me. Conducting relevant real-time research that directly affected our school community, aligned perfectly to our mission/vision statements. On the other hand, carving out another hour in an already overscheduled calendar was less than optimal. However, after lengthy administrative networking, and a vote of support by my family, I decided to embark on what was an enlightening journey into action research.

- First, I conducted several Internet searches on action research, which provided a framework to build my knowledge base.
- Second, I read numerous articles provided by the COPAR facilitator (Alana James) and other CDE quests to fill gaps in my learning.
- Third, I enlisted the assistance of my COPAR colleagues who imparted volumes of experience, both positive and negative, to round out my action research.
- Finally, I conducted my own action research project on highly mobile/homeless students at Columbine to test, first hand, if action research was a reliable vehicle to study student participation in a Systemic Change Program.

### **What was my concern?**

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Undertaking any change project large or small, especially in a district undergoing intense financial crisis, is a monumental challenge to say the least. In

addition to the normal issues of facilities, political maneuvering, facilitating philosophical discussions, and the usual laundry list of what ifs, it quickly became apparent that this was going to take a tremendous amount of my personal time as well as my supportive staff members. I needed specific data on each student subgroup as well as each component of our program. I wanted to gather specific data on students' achievements in the classroom as well as participation in extracurricular activities outside the instructional day. How many students were succeeding? How many were participating in extracurricular programs? Was there a correlation between participation, academic achievement and attendance? Were high achieving students growing at the same rate as homeless students? What action research results would directly affect our program?

A bigger concern was the empathic reaction from colleagues and district educators so impacted by No Child Left Behind Legislation and Colorado's new accountability standards. It seemed as if these people were hoping it would just go away rather than proactively address the plethora of issues facing our school.

### **Why was I concerned?**

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Committing to improve the lives of children has always been part of the job. However, the commitment of 200K annually from the Board of Education to support this project was quite another issue. Past restructuring attempts had failed to produce improved student achievement or increase attendance at Columbine, which set the stage for yet another level of skepticism. Could grassroots community involvement coupled with a comprehensive restructuring program make this program a success? Another concern was aligning before / after school programming with the needs of an extremely large minority / homeless / highly mobile population, without ignoring grade level and advanced students.

My overwhelming concern dealt with gathering data to prove each component of the program. Could I find enough data to support our findings at critical times to provide enough information to secure additional financial commitment from the Board of Education?

## **How could I present evidence to show the need to undertake the research?**

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Given the depth and breath of the Systemic Change Program, I limited my action research to the study of homeless / high mobile students participating in extracurricular events and its link to student attendance. Culling salient ideas from Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) as the basis for my action research, I organized a spreadsheet containing a comprehensive list of extracurricular activities at Columbine as well as K-5 participants. Once baseline data was organized, I utilized the Student Management System to compile attendance rates from the entire student population, and then extrapolate the homeless students for a comparative analysis.

After extensive data analysis, I was unable to draw any conclusions to my original question. In fact, the results showed no statistical differences between the two groups. Frustrated by my findings, I discussed my results with several professional colleagues who encouraged me to interview a sample of homeless / highly mobile families to see if they had a different perspective.

I developed a new set of interview questions with staff assistance, and embarked on a two-week search for 25 homeless/highly mobile families within our attendance area. Needless to say, it took an extraordinary amount of time (32 days) to track these families down, and two more weeks to compile the data. At the end of this exhaustive work, the conclusion was the same - no significant difference in the two groups.

## **What evidence could I produce to show how my actions were influencing my situation?**

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I collected a tremendous amount of data from multiple data gathering instruments. I also retained copious research notes from my readings, collegial

discussions, and interviews to validate action/results were influencing my situation.

My data gathering techniques included the following:

- I systematically checked district SMS attendance rates on individuals enrolled at Columbine Elementary School.
- I collected current extracurricular participation rosters weekly to maintain update information.
- I recorded my conversations with staff and parents to review opinions and perspectives on programming and attendance.
- I designed and conducted interview questions with the assistance from staff to glean information from homeless families on their opinions of extracurricular programming, focusing on their ideas to improve participation.
- I recorded my daily readings in my CO PAR binder for reflection.
- I interviewed several staff members who work extensively with homeless populations. I focused on employees with seven to ten years at Columbine Elementary School.
- I recorded three years of community survey results to glean community perspectives on programming.
- I conducted two action research cycles to gather data on highly mobile/homeless participation in after school programming.

### **What I learned**

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On the surface, It would seem that my action research as a disaster. After two cycles of action research, focusing on minimal criteria, eliminating variables, I was not able to find conclusive data to support my action research question, “Do highly mobile/homeless students who attend after school programming attend at a higher attendance rate than their peers?”

“Frustrating” was not the vocabulary used when describing my disappointment to my COPAR colleagues. I had busted my rear end to research, gather data, analyze my findings, rework my second cycle of research, chase down

homeless families, gathered more data, conducted additional data analyze, only to find more questions.

What was so perplexing about the action research was that I was getting the results I wanted, highly mobile/homeless students attending our after school programming at an extremely high rate, but I could not explain the phenomenon. Then through my mental fog came an epiphany, although it was not quantifiable or qualifiable data at all. I learned that it was not some research article or educational theory that changed the results, or how I conducted my action research, that mattered. It had to do with how I had internalized this information and projected it back to staff and the families at Columbine Elementary School that made the difference.

Prior to my involvement in action research, my staff and I approached our highly mobile/homeless population in a nurturing, compassionate manner. However, we never looked closely at underlining factors that provide intrinsic motivation for high mobile/homeless students. I made a conscious effort throughout the school year to impart my action research findings along with an in depth study of poverty to increase staff knowledge around student social issues. In addition, my action research cycles involved numerous family interviews, community agencies contacts, and attending several Columbine Elementary School community revitalization meetings to gain a comprehensive knowledge of highly mobile/homeless students. As I discovered, highly mobile/homeless students much like their stable classmates, needed something to activate internal/external motivation. They need a combination of high interest programming with educators who understood the complexities of this misunderstood population.

To illustrate the impact of COPAR on my personal perspective, I recently overheard my office secretary registering a new family. Ordinarily, I would not have thought much about this event; however, when I heard the address I automatically knew exactly the potential needs of this family as well as the support agencies that could ensure their success. As I reflected on my thinking, it surfaced volumes of research, collegial discussions, and my action research cycles. Eight months ago, I would have fumbled through a dozen community resources and

research articles just to understand the challenges of our highly mobile/homeless population. Now I react with confidence and little hesitation. I thank COPAR, Alana James and Margie Milenkiewicz for imparting their knowledge, wisdom, and patience to what has become a life changing experience.

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**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 4**

***Pyramid of Interventions***

***A Model for At Risk Middle School Students***

**Vernita Mickens**

**Principal**

**Sheridan Middle School**



*I will never be the same after this study. I considered my knowledge base on the highly mobile student to be adequate. It was not. This project forced me to examine their lives from the inside out and determine if the appropriate infrastructures were in place to support their needs. They are not.*

## **Background**

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It all began with a vision. Three years ago, I found myself as the principal of an urban middle school that was screaming for organizational change and fighting to be left alone. Attendance rates were low, test scores were sinking, and disciplinary referrals were high. This was a classic model of an ineffective school.

As I watched the grim numbers of students in academic failure, it was very disconcerting. Somehow, we had to find a way to intervene on behalf of our at-risk population of students. How could we proactively prevent a growing number of student failures as evidenced by our grade reports and state tests? How could we ensure each student was academically and behaviorally successful? How could we create a support structure and process that would catch any child that might otherwise slip through the cracks of the educational process? How could we embody “No Child Left Behind?” The answer came with a vision.

This vision was a call to action. A participatory action research group funded by the Colorado Department of Education and facilitated by the Center for Research Strategies provided access to a review of research on highly mobile students. I jumped at the opportunity. During my involvement in this group, we reviewed current research. It seemed that academic achievement directly affected factors such as low SES, children not living with biological parents, low parental educational attainment, and high levels of mobility. We were grappling with all of those factors in our school. Our free and reduced lunch rate was 70%. Over half of our parents had no more than a high school education and were proud to have it. Approximately 11% of the school population was homeless or living in substandard housing. Here was our target. If we could design a system of interventions that worked for our highly mobile population, we could measure its effectiveness with all children.

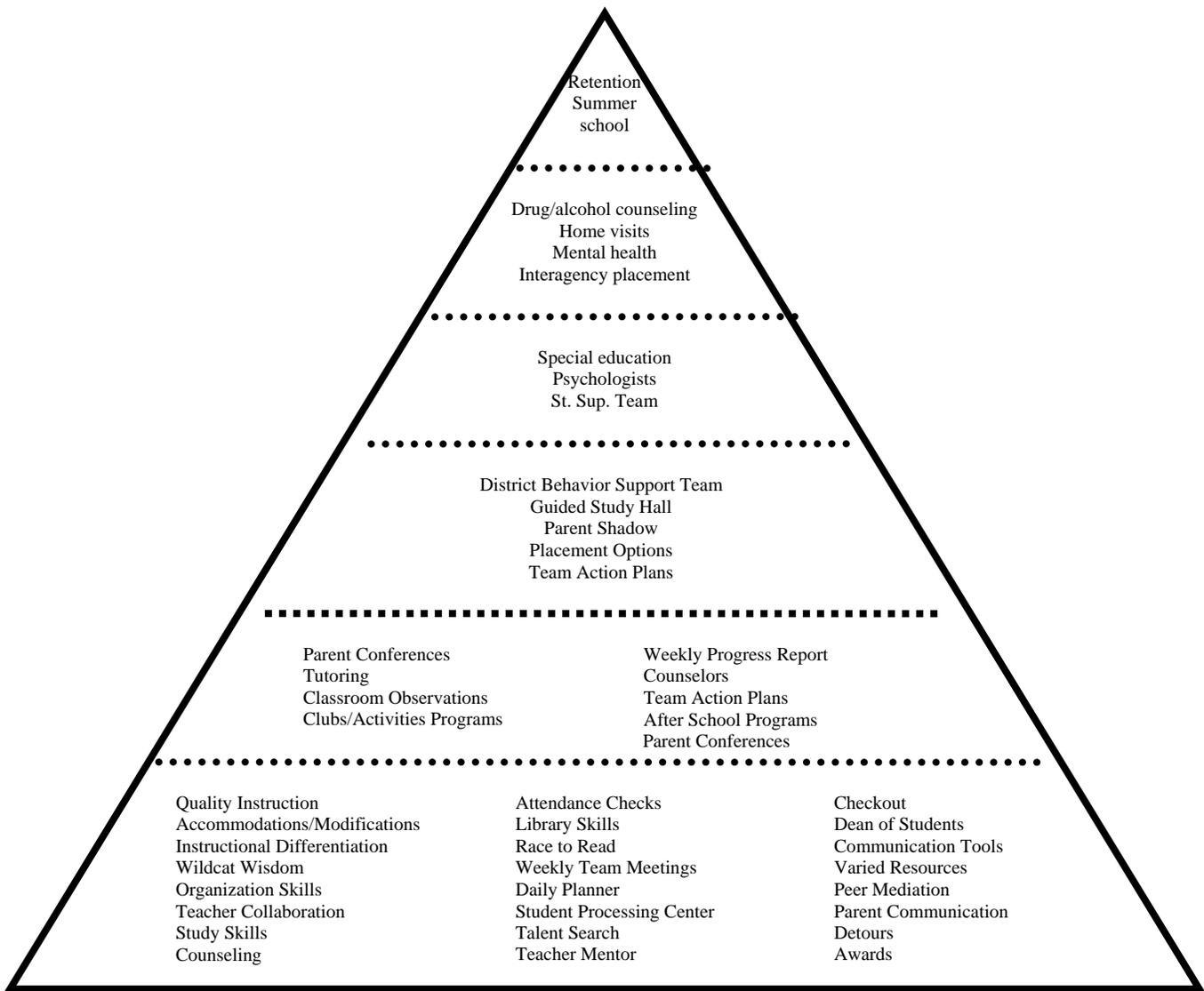
Propelled by the work of DuFour, the SMS Pyramid of Interventions was born (Eaker, 2004). The SMS Intervention model is comprised of six levels of increasingly intensive school interventions. The first level of interventions is accessible to all students without specific staff referral. It includes such things as quality instruction, study skills, reading incentive programs, and teacher mentoring. The next level results from teacher recommendations such as weekly progress reports, specific clubs, or scheduled parent conferences. The third level of interventions includes parent support in designing behavior or educational plans, attending school on Saturday, or the parent shadowing the child. Mental health placement or required counseling comprises the fourth level. Specialized classes make up the fifth level, and retention and required summer school compose the last level.

We built time into our master schedule to address student interventions on a regular basis. Each Tuesday the teachers met in grade level teams to discuss students. They recorded interventions with each student and evaluated the success of previously tried interventions on the noted behavior (See diagram on the following page).

### **Assumptions of the Model**

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1. All teachers are working consistently to direct all children toward appropriate interventions
2. All the interventions are equally effective in addressing students' needs
3. Teachers know which interventions are most appropriate depending upon the students' needs
4. Any child who is exhibiting problems will be brought to the team table and discussed
5. Parents will be willing to have their child participate in the interventions
6. Students are making a genuine effort to succeed
7. All staff believes that the model is an effective tool for identifying and directing students in jeopardy of failing



**Factors Studied**

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1. Highly mobile students’ grades and what interventions influenced them
  2. Highly mobile students’ attendance and what interventions influenced them
  3. Highly mobile students’ behavior and what interventions influenced them
  4. Highly mobile students’ attitudes towards school and what interventions influenced them
  5. The kinds of interventions accessed more often
  6. Other kinds of interventions we should add to our model

## Research Design

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I began by identifying a sample group of highly mobile students. For the next two semesters, I would chart their grades, attendance, behavior and attitudes through school records and personal interviews. The interviews occurred twice during the year. The survey questions were as follows:

- How many times have you moved this school year?
- What effect do you believe these moves had on your grades?
- What effect did these moves have on your attendance?
- What effect did these moves have on your behavior?
- Check all the programs (interventions) in our school that you have been involved in this year.
- Which ones helped you the most and why?
- What other kinds of programs (interventions) would you like to see at school?
- How do you feel about school?
- Has your attitude about school changed this year as result of programs (Interventions) you were involved in this year? Why or why not?
- What kinds of things do teachers do that help you?

## The Subjects

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There were eight students in the study, and highlights from four of them follow. The students could not have been more diverse or their stories more revealing. It surprised me how much I learned about the lives of the homeless/highly mobile children and how vital an effective model of interventions is to their

emotional and academic survival. As the year progressed, this became less of a study and more of a window into the lives of my students. I found myself entirely engrossed in their stories.

## Case Studies

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### **Julia, 12: First Semester**

Julia is a quiet 12-year-old girl. She does not like to talk much and hesitates after each question. She confesses that she experiences teasing about the way she talks in English. She lives with her mother and two brothers in a two-bedroom apartment not far from the school. Her mother speaks little English and works as a domestic in an expensive residential area not far from the school. Julia is living in her third home in five months of school. They began the school year living in transitional housing provided by the county before they moved in with her aunt and her family. When her mother had saved enough money, they packed their things to move into an apartment. Julia likes her extended family but does not enjoy living with them. She is glad they have their own place. She thinks the moves have interfered with her grades. She, along with her brothers, is failing two or more classes. She says part of it is that there were so many people living in their aunt's home, it was hard to concentrate or do homework. She did not utilize the after-school tutoring program because they had to go home directly after school. She has not accessed most of the higher-level interventions either. Her attendance has been consistent, due largely to the aunt who made sure the kids got to school along with her own. Her behavior in class must be exemplary as there is nothing in her behavior file to suggest she has ever had any problems in class. She thinks school is hard. She does not have many friends and cannot afford the expensive cheerleading outfit to participate in that program (\$100+). She hopes living in their new home will help her do better in school and does not know what else to hope for except she hopes they don't have to move again.

**Julia: Second Semester**

Julia is gone. She slipped away in late January without even returning for a formal withdrawal. Her mother called to report they were moving to California. She gave no forwarding address and no request has come for school records. She slipped away without almost any notice.

**Thomas, 12: First Semester**

Thomas is angry. His mother has been distraught and depressed since his father was murdered three years ago. She began using drugs openly and frequently, often encouraging Thomas and his younger siblings to join her. When social services learned of these family get-togethers, they removed all the children from the home.

Over the years, they have allowed the children to return home, one at a time, as the mother underwent treatment and followed other court ordered mandates. Thomas had tested clean for six months and received approval for an unsupervised visit during the upcoming Thanksgiving holidays. His festering anger erupted shortly before Thanksgiving, however. Suddenly, unprovoked, he assaulted another student in band class. Fully repentant after the incident, he realized this action might cause him his parental visit.

He understands why he is angry. He is angry because he wants to live with his mom and siblings. He is angry because he feels alone. He is angry with his father for dying. He is angry at the world. This is not helping his grades. Academically, he holds a 2.2 GPA. He has two F's, one in math and one in science. He says he does not get along with those teachers. His attendance since he has been in a foster home has been satisfactory, however. His foster parents ensure he is in school everyday.

Thomas's intervention checklist is blank. He does not avail himself of the after school programs. His teachers do not refer him for other interventions. He does not care about school and has told his teachers he would like to be kicked out. He likes his language arts teacher, however. He says she is nice to him and does not

yell. His face shows pain as he poses a last question for me. “Right now I just want to be with my family more than anything. You got any interventions for that?”

### **Thomas: Second Semester**

Thomas got his wish. Over the Christmas holidays, social services returned him to his mother. By mid-January, however, we began to see disturbing changes in his behavior. His attendance dropped dramatically. He was late to school everyday and coming consistently late to classes during the day. By mid- February, he was truant from school. Calls made to his home went unanswered. Visits to his home met with silence. We knew, however that he was home. We knew that his mother was often with him. We could see the curtains swinging or hear the hush of small children. A fervent call to social services brought Thomas back to school but he returned with a large knife, making sure he showed it to several students before dropping it out of his pocket in the presence of teachers. Therefore, he got his second wish, too. He was expelled.

We have offered to provide educational services to him outside of the school environment, but he does not show up for those either. It is only a matter of time before he returns to foster care again. While Thomas was in school, he often visited with his counselors, a regular counselor and a substance abuse counselor. He held the same kind of open dialogue with them about his anger, fear, and need for belonging. The school interventions in place were obviously not effective enough to prevent his expulsion. I am compelled to ponder what kinds of interventions might have affected him successfully.

### **John, 12: First Semester**

John is back at home with his mother. He ran away this summer to his friend’s home. Reluctantly, he agreed to go back and serve community service hours for his various offenses. He has already served more hours than he can remember; 148 hours for vandalism, 24 hours for trespassing, and 198 hours for breaking and entering. He did not get any hours for his criminal mischief charge, however. He

feels lucky for that and vows to stop hanging around some of his old friends this year.

John would prefer to live with his friend than his mom. He will not discuss why, but concedes that sometimes he does not get along with his mom. Since she lost her job last year as a convenience store clerk, things have been very hard. They lost their house and have had to move often. He has already moved twice this school year and it is only October. He is hopeful that things will turn around soon, however. His mom is in a program to learn computers. He is proud of this but says he knows more about computers than she does. In fact, he brags, she asks him for help all the time. However, he will not help her. He tells her to look it up in her books. Then he explains to me how to hack into programs that ask for a password. I am still not sure I understand how to do it, but I am convinced that he does. I am impressed with his intelligence and tell him so. He smiles broadly, inhaling the compliment like a breath of fresh air. His grades also reveal he is bright.

He does not think the moves affected his grades, attendance or behavior at school. This year he has accessed several interventions: his daily planner, student processing center, detours, counselor, psychologist, teacher mentor, moved classes, and attended Saturday school. He has not received any awards this year but got one last year. He has not accessed mental health services at the clinic since he began attending middle school but says he attended regularly in elementary school.

John is ambivalent about school. He likes it but does not like it. Sometimes he wants to come to school and sometimes he does not. Spoken like a true middle school student. His attendance shows he is usually here, but he has ten days of suspension. In fact, he received a suspension the first week of school for disrupting class. His behavioral referrals are substantial to be so early in the year, including disrupting class, vandalism, truancy, horseplay, violence/assault, disrespecting peers, willful disobedience, sexual harassment, excessive defiance, substance use, gang related activities and drawing inappropriate items. I am curious if we have the appropriate interventions in place to address his numerous issues.

**John: Second Semester**

John is feeling lonely these days. The friends he ran away with last summer have moved to California. His mom recently completed her schooling and is actively looking for a job at this time. He has not had any run-ins with the police since last summer so he thinks he is doing well and figures that maybe his friends were not a good influence. John has accessed more interventions than any of the other subjects. This is perhaps because he has a Special education case manager, a social worker, and a probation officer. Each of them follows his progress closely and checks in with him periodically. He also started boxing a month ago. I cannot help but wince when he tells me that. He notices that and assures me that it does not hurt and he never fights without gear. He just pays attention to trying to hit his opponent. He spars with a 15-year-old kid who is in the same weight range. He grins famously as he brags that he could spar with a 25-year-old man if he is in the same weight range and he cannot wait for the opportunity. He wants to fight professionally and is told he is very promising. He thinks this activity also helps his ADHD. He believes this intervention is changing his whole outlook. His attendance and grades have improved and his behavioral referrals are half of what they were first semester. He is confident he will end this year successfully and I cannot help but share his optimism.

**Ethan, 13: First Semester**

Ethan thinks this is going to be a good year. He just returned to Colorado after living with relatives in Oklahoma. He was there with his grandparents, aunts, and uncles while his mother was serving time in jail on outstanding warrants. He liked living there where he had relatives who looked out for him. In Colorado, they do not have any family. However, his mother felt there was more opportunity for their family here. The small town in Oklahoma did not hold the promise of employment. She also likes being independent of her parents.

He has already moved four times this year. They started the year in a shelter where they lived for a month. Next, they moved to a domestic violence shelter for

three weeks. He admits it was hard to get to school during that time. Next, they transferred to another shelter before having to move to Oklahoma. He does not believe the moves affected his grades or behavior. He does think it affected his attendance. When they were moving, his mom could not always get a babysitter for his two and a half year old sister. He would stay home and watch her while his mom made all the other arrangements or unpacked things. He did not mind and enjoyed watching his sister. He thinks a good intervention for him might be having someone else baby sit for siblings, however.

### **Ethan: Second Semester**

School feels harder for Ethan right now, although his grades and attendance have improved. Mom is taking classes to be a nurse's assistant. She wanted to do medical billing but owed money from her last school. I am amazed at his resiliency considering his circumstances this year.

He thinks the interventions that helped him this year were individual projects like his science fair experiment. He also appreciated his language arts teacher, Ms. Rummel, checking in with him frequently to ask if he was having any problems or needed any help. If he could change anything about the pyramid, he would add more interesting choices for elective classes. Ethan is hopeful about the success of this year and believes some of the interventions on the pyramid contributed to his optimism.

Interventions this year have included the daily planner, visiting the counselor, assistance from the homeless liaison, study hall and summer school. He says he went to a mental health counselor at the school clinic last year but has not done so this year. Despite his hardships, he reports he likes school and his classes. He is looking forward to another successful year.

## **The Results**

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The SMS Pyramid of Interventions met mixed results in terms of its effectiveness. It is difficult to determine if Julia's departure was because she only

accessed one intervention. Thomas was referred to almost as many interventions as John yet met with complete academic and behavioral failure, while John began to flourish. Ethan, with only three interventions, and many more housing moves, was a model student.

It was clear to me by the end of this study that the number of interventions accessed was not nearly so important as the quality and appropriateness of the interventions for each student. That would be an area of greater exploration for further action research.

### **What I learned**

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I will never be the same after this study. I considered my knowledge base on the highly mobile student to be adequate. It was not. This project forced me to examine their lives from the inside out and determine if the appropriate infrastructures were in place to support their needs. They are not.

I view my at risk students with greater empathy, understanding and sense of determination to assist them than ever before. It was a valiant effort on our part to begin a process to ensure the success of all students including the highly mobile students; tackling the challenge of No Child Left Behind at full force. However, the problems that surround this unique population of at risk students were far more complex than I had originally imagined. My learnings went far greater than the scope of this project:

- Children will still slip through the cracks if there is not an entrenched approach to raising the level of knowledge, awareness, and supportive school policies and procedures about at risk highly mobile children to staff and students. This must include ongoing training with staff and structures to ensure that the school environment is inclusive, welcoming and familial.
- Challenge the model's assumptions. The values inherent in school policies, practices and procedures should align with the values evident in the model. We will need to regularly visit, reinforce and celebrate the values that support its idealism.

- Resiliency is not an option in the urban community. It is a fundamental survival skill as critical as reading. The poignant question is not if to teach it, but how. This in itself is an important intervention.
- Interventions are not effective if they remain invitational. Some simply must be mandated. We will lose children in our system if we expect them to access interventions or wait for staff to initiate them without more careful monitoring.
- We need to be strategic about which interventions we use. Certain interventions are more specific to homeless/highly mobile populations and others best used for criminal offenders, gang affiliations, physical, emotional abuse, etc. If we strategically are aligning students with interventions that meet specific needs, we can be more successful in assisting them.
- We need to develop a rubric that will assess the quality of our interventions.
- The best intervention is people who care. Give me a staff of caring people and I will show you a successful school. The children in this study who were successful were ultimately more successful because somebody cared and refused to give up. A more extensive menu of interventions will not change behavior, attitude or approach. It is the touch of kindness and the acts of high expectations, with tiered levels of support to meet them, which prevents failure.
- The SMS Pyramid is not comprehensive. I am not sure it ever will be or even if it should be. The students came up with interventions we had not considered in its development. There were other interventions in place that we had not listed, largely because we had never envisioned them as interventions before. The interventions currently in place are too general. This study has certainly changed my perspective and definition of intervention. I recognize now that an intervention can be as deliberate as a conference or as simplistic as a pat on the back.
- Finally, I learned that the challenge of the urban school in meeting the needs of highly mobile children and all children subject to the tyranny of poverty is how to meet individualistic needs in a pluralistic system. The focus of the

emerging urban school and therefore the focus of reform within a school must be on serving the community and uplifting the family as a means to uplift the child with interventions that support the whole family, with staff who do not merely exercise interventions, but serve as interventions.

The research that began with a vision has stirred yet another vision. This time, the pyramid of interventions is geometrically accurate. It is three-dimensional with interventions for students, parents, and staff in support of increased achievement. The very nature of participatory action research inquiry is its cyclical configuration that brings you back to more thoughtful questions and meaningful responses. It is exciting to know that each time you aim at a target; you get closer to the mark. Thanks to the inquiry process, this time my aim is straighter, my target clearer, and my vision much sharper.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

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It is the last week of May and I am witnessing students who have faced significant challenges present their Continuation speeches. They have been asked to articulate the skills and knowledge they have developed through their learning experiences. They must explain how their skills and knowledge acquired, how they were able to overcome their obstacles, and how they will use that knowledge in the future. As the scene unfolds before me, I am giddy with pride and excitement.

The students are confident and articulate speakers. They exhibit a broad and varied vocabulary range that demonstrates an extensive range of learning in all academic areas. They chuckle about their experiences in community learning projects and discuss future projects they intend to initiate. Their inner resiliency is evident in their stories. They also share the familiar background stories of poverty, foster homes and mobility. Most importantly, they describe their ascent of hope: teachers who taught and re-taught until they understood, tutors who cared, study halls that brought structure and serenity to chaos, counseling that healed, academic

support classes that brought greater understanding, summer school that enriched and supported their learning, recognition that celebrated their accomplishments.

With a contented smile, I reflect that the programs they refer to are no accident. Rather, they are part of a strategic deliberated effort on the part of the SMS staff to intervene on behalf of all children. Five years before, the staff began with dogged determination to leave no child behind or allow them to slip through the crevices of the educational process. It began by developing an intervention model that included all interventions currently in place in the school and a coordinated process for accessing them before a student fails.

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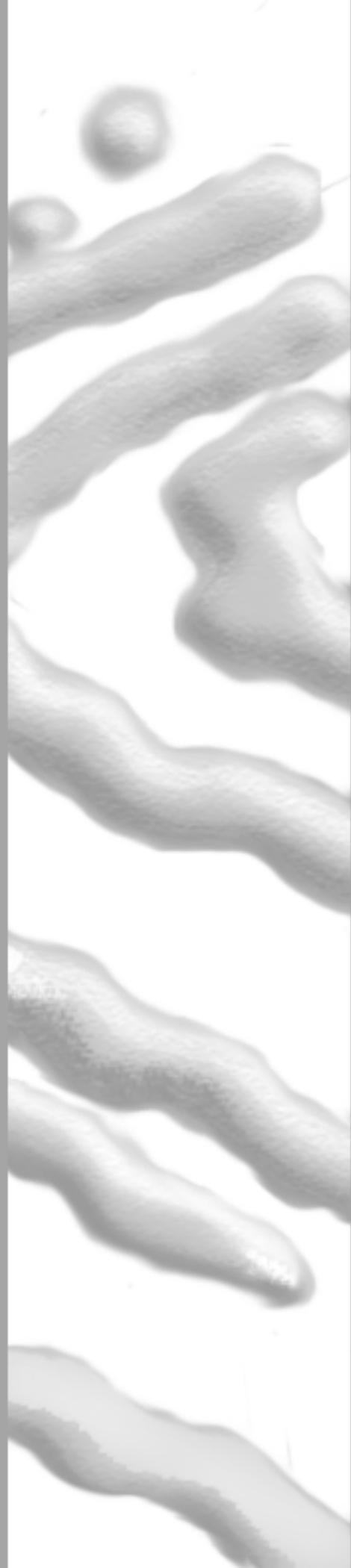
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## **PART 2**

# **Welcoming School Culture**





**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 5**

***Three Elementary Schools' Experiences with  
Access to Services, Welcoming Culture and  
Thoughtful Placement of Students***

**Dave Cook**

**Principal**

**Lincoln Elementary School**

**Lynn Heintzman**

**Principal**

**Alsup Elementary School**

**Julie McVicker**

**Principal**

**Indian Peaks Elementary**



*The initial emphasis for the interview was to thoughtfully place students with teachers that matched the students' learning styles. Before the interview, new placements occurred based solely on how many students a teacher had, and not on where they would best fit with other students and the teacher.*

## **Our dilemma**

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In the age of accountability and high stakes testing, our three schools face the dilemma of how to meet the challenge of increasing achievement for all students while serving a population of diverse, mobile and homeless children. Added to this dilemma is the under identification and lack of attention by our Districts to recognize the impact that highly mobile and homeless children have on academic performance as measured by state assessments. We recognize that our need for services for families goes well beyond the classroom or school setting. The three of us began participation in this project on a quest for best practices to assist our students in a more comprehensive manner and in turn increase the opportunities for their academic and social success.

## **Our Schools**

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### **Indian Peaks Elementary School – Longmont, Colorado**

After completing four years as Principal at Indian Peaks Elementary, I understood why the school had seven principals during the five years before I arrived. The complexities of this school are immense. Indian Peaks Elementary School is a bilingual center school located on the south side of Longmont, Colorado. The school has between 360-390 students per year. Programming at the school includes a late-exit transitional model of bilingual education for Spanish speaking students. Students who come to the school speaking Spanish continue with a Spanish-speaking teacher to learn in their native language while learning English. Students fully transition to English by fifth grade. English speaking teachers teach other students, who speak English.

Free and reduced lunch rates vary per year but have been consistently between 45-60%. Our total Hispanic population in the school is 58% but only 38% of the total population is in the bilingual program. What this means for us is that students whose native language is Spanish but have been in English instruction in a previous school are placed in English instruction to avoid the confusion of constantly switching languages.

Mobility in the school is high with most of the turnover coming during the summer months. In a typical year, we will enroll between 100-115 students and drop close to the same amount. Because of this turnover and history of low achievement, we knew we had to make some changes.

### **Lincoln Elementary School – Colorado Springs, Colorado**

Lincoln Elementary is a centrally located school with a population of 320 students. The number of students attending Lincoln has been in decline for the past six years, as has the entire student population for District 11. However, Lincoln's percentage of student turnover has increased throughout this time. Lincoln was built in 1948 at a site that for that period was the north end of town. As the economy grew after World War II, a large number of motels emerged along Nevada Avenue to accommodate new families and tourists, and businesses began to occupy the majority of the area, leaving limited space for apartment complexes. Additionally, Lincoln's boundaries include a flood plain suitable only for low-income mobile home parks. The lack of single-family housing available for ownership contributes to a high turnover in student population as the majority of the student population lives in apartments, motels, and trailer parks. Over the past five years, during the school year, Lincoln has averaged enrolling 220 new students and dropping 190 while maintaining a population of 325 students. The homeless rate has fluctuated between 12 and 17 percent of the student body.

## **Alsup Elementary – Commerce City, Colorado**

Having spent seventeen years exclusively in secondary education, I knew I had a great deal to learn about elementary age children when I took my first principalship in August of 2003 at Alsup Elementary School. Alsup Elementary School is located in Commerce City, Colorado where a child cannot walk six blocks in any direction without facing the dilemma of crossing a truck route. Alsup is an urban, economically disadvantaged, PK-5 elementary school with approximately 490 students. The education level of the parents is quite low with 5% graduating from a four-year institution and 60% graduated from high school; the average family annual income is \$20,000. It is difficult to determine whether many of our families fit the definition of homeless because they often live with relatives for extended periods. Determining if these situations are due to economics or just a cultural decision is frustrating. Often homeless and highly mobile children go unidentified and their needs go unmet. Defining highly mobile in our transient and multiple family housing communities is easier than defining those who are homeless. From October 1, 2003 to April 1, 2004 seventy-five students withdrew from Alsup and sixty-eight students enrolled. The 41% transient population creates a need for teachers to understand and successfully implement instructional strategies that quickly assess and affect the learning of every child. As the instructional leader I must provide supports and strategies to allow for positive academic experiences for highly mobile students, but first we need to identify these children.

### **Research Focus**

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Together, we decided that our three-fold focus would be the thoughtful placement of students in classrooms as they came into our buildings, a welcoming culture and access to services. To begin, our work built off the work of Indian Peaks and student placement.

Indian Peaks had begun development of a survey for the thoughtful placement of students (See Appendix) including a placement/entrance interview for parents based on the pyramid of interventions from the work of Rick DuFour. Also

considered was the work of R.W. Rumberger and K.A. Larson (1998), stating that local education agencies must create a culture of care by revising intake processes to assist the need of incoming students. Additionally, they suggested that schools must deal with the social integration of the students as well as the academic integration.

The initial emphasis for the interview was to thoughtfully place students with teachers that matched the students' learning styles. Before the interview, new placements occurred based solely on how many students a teacher had, and not on where they would best fit with other students and the teacher. While we were very good at placing returning students in classrooms at Indian Peaks, we found that just using numbers to place the new students was becoming problematic. Classrooms were ending up with lower level readers or behavior problems and with teachers who might not be best equipped to handle the issues the students would bring.

Working through the Building Leadership Team, which is the school accountability committee, a group of teachers and the counselor designed questions to help us learn about the student's previous history and learning style. After becoming a participant in the mobility/homeless action research project, Julie met with our homeless liaison and expanded the questionnaire to include information regarding legal, medical, and family histories so they would get to know the families and students that were coming in to the school. The survey has also focused the school to help families get access to services and creating a welcoming environment of the school.

During the COPAR sessions, Julie presented the survey to the administrative group. Lincoln and Alsup joined Indian Peaks to create a cohort, which would use this interview tool as a common denominator to collect information about the clientele. From that point in the school year, all three schools utilized the survey to gather data.

### **How Each School Implemented the Survey**

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At Indian Peaks, either the principal or counselor conducted the survey with the family. When a family came to enroll, they met with the records clerk. She

helped them through the registration process. They had Spanish-speaking office staff available when needed. Of course, all forms were in English and Spanish. If the family spoke English, the principal usually conducted the interview and if Spanish speaking, the counselor conducted the interview in Spanish. There were times that neither the principal nor counselor was available so an appointment was set up with the family. The interview took place within 2 days of registration. Once the interview was completed, the counselor and principal reviewed the information and decided on a placement for the student. The teacher then received the information orally and in writing. If the family needed other services, the counselor, principal and office staff worked to contact the appropriate agencies.

At Lincoln, essential questions that drove the need for the interview process were:

- 1) Is there an immediate need for a family that the school can provide assistance with in order to support the concept of increasing family stability?
- 2) Can we gather information that could make an immediate impact on a child's academic process?

The placement interview asked questions regarding educational background, language issues, health issues, behavioral concerns, legal issues, and parent involvement. Six families already enrolled in Lincoln interviewed first to test the acceptance of asking such questions. All six families felt comfortable with the questions and appreciated our interest in listening to their situations. Further review of the information collected demonstrated a need for additional questions. These questions focused on insurance issues and daycare needs. For new families to the area, additional questions asked about the need for community services such as employment assistance, Department of Human Services, Section 8 housing, and medical facilities.

Alsup did not have extra resources to initiate the survey with families. Lynn interviewed each family if one member of the family spoke English and for the four Spanish-speaking families she solicited the help of a paraprofessional in the building. Alsup's focus was around the basic needs of the family with housing and transportation being in the forefront of the adults' minds during the interview.

Feedback from parents was positive with a feeling of honor that the school took such an interest in the needs of the family and the child.

## The Results

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To gain perspective in addressing the needs of highly mobile children, we turned to Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1998). Payne explained (p. 61) that many of the attitudes students and parents bring to the school are part of the culture and belief system. Imposition of middle-class solutions should not occur when other, more workable, solutions exist. She also reflected (p. 39) that educators have a tremendous opportunity to influence some of the non-financial resources that make such a difference in students' lives. To date, 66 families participated in the interviews. Only three people, one at each school, have refused to participate. All families interviewed have expressed an appreciation for the questionnaire, many commenting that they have never experienced this level of interest, personally or professionally, from a school. Follow-up intervention for students and families include:

- Housing assistance (applications, damage deposits, utilities)
- RTD bus passes and transportation within the district
- Daycare support
- Medical, dental, and vision services
- Clothing and school supplies
- Food assistance
- Family counseling services (parenting classes, single parent family support group)
- Family literacy nights
- Adult Literacy and ESL classes
- Help with government, job and school applications

In regards to the thoughtful placement of students in classrooms, survey information matched student needs and teacher strengths. Teachers received a copy of the survey and discussed the results with the survey administrator. Michael Fullan

(2001) reminds us, “Improvement in education begins and ends with the teacher; it’s as simple and complex as that.” The information in the following table reflects summary survey responses from each of the three schools.

### Next Steps

This research project is in its infancy in regards to conclusions. To date, the interview process and subsequent interventions do not correlate to the initial premise that such activity will stabilize families, getting them to stay at our schools for an extended time to give the school a better opportunity to raise student achievement levels. This will be a time intensive study. However, the collection of this information has led to quality discussions on what we should do next. In regards to the interview questionnaire, continuous refinement of the questions needs to occur to streamline the process and maximize the quality of information. Additionally, refinement of the database needs to occur. The volume of information has been so vast, it is cumbersome to record and pattern. In regards to interventions, two concepts are emerging that need attention: the need for a community school program and the need for a community liaison. Many of the needs of Lincoln, Alsup, and Indian Peaks’ families focus on community services. Additionally, many of the families do not have, or know how, to access community services. It is our assumption that providing these services in the evening at the school will increase the stability of the family unit, thus increasing the possibility that these families will

School	New Families Enrolled	# of Medical Concerns	# of Legal Concerns	# with Educational Concerns	# with Behavioral Concerns	# of Basic Needs	# with Transportation Needs	Total Number of Schools Attended
Alsup Elementary	27	5	2	9	7	20	10	81
Indian Peaks Elementary	18	4	7	6	5	6	1	53
Lincoln Elementary	19	7	7	4	6	13	1	51

want to stay in our area. Community schools have been successful other places. Schools should be the link between service providers and children and their families. (Abdai-Haqq, 1993) The concept appears to be a ‘good fit’ for our neighborhoods. Finally, coordinating these efforts take personnel. Schools typically function on ‘minimum’ staffing ratios, and do not have someone to perform these duties. Thus, another focus is to devise a plan to allocate monetary resources to support a community liaison position.

## **Conclusion**

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It is clear to us now that the interviews start a student and family off on a positive note with the school. We have developed relationships with the family and we know much more about the circumstances of their lives. While we may not prevent a child from moving, we can make their experiences at our schools productive, worthwhile and caring. We can help them access services in the community and they know we are here to help them succeed. The students are now in classes that we feel best meets their needs, and the transitions for students have gone much smoother. The students appear to be happy with their class and teacher and are exhibiting well-adjusted behaviors. They know the expectations of our school up front and are not surprised about the quality of work or homework required. We are able to help them with school supplies, as needed, or clothing because of our community connections. They feel that we care about them personally.

This process has made us realize how important it is to establish effective communication and create a welcoming environment for families and students as they come in to a new school setting. The relationships we have established are invaluable and work to improve the education of the children. We feel that we know the families better and when there are issues, we are better able to assist them in accessing supportive services.

## Reflection on the Action Research Process

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The action research process has pushed all of us to continue to refine our practice of acquiring useable information. As we went through this cyclical process, we gained clarity on the data needed to be most helpful to teachers, students and parents. Teachers assisted the cyclic process by seeking more information, thus clarifying the types of data needed from families. As we work on achievement of all students, we will need to further research best instructional practices for highly mobile children so we can create an environment where all are successful. The action research process will support our endeavors. While at times the process of cyclic revision in action research is frustrating, it also creates a more effective model for successful implementation of change. Data gathered allowed us to look for additional programming or grants that we may be eligible to receive thus enhancing the opportunity to increase student achievement and support the basic needs of families. This process has allowed the three of us to use parameters that are more formal in order to accomplish our goals. Through this process, we have created a relationship that has given us valuable information and ideas in coming together to meet a common goal, which is the success of all children.

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## **PART 3**

# **Flexible Instructional Strategies**





**An Action Research Study:**

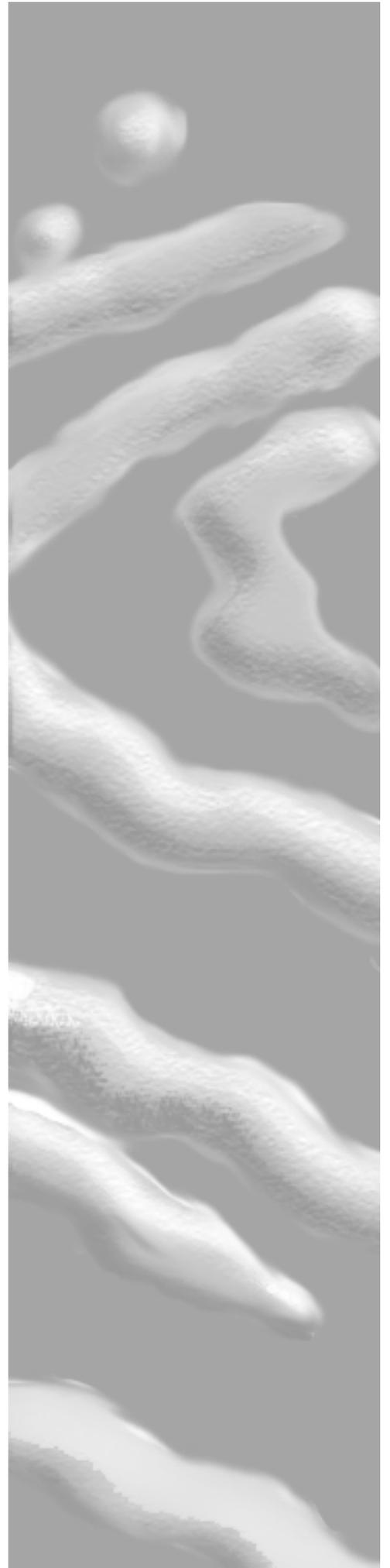
**CHAPTER 6**

***After School Tutoring Program***

**Jason Reynolds**

**5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher**

**Indian Peaks**



*To be quite honest, I fought tooth and nail against the entire process until I thought about the goal. Action research is not about finding a definitive answer to a research question using hard data and controls; it is about making a difference through action. I was not a researcher first, I was a teacher, and my responsibilities were to my students, not the research community. I was dealing with ten and eleven-year-old human subjects with varied life experiences, feelings, and needs, both educational and emotional. When I put all of that into perspective, I realized that action was the most important aspect of action research, not the data.*

## **Background**

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Indian Peaks Elementary is a bilingual center school for the St. Vrain Valley School District, and is located in the southern end of Longmont, CO. The bilingual instruction at Indian Peaks uses a Spanish/English late-exit transitional model. Indian Peaks receives Spanish-speaking students from several neighboring schools if their families desire bilingual instruction. There are about 400 students that attend Indian Peaks, in 20 classrooms, grades K-5, with both Spanish and English speakers represented. Forty eight percent of the students at Indian Peaks receive free and reduced lunch; 53% of the students are Hispanic. Indian Peaks has a large number of highly mobile students. During the 2002-2003 school year, we recorded 97 new enrollments and 103 disenrollments. Through March of the 2003-2004 school year, we enrolled 62 new students and disenrolled 86 students.

During this study, I was in my third year of teaching at Indian Peaks. My teaching assignment at Indian Peaks included teaching literacy to students that received all of their literacy instruction in Spanish until fourth grade, at which point they slowly began to transition to English. During the 2003-2004 school year, my fifth grade class saw four students leave and we gained four new students. Additionally, eight of my 19 literacy students were absent from school for extended periods, on trips to Mexico.

When I entered the classroom for the first time as a fully certified teacher, I felt well prepared. I had a Bachelor's degree in Biology and a Master's degree in Education. I had spent countless hours as a practicum student in several different

schools in the Denver-Boulder area, and I had a very successful student teaching experience. However, I soon realized that one area in which I was not prepared for was student mobility. As students moved in and out of my classroom during my first two years, I was upset and concerned. I became flustered and stressed each time I learned that I was receiving a new student, usually on the morning that he or she arrived. I would run around like mad to secure the necessary equipment: desk, nametag, chair, books, planner, and all of the necessary forms. Then I would pull my hair out trying to plan for a student that would have no idea what we were currently studying. Even worse, as students moved away, I would worry about their educational futures, especially those students from families that were highly mobile, for I had noticed that they seemed to have less background knowledge coming in. I could only assume that this lack of knowledge was due to an unstable educational experience. I wondered if they would enroll immediately in a new school when they moved. I wondered whether they would continue their progress or if they would end up relearning what we had just studied. I hoped that they would feel safe and comfortable wherever they ended up.

At the end of my second year of teaching, the opportunity arose to participate in the Colorado Participatory Action Research (COPAR) project on homeless and highly mobile students. I thought about the students that had moved in and out of my classroom during my first two years of teaching, and I jumped at the chance to do something to help other kids like them and to learn more about their situations. The first meeting of COPAR really opened my eyes and my mind. I gained an incredible amount of information about the homeless population in Colorado and the Federal McKinney-Vento homeless Act (2002) that guarantees certain services to students that qualify as homeless. I also met other educators from around the state with similar concerns about how mobility affects students. At that meeting, another teacher and I discussed certain concerns about the stresses brought on by new students arriving in our classes mid year. I realized that even though I did not yet know what my research would entail, I could do certain things to prepare for new students in advance in order to lessen that stress. Thus, without a true research question in mind, I began my first cycle of action.

## **The First Cycle: Preparing for Mid Year Enrollments**

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Through my conversations with the aforementioned teacher, I came up with the idea of creating a welcome strategy for new students. This strategy involved three parts: having extra desks with nametags ready, creating a new student folder that contained all of the materials that a new student would need on his/her first day, and developing a buddy system for introducing new students to the school and the classroom. To begin, I collected three more desks than students I had in my class. Doing so was not a problem because our enrollment was down and there were several extra desks for the taking. Next, I began to assemble my new student folders. These folders included all of the materials that I was going to give my students during the first few days of school, including a letter of introduction from me, a school handbook, a class list and word search of classmates' names, pre-assessments in math and reading and all of the forms required by the office (Milenkiewicz, 2002). I also included several other necessities that were specific to my classroom. Finally, I began to develop a buddy program for welcoming new students into my classroom and the school. Several articles (Berliner and McCormick, 2001; Milenkiewicz, 2002) that I received in the first COPAR meeting stated that a buddy program was a great way to ensure that new students would have a friend and mentor immediately upon arriving and would feel more comfortable and welcomed into their new school.

### **Reflection**

Each of these three steps was surprisingly easy to accomplish and took very little time. Because I assembled the new student folders at the beginning of the year, all of the materials were at hand. All I had to do was find the actual folders and make sure that each one received all of the materials that I had collected. Once I had collected the extra desks and assembled the folders, I immediately felt better. I had always felt stress upon learning that I was receiving a new student. Now I was prepared.

I received four new students during the year, and I smiled every time, thankful that I had taken the time early in the year to prepare for them. I never had to run around the school looking for desks as I had in years past, for I had replaced them as I had given them to new students. All I had to do was to write the student's name on a nametag and add the desk to a desk group. I also had materials to give them upon their arrival and activities for them to work on while I decided how to get them up to speed on our current unit of study. The students seemed to like receiving a folder of things that were theirs to keep and having a desk waiting with their name on it.

The buddy program didn't take any time at all to develop. All it really took was a decision to provide new students with a buddy that would be a good friend and mentor. I decided that I would provide same-sex buddies in order to make new students feel more comfortable and I would only choose kids to be buddies that were good, responsible students. I also decided that I did not need to train specific students to be buddies. Instead, I explained the role of a buddy mentor to the whole class and I asked if any of them would rather not perform this job. I made a mental note of the few that raised their hands.

I found that not having pre-selected buddy mentors allowed me to be more thoughtful about each individual case. I could then choose a buddy that I thought would get along with my new student and I even was able to choose students to be buddies that I thought would benefit from meeting a new friend. In fact, I chose a different buddy for each of the four students I received.

The buddy's job was to take the new student on a tour of the classroom to show him/her where materials were kept and explain which areas and cabinets were or weren't accessible to students. Then, the buddy would take the new student on a tour of the school, pointing out all of the important areas: bathrooms, gym, library, art and music rooms, cafeteria, office, etc. The buddy was also in charge of answering any questions that the new student had and taking the new student to lunch that day. I found that both the new students and the buddies enjoyed the experience and it saved me quite a bit of time and effort.

## The Second Cycle: Brainstorming a Research Question

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I felt great about my work preparing my class and myself for new students, but I still had not developed a research question to study. My concerns about the education of my highly mobile students and their continued educational growth remained, but I had come to realize that, as a teacher, I did not have the ability to track my mobile students from state to state and school to school. I decided that the biggest impact that I could have on these students was to connect with them, teach them as much as I could during the time that they were with me, and really try to get them to love school. As James Comer (cited in Payne, 1998) says, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” If I could create a strong relationship with my highly mobile students, I figured they would have a better chance of succeeding academically and they would have more of a desire to continue their education when they left my class.

My quandary came when I realized that this goal was the same goal that I had for all of my students: I wanted to connect with every one of them, give them the knowledge and skills to succeed in school and in life, and convince them that school and learning were fun. How could I justify spending more time and effort on a small group of students just because I knew that they moved around a lot and missed a lot of school? I decided that I could not, not if in doing so I was neglecting the needs of other students. I began to think of other ways in which I could give my highly mobile students the extra attention that I thought they needed without doing so at the expense of my other students. I discussed my challenge with my principal and we came up with the idea of starting an after-school tutoring group with my mobile students. I was very excited. I could give up an hour or two a week after school to help my mobile students to make a more personal connection to school and help them to catch up on some of the skills that they had missed due to their various moves.

## **My Concern**

When I learned that one of my new students was highly mobile, I immediately thought about my tutoring group idea and I was excited to work with him. However, when I was informed of his recent experiences, I went from feeling saddened and concerned to appalled. My principal and the school counselor explained that Jose (not his real name) had been in and out of school, and had moved four times in the past two years between the United States and Mexico. He had very low language ability in Spanish, and spoke no English. This issue was confounded by the fact that he was hearing impaired and had little to no recognition of high frequency sounds, mainly 's' and 'z' sounds. During his prior stints in the US, the Title 1 reading program, speech and hearing specialists, and Special Education teachers had served him. However, this time was different. During the previous summer in Mexico, Jose had witnessed his father commit suicide. He had been the only one home when his father took his own life with a bullet to the head. Juan heard the shot and discovered his father's body. I learned that he was angry and withdrawn and would be a challenge academically and emotionally.

## **My Question**

I really felt that Jose would benefit from some extra help after school, but the question that I kept struggling with was this: When a student has so many challenges in addition to academic ones, how should after-school tutoring proceed? Should I focus on his academic problems solely, and if so, in which areas? Juan was very low in math, reading, writing, and English. On the other hand, should my focus be on his emotional well-being and his feelings about school? I decided that the best course of action to begin with was to focus on making our time after school fun (Berliner and McCormick, 2001). I felt that if studying after school was not an enjoyable experience for Jose, he would not want to come, and any other goal that I had would be moot. I also hoped that if Jose really enjoyed our tutoring sessions, I would be able to establish a stronger bond with him, which would in turn improve his perception of school and facilitate his academic progress. As Dr. Ruby Payne (1998)

states, "...the most important part of learning seems to be related to relationship." Thus, my goal was set, make the after-school tutoring sessions fun and put more effort into building relationships than on academics.

### **The Third Cycle: Identifying Other Students to Participate in my Study Group**

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#### **Planning and Action**

I decided that my first step was to identify other students, in addition to Jose, that would benefit from an after-school group. I would have loved to work with Juan one on one, but I thought that it would be more fun for him if he had some friends to join him after school. I also figured that my work would be more worthwhile if I was able to help more students that had missed schooling due to their various moves. I began to seek out more students to work with, but I decided to limit the group to just three or four students, for research has shown that students achieve at the highest rates in groups of 3-4 (Marzano et. al., 2001, p. 88). I also decided that as Jose was my primary focus, I would look for students that fit my guidelines of being highly mobile, but only select those that had similar needs as him and got along with and worked well with him.

I developed a simple survey that asked students about their school history, including how many schools they had attended in the past two years. I gave the survey to all of the Spanish-speaking students in fifth grade. I only included the Spanish-speaking students because I knew that one of Jose's biggest needs was to learn English. I went through the surveys and selected students that I thought qualified for my group and then went about personally interviewing them. Once I concluded my personal interviews, I had identified two other students, Lena and Tomas (not their real names), which fit my guidelines. I talked to the two of them and Jose about starting an after-school study group. I assured them that the group would be fun and told them that we could study anything that they wanted. They all agreed to participate, so I set out to contact their parents to get permission for them to stay with me after school. I created a permission slip for them to participate, as

well as one giving me permission to drive them home after we met, if necessary. When I received all of their permission slips, we set a day to begin our sessions.

## **Reflection**

When I thought about this cycle of my research, I thought it would be relatively short, and we would be able to get started with our meetings promptly. However, it took a lot longer than I had expected. I had to create the surveys and the permission slips in Spanish, which is difficult for me as a second-language learner, and I had to get all of them proofread and edited by our school's district-approved translator. Another obstacle was that Lena left on an extended trip to Mexico so we waited for her to return before beginning. Because I was working with highly mobile children, I had anticipated difficulties such as students leaving in the middle of my study. Therefore, a child leaving for Mexico for a couple of extra weeks at Christmas time was not unusual. I was happy that she would be returning.

The delay that I had not anticipated was my own sluggishness at getting started. I was not looking forward to beginning the sessions as much as I thought I would. In fact, I was beginning to feel overwhelmed with all of my teaching related duties and my research project became a source of stress instead of an exciting opportunity to help kids. I began to procrastinate getting started, giving the students and myself various excuses as to why we should wait "one more week". Finally, the students got me back in gear. The idea of the group excited them and they began asking me about it constantly, so I could not put it off any longer.

## **The Fourth Cycle: Beginning our After-School Meetings**

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### **Planning and Action: Data Collection**

Even though my primary goal was for the students to enjoy themselves and for us to build a strong relationship, I wanted to measure my effectiveness with them academically as well. To measure their academic growth, I decided to give them pre

and post assessments in English language ability and mathematics computation skills.

We spent our first session doing an oral language assessment from the Carousel of IDEAS English language acquisition curriculum. I had used this curriculum in the past and really liked it because the students enjoyed the lessons and learned a lot. In addition, the assessments are extremely unthreatening and very game-like. In fact, I introduced the assessment to the students as a game and they were excited to play. The assessment involves the students taking turns rolling a colored die and the teacher asking them the questions or giving them the commands that correspond to the color that the student rolled. The students then receive a score and are placed into levels based on their ability to respond to the commands and answer the questions in English.

During our second session, I had the students take a mathematics assessment in which I assessed their abilities to add, subtract, multiply and divide.

## **Reflection**

The students enjoyed the English language assessment very much. In fact, they often asked me during our meetings if they could play “that game with the dice” again. I assured them that we would play again after they had learned some more English. The math assessment was not as popular. I did not hear any complaints, but I did not have any requests for a repeat either.

## **Group Meetings**

In keeping with my promise to the students, each week I asked them what they would like to study. Though they had initially expressed interest in practicing their math skills, each week they said that they wanted to learn English. We had fun playing vocabulary-building games, making picture dictionaries, and just chatting. I tried to use as little Spanish as possible to push them toward English.

After several sessions, I told them that I wanted to work on our math skills. We practiced multiplication and division strategies, as they were the areas that I had

noticed were the weakest on their pretests. After that session, we studied English again for three more sessions before I again opted to spend time on our math strategies. It was horrible. The students were off task and unproductive. “Mr. Reynolds,” they said, “We want to study English.”

## **Reflection**

After the second session we spent learning math strategies, I was upset that we had such a poor meeting. I went back to my reflective journal, read my notes, and smiled to myself. I had set out to create an environment in which my students could have fun at school and enjoy learning, and I had promised them that they could choose to study anything that they wanted. Then, I proceeded to impose my will on them and force them to work on their math computation skills. In retrospect, I realized that I did so only because I had given them a math pretest and I wanted to have some hard data to measure my success with them. Looking back at my original goal, I saw that nowhere had I written that I wanted them to increase their math skill level. I was upset at myself for losing sight of my original goal and changing the focus of our meetings to meet what I thought were the needs of my research.

Nevertheless, as I looked at my original goal, I also smiled because I realized that I had met both of the goals I had set. I had wanted to build relationships with the students and I wanted them to enjoy staying after school and learning. I had indeed built relationships with the three of them. I had learned about their families and their likes and dislikes, and they told me things that I never would have learned had we not built the bond that we did during our after school meetings. I now know that Lena lives with another family and as such classifies as homeless. I learned that she lives in a verbally abusive home and that her dad drinks. She even told me about how her mother had suffered a stroke and was unable to care for her younger brother, so he was living in Mexico with their aunt. I learned that the reason Tomas had been moving so much was because his family was looking for better housing, and they had recently purchased their first house. I found out that he and Lena often helped each other out on their homework. I already knew quite a bit about Jose due to the information I had received from the school counselor. He shared some information

with me about his family, like how he lived with his sister and brother-in-law; however, we never discussed his father.

I know that these students, especially Lena, who was quiet and reserved, would not have opened up to me in this way had they not felt so comfortable with me. Our after school meetings had served one purpose: I had built a stronger relationship with my students.

Additionally, I had achieved my second goal; the kids were enjoying staying after school. I had assumed that they would not want to spend any extra time at school and would dread coming to our group. I found just the opposite to be true. They loved playing vocabulary-building games like “Simon Says” and “I Spy”, and on several occasions, they asked if we could stay longer. Several days a week, they would ask me if we were meeting that day. Somehow, they never got the meeting day straight, or maybe they just needed to know that I still wanted to meet with them.

After reflecting on my time with these three students, I felt more at ease. I realized that I really wanted some quantifiable data for my project and the only way I saw to get that data was to show academic growth, despite the fact that my original goal was not solely academics.

### **Evaluation: Students**

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#### **Academic Results**

The results of the *Carousel of IDEAS* English Language assessment showed that all of the students made growth. Out of ten points possible, the students scored as follows:

<b>Student</b>	<b>Pretest Score</b>	<b>Post-Test Score</b>	<b>Growth</b>
Jose	2.5	6	3.5 points
Tomas	8	9.5	1.5 points
Lena	9.5	10	.5 points

Because of my realization that math was not a priority to the students or my research, I never gave them a post assessment. Therefore, I have no results for mathematical growth.

## **Reflection**

Because Jose had the lowest language ability at the start of our group meetings, it is logical that he showed the most growth. In fact, the level at which I instructed the students was actually one level lower than was prescribed for Tomas and Lena. I decided to teach them at that level because I wanted all of them to learn together and help each other out, and once again, I focused on Jose's needs as a primary concern. I was worried that the level would be too low for Tomas and Lena, and they might get bored. I was especially worried about keeping Lena's interest since she was far more advanced than the boys were. I was pleasantly surprised to see shy, reserved Isabel relish the opportunity to be the "expert". She really came out of her shell in our group, and she picked up quite a bit of vocabulary that she had been missing.

## **Emotional Results**

When I began my research project, my focus was on Jose. Of course, I was concerned with his lack of formal education, but my main area of concern was his emotional well-being. I feared that this was a very pivotal year in Jose's life and if he did not make a positive connection with school, he might forever see education in a negative light. Though I certainly cannot take sole credit for his emotional growth, I am happy to report that Jose completely changed his attitude and outlook on school and life this year. Throughout the year, Jose worked with the school counselor, several other teachers, the school principal, and he grew to love school. When the year started, he was timid, angry and closed off. He rarely attempted to communicate with me or other students. Toward the end of the school year, Jose was smiling and laughing with his classmates. When he began the year, he lacked confidence and was uninterested in learning. However, as the year progressed, he

became engaged and his confidence boomed. During our group, I often laughed at how aggressively he shouted out the English vocabulary words we were working on and then raised both hands like a champion when he got them right.

Countless people came together this year to nurture Jose and give him the skills and knowledge he needs to succeed. He still has a long way to go academically, but I am confident that he will work hard in school and that he views school as a positive place. His confidence has grown immensely and he believes that he can succeed in whatever he wants to do if he works hard. Perhaps the most important piece of data that I collected throughout this project was when I asked Jose what he wanted to be when he grows up. “A teacher”, he said, “and then in about forty years... the President.”

When I started this project, I wanted to impact more than just one student, so I included Lena and Tomas. I really did not have too many expectations for them, as my focus was on Jose. Tomas enjoyed our sessions and never missed one, but I think he would have rather been at home playing a lot of the time. I think that besides the games we played, his favorite aspect of our group was that he got to ride in my car and wave to his friends on the way home.

Lena, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed coming to our group. She was the student that was most often asking if we could stay longer, even just fifteen minutes. The funny part was that she needed the content the least. She was the strongest English speaker and knew most of the vocabulary that we studied before I introduced it. For her, I believe that our group fulfilled something that she was not getting during the regular school day. She received focused attention and she was able to shine. In whole class situations, Lena was bashful and reluctant to take risks. However, in our group, she was the star and I saw her blossom. Often when we finished our sessions, we would spend ten minutes out on the playground. As the boys raced over to the tetherball courts, Lena and I would shoot baskets and talk about life. She confided in me about her family and her fears about going to middle school. We celebrated when her mom recovered from her stroke and her baby brother came home. Because we made such a connection, I also felt more comfortable challenging her in class. I had been afraid of really pushing her hard

because of how shy she was. I was scared that I might make her feel unsuccessful or turn her off to school. After we got to know each other on a more personal level and developed a strong trust, I knew that she would respond well if I expected more out of her. When I did so, it seemed as if she really started to grow.

### **Evaluation: Myself**

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When I began my action research, my goal was to help my highly mobile students find enjoyment in school and feel more comfortable in the school culture. I really had no goals for my own growth as an educator, yet the lessons that I learned because of doing my research were profound.

When I started to learn about action research, I felt put off by the “softness” of the research and the data to be collected. My personal background is in the sciences and I have always thought of research in a traditional scientific sense, with the researcher as an observer, collecting “hard” data that is easily measurable. In my mind, the researcher should not be directly involved in the experiment, so as not to affect the outcome. Action research was extremely difficult for me to wrap my head around. Throughout the project, my frustration continued because I did not have more numerical data. I did not understand how journal entries and personal reflections counted as data sources. They seemed far too ambiguous and unreliable. I also could not comprehend the idea of the researcher changing and adjusting the project as the research proceeded: surely, the data would not be reliable if the parameters changed throughout the course of the research. To be quite honest, I fought tooth and nail against the entire process until I thought about the goal. Action research is not about finding a definitive answer to a research question using hard data and controls; it is about making a difference through action. I was not a researcher first, I was a teacher, and my responsibilities were to my students, not the research community. I was dealing with ten and eleven-year-old human subjects with varied life experiences, feelings, and needs, both educational and emotional. When I put all of that into perspective, I realized that action was the most important aspect of action research, not the data.

It took a while for me to get to the action, because I could not figure out what exactly I was measuring. I decided to collect academic data so that I could “justify” my research project and I hated the fact that I was not going to have any hard data except for the pre and posttests. My resistance to the action research process was so great that I procrastinated terribly. Thankfully, the students got me to move into the action phase of action research. Had I continued to fret over the validity of my data and the success of my research, I would have never gotten to the most important thing: spending time with the kids. Once I did, I realized that no matter what my data said, I was making a difference in the lives of three children that needed me. I was spending time with these three students and showing them that I cared about them and their education. I was giving them extra: a tiny bit better of a chance to succeed in school. More importantly, I was giving them the attention and love that all children need to succeed in life, and after interviewing them during our last meeting, I know that they appreciated it. They each told me that they enjoyed coming to our groups and that they learned some English. Jose and Tomas also told me that they were better friends than they had been at the start of our group.

Another thing I learned through the course of my project was that no matter how busy teachers get, we could do that little bit extra to make a difference in our students’ lives. There were times that I was absolutely exhausted by the end of the day and the last thing I wanted to do was stay after school for an extra hour to meet with my group. I found that once we got started and I saw their enthusiasm and appreciation, I reenergized. With all of the expectations put on teachers from parents, the school district, and the state and federal governments, it is easy to forget why most of us became teachers in the first place. We did not do it for fame, money or status. We did it because we wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. I found that starting an after-school tutoring group gave me that feeling of making a difference that my daily work lacked. With my small group, I was able to build relationships that are impossible to build with every child in a classroom of 25-30 students. I was able to build these relationships with students that are easy to overlook in a whole class setting: quiet, second-language learners that move around a lot.

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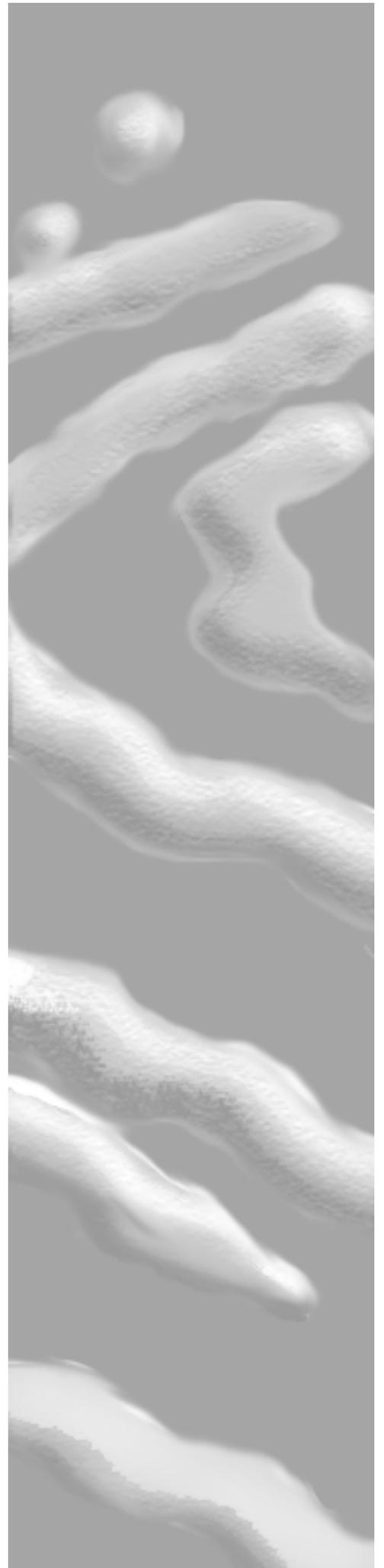


**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 7**

*How can I improve reading achievement  
among my highly mobile and homeless  
fifth grade student population?*

**Tobey Cho Bassoff**  
**Fifth Grade Teacher**  
**Columbine Elementary School**



*I am better equipped to handle the academic achievement of a student population impacted by homelessness and high mobility. More over, I have sought out collegial collaboration on positively and effectively addressing those needs and issues through the process of action research. Finally, I gained personal knowledge that I have made, and will continue to make, a difference in the lives of the children.*

## **Background**

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I teach at Columbine Elementary School in Longmont, Colorado, which is located 37 miles northwest of Denver, Colorado near the foot of the Rocky Mountains. The population is approximately 76,000, including a large number of migrant workers and families. The major local employer is the Con Agra turkey plant.

Columbine Elementary School's ethnic breakdown is 54% Hispanic, 41% Caucasian, 3% African American, and 2% Asian. Free or reduced lunch applies to 89% of our students, and a large number are highly mobile and/or homeless.

In 1999, our school accountability team identified a need for systemic change to increase our historically low student achievement. By 2001, changes included an extra twenty days of instruction, a new school calendar that was more in keeping with family needs, class sizes that were 20:1 or lower, and all-day everyday kindergarten classes.

As a third year teacher at Columbine, I saw a need for greater attention for students from our highly mobile and homeless population. Many of the students in my class would leave for several weeks or months and return numerous times throughout the year, their academic progress often suffering. I recognized a need to better accommodate these mobile students, wondering how to make the students feel welcome when they arrived and how to adjust my teaching to better fit their needs. When the opportunity arose to collaborate with other educational professionals who were also concerned about the same issues, I took it.

## How did I get started?

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Although I had heard the term “action research,” I really did not know what it was and wanted to find out. I “googled” “action research” on the internet and read the journal articles and books suggested by my colleagues in the COPAR group. While there were many interpretations of “action research,” I understood it to mean a process where I would collaborate, conduct a research project, reflect and report on my findings. Once I thought I had a reasonable working definition of “action research,” I began working on a question that would serve as my goal. The goal would allow me to focus, avoid going off on tangents and distractions from competing ideas. While all this sounded good in theory, in practice narrowing my focus was hard. As a teacher, I was used to attending to all the issues that affected my students and thinking narrowly was out of my comfort zone. Therefore, collaboration with my group became essential.

When I presented my goal of helping highly mobile and homeless students become more academically competent to my colleagues, they found it to be too broad. They helped me narrow my focus challenging my assumptions about my students. For example, they asked why I thought the students were not already academically competent; in which areas I thought the students were not competent; if I had any data to support my assumptions; and if I thought they were incompetent just because they moved around a lot. This questioning process was enlightening albeit somewhat uncomfortable for a seasoned fifth grade teacher like me who trusted her instincts. As my scraped ego thought about each question, I began to realize for the first time that I did make some unfounded assumptions about my students. Rather than beat myself up for these mistakes, I focused on answering these tough questions.

## The first cycle

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I went back to my classroom and began to think seriously about what I was seeing. I began to realize that when students came to my class from Mexico, they

had solid computational math skills. However, on math tests given in their native language they performed poorly on any problem that required literacy. Furthermore, students who came from schools outside the state also excelled on computational exams, but failed on tests requiring literacy skills. Finally, even students within our own district, taught using a literacy-based math program, still struggled on assessments requiring reading comprehension skills. This led me to realize the impact that reading proficiency has on student achievement. I also looked at the reading data from our computerized reading assessment program, and it showed that many students who were new to the school started as below grade level readers. As I pieced together what I was learning, I honed in on the idea that my primary goal for the action research project would be: How can I positively impact the reading achievement of highly mobile and/or homeless students?

When I presented my primary goal to the COPAR group, they responded positively. They helped me create a plan of action in which I would discover the answer to my question. Hence, I set up a procedure for collecting data. I selected three ways to gather data that collectively would provide information for me to analyze. The three methods that I chose were student work samples and authentic notes from students or parents, reflections from my personal journal, and results from the computerized reading program. My CO PAR colleagues continued to challenge the new assumptions that I made about data collection.

For instance, Julie, one of the CO PAR members, asked me about the validity of the computerized testing program. In other words, she wanted to know if the test was measuring what I wanted it to measure. While the question annoyed me at first, I found it surprisingly useful. Of course, I should have considered the limitations of the reading test program. Because of my excitement about the project design, and how I was going to help my students, I was blind to the aspect of limitations. Even though Julie brought up a good point, I was tempted to see it as a reason to “submarine” my project. However, after reflecting on what she offered, I saw it as no more than food for thought. I decided to reframe the test from being the *only* indicator for reading success to being *one* of three indicators of reading success.

Once my data collection process was in place, I went back to school ready to observe and collect data. I organized a loose-leaf binder into three sections. One section became my journal; another section held student work and other authentic samples; and the third section housed the data from the computerized reading test. Then, I observed and took notes.

Within several weeks, I noticed that my attention to my homeless and highly mobile student population increased. I identified which students in my class were homeless and/or highly mobile. Because my school had no formal identification system for notifying teachers, this was difficult. However, my frustration led me to discover that the school district had a liaison for the homeless. Simply stated, this was a person assigned by the district to track and follow our homeless and highly mobile population.

My most startling discovery was that one of my students rode a public bus to school because our school had officially eliminated school bus service. It turned out that he was not eating breakfast in the morning because the bus dropped him off at school just before the bell rang. Due to his conscientious effort to make it to school on time, he elected to miss breakfast. However, he would perform poorly in class as a result. I contacted the liaison for our homeless population and I learned that my student came in from a homeless shelter. This transportation was paid for by a grant from the Colorado Department of Education as part of the McKinney-Vento Act that stipulates that all children are entitled to remain in one school even though their housing situation changes.

### **The second cycle**

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Even though this student's situation had seemingly nothing to do with my goal of assessing reading achievement, I learned about it because I had a heightened awareness about children's circumstances that may be affecting their school performance. Therefore, my research entered a new cycle, and I focused on a new question: Since students cannot learn if their basic needs are unmet, how can I ensure that my students' basic needs are met? This question tied into reading achievement

because if students were hungry or having other basic needs unmet, then how could they focus on anything but that? My new plan of action involved asking my COPAR group what assumptions I was making about “basic needs.” They assisted me once again by asking me what I already knew about basic needs and suggested that I “google” once again. My reading led me to want to find out if the school had any system in place to meet students’ basic needs. Unfortunately, I found out that the answer was “no.” I made a list of what I considered the fundamental needs of students so that they could learn. My list included food, shelter, clothing, and supplies.

It did not take much time for me to see that new students to my class did not always have the clothing, food, or supplies that they needed to start the day. In fact, during the time that the study took place, five highly mobile/homeless students joined my class without the necessary supplies to do their work. Furthermore, their families did not have the money or means to purchase these things. Not surprisingly, not a single child admitted to not being able to buy the necessities, they merely stated that their parents just had not gotten around to it yet. Based on what I was learning, I set up a system so that every child would have supplies ready for them when they got to school. I coordinated my efforts with our Parent Room, which is a group of school volunteers that arranged for donations from area businesses and scoured yard sales for good deals. Together we made sure to stock the classroom with individual backpacks full of the necessary pencils, notebooks, and pens that the children needed to become active learners in school. We also arranged for extra sets of eyes to monitor the most impacted students during breakfast. It was not long before we ensured that all of my students ate breakfast. In addition, we arranged for extra clothing for two of my students whose families had only two pairs of pants and one shirt.

As I reflected in my journal, I had not attuned enough to my students’ basic needs. While this self-assessment seemed harsh, I needed to realize that because I was concentrating so hard on student achievement, I sometimes failed to pay adequate attention to their not-so-obvious impoverishments. At that point, I made the decision that if the students needed something essential, then I would find a way

to provide it. I further deduced that a welcoming environment would all but guarantee that I could find out early on if the child's basic needs were unmet. To create a welcoming environment, I needed to develop a rapport and create a safe place that would allow them to share with me what they needed.

### **My third cycle**

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Once again, in the course of my research, I found unexpected paths. This time I questioned whether the classroom felt welcoming. I reasoned that if students felt welcome then they could feel safe enough to share their personal experiences with me.

As I shared my discoveries with my colleagues, it dawned on me that they enriched my original question. I found much comfort in my colleagues. It was Amy, a woman from Saguache, Colorado, who said that if I did not take time to make a child feel welcome then nothing else I did all year would matter. As I sat around the table and listened to my COPAR teammates, I learned that they had discovered new places in the process of their research as well. Furthermore, our practices were improving based on what we were learning. Perhaps we were not improving in ways we anticipated, but we were improving in the best kind of unexpected ways.

Amy offered me the idea of creating a welcome folder for new students to my class. The folder would include a letter describing our city, school, and class, initial assessments, and a getting-to-know-you activity. In the activity that I chose to include, the new student described his interests and hobbies, which I then featured on a board that included descriptions of the other children in the class. In this way, the new student would feel special and part of the new classroom community. Creating the folder and seeing my classroom through the eyes of a new student was honestly stirring. I had the electrifying feeling that I would make the next student that came to my class feel truly welcome, and I did.

When “Delia” (not her real name), who happened to be homeless, arrived to my class, she received the welcome folder, the backpack full of supplies, a bag full of clothes for her and her family, and a teacher who was more aware of her as a whole child. In no time at all, I received a warm note from Delia’s mother stating how touched she was by the supplies that I had provided for her daughter. As this mother explained, the family had to move in the middle of the night leaving most of their belongings behind. She would not have been able to afford anything for quite some time. They moved around a lot, and they finally felt that this was a welcoming place.

Delia’s reaction to the folder was enthusiastic. She appreciated the letter and said it helped her understand that “specials” was what we called gym, music, and physical education. Delia’s story made me feel that my action research was opening my eyes to the students as more than receptors of knowledge. As I learned more about Delia, I gathered that her life was hard. Delia’s survival was fraught with abuse, neglect, and poverty. I believed that she slowly opened up to me because of my efforts to know her as a whole person, which allowed me to be a more effective teacher to her. While her reading was not quite on grade level, she did seem to show more aptitude in reading than in any other subject. Then, I asked myself how I could get Delia and my other students more involved in reading.

### **My fourth cycle**

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As I reflected on the interests of the class, it dawned on me that what my students needed was an opportunity to express what they had learned from their own experiences. Operating under my currently successful guided reading model of instruction, I began to look at ways in which I could make the model flexible. I wanted to tap into my students’ strengths as tellers of their own stories. This led me to look at the poetry component of my reading program. Each week students were required to memorize and learn about the meaning and structure of a poem. Many of the poems illustrated phonemic patterns, but some poems were selected because of their silliness or their thematic ties to our reading anthologies. I researched poems

with themes of poverty, neglect, and survival. Children’s poetry offered my students a beautiful way to nourish their imaginations while drawing on academic strands like “figurative language.” I started with an anthology of poetry written for children entitled *Knock on a Star*. I selected poems that had an obvious connection to many of the students’ experiences. Then I introduced them to poetry that was more sophisticated and encouraged them to probe their own experiences more deeply. They were able to share their interpretations of the poems without discussing their own personal experiences, and I felt they opened up to new self-understanding. The results of this flexible strategy were overwhelmingly positive. Students who had never experienced success with memorizing poems began pleading with me to recite their poems earlier than the due date. My shyest students started speaking up in class discussions, sharing their experiences about feeling like an outsider. My more creative students began drawing illustrations to go with poems and several students felt that they could best express their feelings through writing interpretations of poems. Not only did the changes in my teaching strategy help my students learn about poetry but engaged them in reading groups. As a result, they began to do better on in-class assessments. My mid-year student interviews indicated that the students’ favorite part of reading was the poems. I had several students memorizing the poems assigned to other reading groups and requesting to sit in on all poetry discussions. Parents wrote letters and remarked in conferences that they were pleased with their child’s development in reading and their recent interest in poetry.

### **What evidence did I have that action research was effective?**

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Even though my school year is only three-quarters complete, student achievement on the computerized reading assessment program in my class increased an average of 200 lexiles for my stable student population and over 300 lexiles for my homeless and highly mobile student population. The average student growth is 75-100 lexiles in one school year. Student work and parent communication suggest that students have grown considerably. Parents and administration report that they are happy with the growth that the children have made. My personal journal shows

strong evidence that through reflection I have grown in my capacity as an educator. I am better equipped to handle the academic achievement of a student population impacted by homelessness and high mobility. More over, I have sought out collegial collaboration on positively and effectively addressing those needs and issues through the process of action research. Finally, I gained personal knowledge that I have made, and will continue to make, a difference in the lives of the children.

### **How did I modify my practice?**

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Based on this research experience, I have made sure that there is an identification process for homeless and/or highly mobile children in the class. I have become more welcoming to my students by offering them a safe place to share their personal lives. My writing assessment and interview intake forms provide me with information regarding the students' basic needs and if they are being met. I have developed a rapport with the homeless liaison, and other school officials who provide services to my students. Through this network, my students have more people paying attention to their needs. Students participating in reading groups experience poems that are relevant to their personal lives and that tap into their funds of knowledge. I am currently seeking out books that also draw on their personal experiences while keeping in line with state standards. I have implemented a portfolio system that tracks student achievement on assessments, and I offer students a chance to discuss their progress with their parents, the administration, or me. I have increased my network of professional colleagues who will assist me on further action research endeavors. I introduced the idea of action research and my findings of this project to my school colleagues. They were impressed and wanted to know more.

## Significance of my research

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### **For me ~**

I believe that I achieved what I set out to do: I wanted to learn more about how public education affects our highly mobile and homeless student population. Specifically, I wanted to learn more about what I could do to improve student achievement in this group. I have reevaluated my earlier assumptions, some of which were unfounded, examined my classroom practice, collaborated with a network of professional educators, adjusted my practice to meet the needs of my students, and shared my findings with students, colleagues, and members of the community.

### **For my school ~**

Action research supports the belief that educators have the capacity to build their own evidence-based practices. Colleagues have expressed interest in wanting to learn from my work. As more educators honestly face the problems that beset the school system, change is inevitable. We can hope for solutions or at least partial solutions based on accurate observations of our own practices.



## **PART 4**

# **Access to Educational Services, Welcoming School Culture and Flexible Instructional Strategies**





**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 8**

***Studying Homeless and Highly Mobile Students***

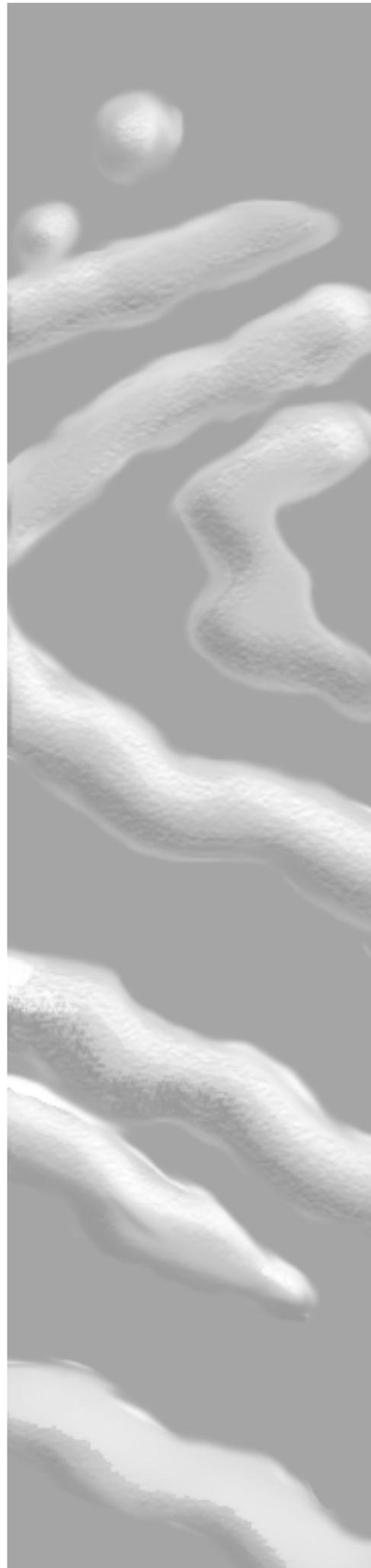
***At Westminster Elementary School:***

***Raising Awareness and Building Relationships***

**Rebecca Chao and Dana Clements**

**Westminster Elementary School**

**K-5 teachers**



*Our evidence shows that we have raised the awareness of our staff towards the struggles of our homeless and mobile students and the services available for these students. There is an increased sensitivity to the importance of school culture. Teachers understand that we need to look to the students for answers. The students are beginning to understand that there is value in their opinion and voice.*

## **Background**

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In an era of high stakes testing and an increasingly diverse population of learners in our classrooms, we often found ourselves questioning what control we really had on the learning in our classrooms. Can we truly make a difference in our student's educational lives? Budget cuts, No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress were only a few of the challenges.

As teachers of an urban K-5 population, we had also become aware of the impact of our students' mobility on their academic success. Our school, Westminster Elementary, experienced a great change in population over the past five years, shifting from a Caucasian majority to a Hispanic majority primarily within the past three years. In addition, about 95 of our Hispanic students are ELL students, who received pullout services for English language instruction. With our school population hovering around 285 students, this was nearly one-third of our student body. Furthermore, with an increased understanding of the definition of "homelessness" under the Federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Act (2002), we were able to identify a group of twenty-five students who fit the criteria as a homeless or highly mobile student. Westminster Elementary School serves a population, which, for the most part, is in the lower strand of social-economic status. All of these characteristics created quite a challenge for our educators. How were we to meet each student's individual needs in the midst of these uncontrollable factors?

Even with a relatively stable staff of 19 educators, it had become increasingly more difficult to meet the needs of individual learners in the K-5 classroom setting. Current curriculum did not seem to be an appropriate fit for most of our highly mobile and homeless students. Without instructional modifications, it was unlikely that our homeless and mobile students would be successful at meeting grade level

district and state standards. We began to question what would need to be present in order for these particular students to learn at an acceptable rate.

### **What Research Told Us**

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What research told us was that these students needed someone who cared about their well-being and could provide a stable relationship within the school setting. Many experts in education had noticed that school climate and a student's sense of belonging in a school were key factors to being and feeling successful. "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship", stated Comer (as cited in Payne, 1996). How could these relationships between students and adults be initiated and maintained in elementary schools? This large idea was the premise of our action research. Payne (1996) added that since 1980, Americans have concentrated school efforts on "achievement and effective teaching strategies" (p.143). While these efforts seemed quite valid and in students' best interest, we wondered how achievement could occur without the foundation of a relationship? Payne stated, "yet the most important part of learning seems to be related to relationship" (p. 143). Educators can create and build relationships through caring about students, by being role models, and by insisting upon successful behaviors for school.

This relationship could then become the foundation to build academic achievement and other indicators of success. Mark Bensinger, a fifth grade teacher, noted that a supportive classroom climate was essential. "If students don't feel that they're safe, respected, or wanted, they're never going to get to the point where real learning occurs." (O'Neil, 2004). Eric Schaps supported this idea as he pointed out the numerous benefits of building a sense of community in a school. Students in supportive environments such as these were more likely to be academically motivated, to act ethically and altruistically, and to develop social and emotional competencies. Additionally, these benefits were often enduring (2003).

When considering the specific social and emotional needs of homeless and highly mobile children, school climate was definitely a key factor. Schools should

be safe havens for these children. Often, their families and community life could be so unstable that the school was the place where they sought security and a sense of belonging. In the midst of a student's chaotic life, a teacher could be a source of hope, encouragement, and positive support. In relation to the challenges that a homeless student faced, it was not surprising to learn that one study found that these students had significantly more behavioral problems in school than did their housed peers (Halloway, 2003). Hence, it was suggested that the school be sensitive to the learning needs of homeless children and provide support outside of academia to address the physical and emotional issues these students faced. Doing so could increase the likelihood that some of our neediest students would be successful in the public school setting.

Ernest Mendes (2003) expressed the importance of empathy in the public school setting as a part of school climate. Empathy encompasses much more than mutual respect between adults and students in a school setting; it seeps to a much deeper level of understanding and caring. He stated, "Earning the respect of students is not enough. "Students must perceive that we care, and even that we like them deep down, as people" (p.57). Mendes reported that students would work harder for someone they liked than for one they simply respected. With this in mind, the impact of truly empathetic adults in a school building experiencing a great deal of mobility and homelessness could be astounding. Empathy could begin by teachers becoming more knowledgeable about their students' world and by demonstrating a genuine interest in them. The idea of empathy went back to our basic human need of love and acceptance. It is no wonder that its' presence could have such a great impact and its' absence could be hazardous.

## **Beginning the Action Research Project: The Reconnaissance**

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### **What Do We Know?**

While analyzing data concerning student achievement we immediately recognized the disparity of performance between our homeless and highly mobile students and our stable students. This led us to several questions. The answers

would ultimately direct us to our primary action research question. What was the basic understanding among our staff of empathy for our homeless and highly mobile students? What did our staff understand about the significance of their relationship with each student and the impact the relationship would have on the students' education?

To gather data for the "answers" to these questions, we relied on teacher discussions, both individual and small group, concerning specific homeless and highly mobile students, and the minutes from horizontal, vertical and whole staff meetings. In examining these data, we concluded that there were two general misconceptions. The first misconception was what defined a highly mobile student. Many of our school staff considered our Hispanic students that visited Mexico during January as highly mobile students. The second misconception identified a diminished sense of rapport. Blame often transferred to these students when a student was absent or discussed an upcoming move, as if the student had control over his or her attendance or mobility. These findings led us to the assumption that most of our staff would feel that their student's academic success would not be significantly impacted by a bond with a teacher but rather that the quality of the relationship depended on the motivation and academic success of the student.

Our discussions with staff appeared to be guiding us to examine our school climate, the importance of a student/teacher relationship and its' impact on achievement. In reviewing relevant articles and publications, we found several that supported our growing understandings.

First, Bronfenbrenner (1989) stated, "young people need to have adults who are 'crazy' about them. Instead, teachers may resent inadequate encouragement and assistance to do their job and students may feel that nobody cares about them". Ernest Mendes (2003) provided his perspective for empathy and structure in a classroom. "Students do respond just because we care – and because they like us" (p. 56). However, he went on to say that developing caring relationships did not negate the need for limits and structure in the classroom. Students need both structure and nurture, and the ways in which the teacher responds to these need in the classroom are crucial (p.57).

Finally, there was the research and work from Dr. James Comer. Dr. Comer stated that, “a bond is established that enables the child to imitate, identify with, and internalize the attitudes and values of their caretakers and then those of other people around them. These people become important because they mediate a child’s experience and protect the child and help him or her grow along the important developmental pathways. Hard science – brain research, has confirmed the nature and critical importance of this interactive process. To be successful, schools must create the conditions that make good development and learning possible: positive and powerful social and academic interaction between students and staff. When this happens, students gain social and academic competence” (p. 3).

With Dr. Comer’s philosophy, that no significant learning occurs without a significant relationship, in mind, we considered meeting with our homeless and mobile students three times a week for lunch. Could a relationship with the students motivate their learning? Could we affect the attitudes and actions of our Lunch Bunch students to precipitate a change in our school climate and thus academic achievement? With these questions in mind, we began our action research.

### **The First Cycle of the Action Research: The Beginning of Lunch Bunch**

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#### **Planning and Action**

Our first step was to establish when and where to meet with students. We felt our school library offered a “homey” feeling. Our students thought of it as a special place to go, a community place within our school. We also decided that the best time to meet was on Monday, Wednesday and Friday during our lunchtime. We felt that this was a time least impacted by other activities in our building. This would be a long enough block of time so that we would be able to eat lunch and socialize. We also decided that attendance would be student choice. We felt that we would need to work hard to engage the students and provide interactive activities to keep our attendance strong. Our first challenge came in identifying our homeless and highly mobile students. We felt it would be important for us to identify them for our study

without publicly labeling them “homeless or highly mobile”. We enlisted the assistance of our district homeless liaison, Jamie Skaronea. She had lesson plans that helped classroom teachers to identify homeless students. The lesson plans fit in with our grade level social studies standards within the context of a typical classroom lesson. Each student in every class drew and labeled where they lived and whom they lived with. We kept the drawings together by grade level so we could cross-reference and confirm our findings with the classroom teachers and our school secretary. The drawings easily showed us who lived in temporary housing and lived in a multi-family dwelling. We were also able to determine who fit in our definition of a highly mobile student. For the purpose of our study, our definition of a highly mobile student was a student that had experienced two or more enrollment changes in any given year. We were able to use student registrations to identify these students. Once we examined the data, we eliminated three students who lived in multi-family dwellings by choice instead of economic need. After carefully examining our student population, we had a group of twenty-seven students we felt fit the criteria for our study. We were both surprised that the number of students was so high. We did not expect to find 10% of our population fit into our study. We then designed invitations identifying our group as “The Lunch Bunch”. We met with students on our list on a one-to-one basis to invite them to join us.

In anticipation of our first meeting with the students, we designed Lunch Bunch attendance records to show current daily attendance as well as a running record of individual student attendance. We gathered crayons, markers, art paper, writing materials and board games. We discussed possible daily agendas wondering if we should have a specific purpose for each day. After much discussion, we returned to Dr. Comer’s research, our lunch bunch time was a time to share a meal with friends and create new bonds within a safe, supportive environment. We modeled and expected respect, responsibility and cooperation from all who participated in Lunch Bunch.

For other data to support our study we looked to our district reading assessment, quarterly student admissions, withdrawals, and discipline reports. We

created a student survey to give us a baseline on the student's perspective concerning school climate and school relationships.

We were pleased and surprised to have 100% participation at our first meeting. The younger students were excited to eat lunch outside of the cafeteria, while the older students wanted to know more about the Lunch Bunch. We moved from table to table, talking with the students while they ate. We explained that this was a time for all of us as a group to meet, eat, and make new friends. We put signs in the hallway on Monday, Wednesday and Friday to remind the students to come to the library. During the second and third meetings, we asked the students to complete a twenty-five-question survey on the effectiveness of the Lunch Bunch. The intermediate students read the surveys and were quite serious about giving us honest answers. We worked with our primary students on an individual basis to insure that they understood our questions. We worked quickly and with the older students working independently, were able to finish all the surveys in two lunch meetings. The responses we acquired from our students supported our theories and encouraged the development of our initial research question.

### **Observation and Reflection**

In reviewing our data from the surveys, we noted that 40% of our intermediate students were not comfortable with the climate in the school. Several of the intermediate students noted that they were uncomfortable with peers. The majority of our primary students were happy with the school climate, the teachers and peers. We wondered if the student-to-student relationships or student to teacher relationships caused the discrepancies.

An immediate outcome that we noticed was an obvious connection made with intermediate students. Students that previously would not say hello or make eye contact were now going out of their way to greet us. It was an astonishing reaction considering that we had only met two or three times for lunch. We discovered that our commitment to lunch, time and attention opened the doors of communication between our Lunch Bunch kids and us, as well as between their classroom teachers and us. For example, within our first month, a homeless student

came to us for mediation assistance concerning teasing in his classroom. We were able to engage in a reflective conversation with him on how to empower himself to problem solve. He also gave us permission to talk with his classroom teacher. We quickly became allies and advocated on his behalf. His classroom teacher felt supported and was grateful for the assistance and information while we felt rewarded with the knowledge that our Lunch Bunch time was serving its purpose. We quickly became the “go to” resource for bus passes, qualifications for services and general information concerning our homeless and highly mobile students. We also encountered issues related to McKinney-Vento funding during this cycle. Finding the financial resources to supply a student with bus tokens to travel to and from school became an issue for the first time when a student in temporary housing moved beyond our school boundaries. The idea of keeping a homeless child in their “school or origin” became a reality right before our eyes. During the holidays, our connections with the students enabled us to have conversations with the classroom teachers to insure all of our students had a holiday meal and gifts.

We encountered a tough challenge, one that would continue to surface, after our winter break. Two of our intermediate students were restless and appeared to have difficulty engaging with the other students during lunch. They began to ask if they “had” to come to Lunch Bunch. During subsequent weeks, we made it a point to seek them out during the day and especially during our Lunch Bunch time. We discovered through talking with these students that most of the activities we had for the students focused on younger children. They gave us some ideas of activities they would enjoy, and how they wanted to spend their time. We hoped that more one-on-one interest and engaging them in more appropriate activities would ensure they continued to buy-in to our time together.

## **The Second Cycle of the Action Research: Becoming a Family**

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### **Planning and Action**

One concern at this point in our research was staying continuously aware of new students enrolling at our building so that we could add new members to our

group. Overlooking these children and not including them in our activities seemed counter-productive to our efforts, so we stayed in close touch with our administrator and our school secretary. As new students arrived, they received a personal invitation and a letter explaining our group, just as the other members had when we first began meeting. On the other hand, it was frustrating when a few of our members left our school, transferring to new schools for many different reasons. We had to reassure ourselves that at least we knew that we had identified the right students and served them to the best of our ability while they were with us.

We felt that we had come to such a greater understanding about our at-risk students that we shared our research and related information with our entire school staff. We discussed our study, the criteria of our two student categories, services that were available to some of our students, and general information concerning our homeless and highly mobile students. Our primary goal in doing so was to raise awareness and encourage empathy and compassion among the staff members. After our awareness heightened through our participation with the other action research teams, it was often difficult for us to slow down and take baby steps. During this cycle, because of our newfound information and understandings, we were also able to advocate for our homeless and highly mobile students as a special student category to be included in the district's long-term planning. We also continued to advocate for our most needy students in our building, serving as a communication link between the students and community services, social workers, teachers and administrators.

### **Observation and Reflection**

During this cycle, we began to congeal and trust as a group, and our three times per week remained consistent. The students' eager participation and interest in meeting soon relieved our apprehensions that they were missing lunch recess. Ironically, students who were not part of our group began asking if they could accompany a member to Lunch Bunch. We were a bit hesitant to let this happen, not wanting to interfere with our data collection and focus on the original group. We then considered the needs of this group, which included practicing appropriate social

interactions with peers. Knowing the enormous impact that peers can have on each other, we began to view a few “typical” kids joining us as quite an asset. These kids might be able to reinforce cooperation skills and table manners in a way that we could not, so we decided to allow the Lunch Bunch kids invite a friend to our sessions. The two or three weeks that followed brought interesting insights and observations. The guests that joined us indeed displayed leadership qualities and enjoyed the time spent with us in the school library. At one point, it became so popular to bring a guest to Lunch Bunch that just about every member did so and we were scrambling to find places to sit for lunch. We were in awe at the impact that Lunch Bunch seemed to be having on the student body as a whole. Wanting to continue to let the Lunch Bunch kids invite guests, yet keeping crowd control in mind, we decided to ask the kids for a solution. They found it feasible to be able to invite one guest per week and keep Friday as our “family day” for the original Lunch Bunch kids. As a result, it seemed that students throughout the building became aware of our presence, as well as teachers who were interested in the welfare of all the students at Westminster Elementary and not just the ones in their classrooms.

Another observation that we made at this point was the amount of trust that had built up and the sense of community that we felt as a group. The kids were coming to us for assistance with social issues occurring during the school day as well as issues dealing with peer mediation, laundering clothing, and personal hygiene. On average, we were assisting with these types of issues two to three times per week.

Viewed as informed staff members when it came to issues surrounding homeless and highly mobile students and as teachers who were willing to make extra efforts to empower students, we began to bear additional responsibilities with our school. We were pleased to discover that we had an increased awareness among staff members, as measured by conversations happening among adults in order to meet individual students’ needs. In addition, the number of students referred to the “Care and Concern Committee” in our building had increased. We wondered if we were beginning to experience a shift in school-wide awareness and understanding.

## **Third Cycle of Action Research: Examining Results and Outcomes**

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### **Planning and Action**

With the conclusion of our project in sight, we began to discover a wealth of data to examine. We again conducted the twenty-five question student survey with our Lunch Bunch kids to provide us with data that would inform us of the effectiveness of our lunch bunch meetings. Once again, each member of lunch bunch completed the survey and provided us with honest feedback. The older students worked independently, while the younger students relied on our help to read the questions. Our meetings at lunch had ended just after spring break, at the end of March. In all, we met 41 times over a 15-week period.

As our research question had evolved, we also conducted teacher interviews to examine the impact of our group on our school-wide culture. The seven interview questions reflected the three domains of educational practice: access to student services, flexible instructional strategies, and welcoming school culture. Fifteen educators, including our principal, provided input in a one-on-one setting with us.

In addition, our principal and building accountability committee approved and conducted a parent survey that our school is required to conduct every other year. Overall, this survey asks how satisfied parents are with their child's education at our school. With heightened awareness of student input, the committee decided to design a student survey that would mirror the information obtained on the parent survey. Each student in the building completed the ten-question survey in their classroom setting and was encouraged to add any comments that they deemed worthy.

Based on these four data sources we had several ways to measure the effectiveness of our Lunch Bunch group. From the analysis of the student survey given to the lunch bunch members, we discovered key questions and coded them as either indicating a shift in teacher behavior according to student perceptions or a shift in student beliefs. This provided a frame of reference for our successes this year and for future areas for improvement. We found that, in general, the first and second

grade students had positive attitudes about school, even on the first administration on the survey. The older students tended to agree less with statements such as, “I can talk to my teacher about my problems,” and “I feel like I fit in with students in my class.” In addition, we found a positive change in answers to statements such as “Adults in the building know my name,” and “I have friends at school.” Interestingly enough, several students from first through fifth grade indicated on both pre and post surveys that they did not trust other students in our school. This belief generalized among all students in our building. Our school-wide student survey indicated that only 43% of our students agreed with the statement, “I trust the other students at Westminster Elementary”. Thirty-six percent were not sure, while 21% disagreed with the statement.

Of the parent surveys completed at spring student-led conferences, the overwhelming feeling was that parents of our students were satisfied with the educational environment and instruction at Westminster Elementary. Each child who attended their conference and whose parent filled out a survey received a raffle ticket for prizes to encourage participation in the data-collection. Ninety-seven percent of our participating parents expressed that their child enjoyed going to school and felt safe at school. Overall, it seemed that parents were quite satisfied with the curriculum delivery and educational environment at Westminster Elementary School.

With the teacher interview process, we were able to delve a little deeper into the three domains of educational practice and its effect on our building. In analyzing this set of data, we highlighted key questions and tallied common responses. We found that thirteen of the sixteen respondents reported that their awareness or understanding of educational issues surrounding homeless or highly mobile students had indeed changed over the course of the year. Interestingly enough, thirteen people also responded that Lunch Bunch made an impact in our welcoming school culture. When asked how their awareness had changed, ten participants responded that an informal faculty presentation on issues of homeless and highly mobile students was a factor. Seven reported that having students participate in Lunch Bunch was a catalyst in this shift. Ten of the sixteen interviewees reported that because of their awareness, their educational practice had changed. The changes

appeared in a variety of ways: emotional assistance, accommodations for homework, instructional support, and providing physical resources. Our teacher interview, indeed, provided us with a wealth of information.

### **Observation and Reflection**

As we entered this final cycle of our research, we were amazed to observe and reflect on how much our question had evolved since the beginning of our inquiry. We began focused on a particular population within our student body that had begun to affect many other students in the building. This inquiry then led us to question the impact on teachers' perceptions of our school culture. As our question evolved, so did the data that supported it. Studying the cultural impact of homeless and mobile students on our school-wide culture was the beginning, we feel, of a shift towards becoming a collaborative community of learners.

### **Conclusion**

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Our evidence showed that we had raised the awareness of our staff towards the struggles of our homeless and mobile students and the services available for these students. There was an increased sensitivity to the importance of school culture. Teachers understood that we needed to look to the students for answers. The students were beginning to understand that there was value in their opinion and voice. Teachers were learning to explore new methods of instructional flexibility. In response to the heightened awareness, we have experienced a dramatic increase of the number of students referred to our "Care and Concern" process. Finally, with the assistance of our PTA, we purchased new furniture, an aquarium and plants to create a more welcoming environment for our parents in our school lobby.

Our expectation was that as an entire staff, we would continue to pursue the evolution of our school culture. We have discussed continuing "Lunch Bunch" as a school community study time. The creation of a new student-run "Welcoming Committee" now focuses on new students and their families. We also are pursuing funding for an "Enrollment Liaison" position. This person could coordinate all of

our school and community services for our mobile families within our own school. The liaison would have the opportunity to establish strong communication between our at-risk families and the school and administer any pertinent assessments to assure appropriate classroom placements.

As a final point, we have proved, as we hoped, that by establishing a relationship with a group of students that once provided a negative impact on student learning, our Lunch Bunch kids have instigated a positive change in the attitudes and actions of our school community.

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**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 9**

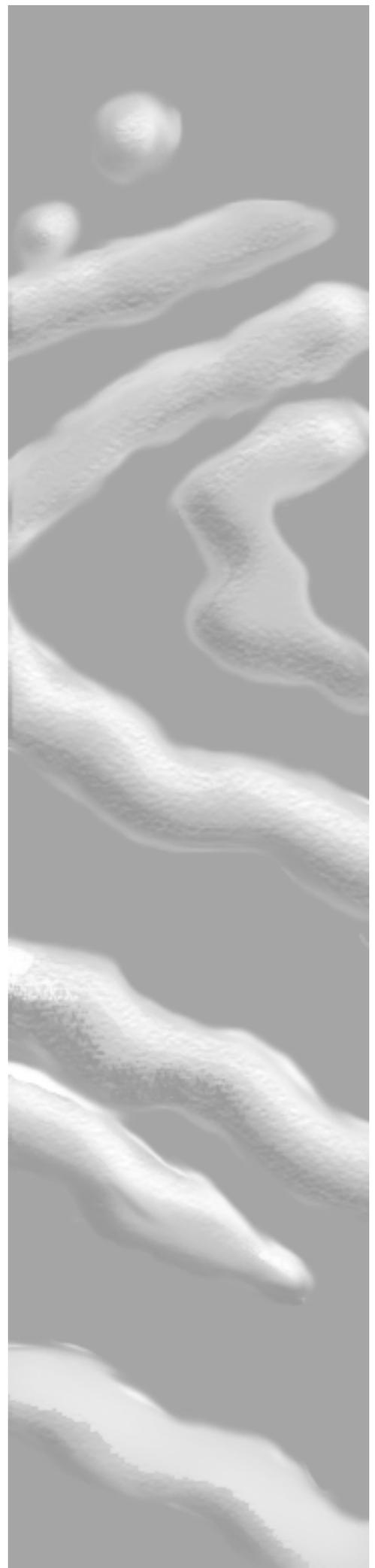
***To What Extent Are We Meeting The Needs  
Of Highly Mobile Students?***

**Jennifer Rahn**

6<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher  
Sheridan Middle School

**Jennifer Skrobela**

6-8 Grade Teacher  
Adams City Middle School



*Discussing the issues that highly mobile students bring to schools with our colleagues seemed to open a floodgate. Each team engaged in a lively discussion and had many questions for us. One group decided to look online for curricula guides for surrounding districts and another teacher asked if she could use the information we provided and create a new student check list for teachers to use in their classrooms! What a great idea!*

## **Background**

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We are two middle school teachers from the Denver metro area. A short background on our experience follows:

### **Jennifer Rahn**

My part of the research was conducted at Sheridan Middle School (SMS), which is in southwest Denver, where I completed my third year of teaching. I taught three 6<sup>th</sup> grade Balanced Literacy and Social Studies classes and had a total of about 44 students. In my three years, I have been involved with many extracurricular activities that allowed me to build a great rapport with students. This project has allowed me to delve into my students' lives to help them feel safe, welcome, and successful.

### **Jennifer Skrobela**

I conducted my portion of our research at Adams City Middle School (ACMS), which is located in Commerce City, Colorado. As the name indicates, Commerce City is an industrial area with neighborhoods entwined within the commercial areas. In general, the students who attend ACMS tend to be from families with lower socioeconomic status, 74% of all students receive free and reduced lunch. Approximately 62% of the students are of Hispanic descent, 33% are Caucasian, and 5% are of other ethnic origin. ACMS consists of six teacher teams, two teams per grade level, which loop with their students during the middle school experience. Over the past five years I have taught predominantly general science

classes, a literacy block each year, and a few math homerooms. The majority of my classes are heterogeneously grouped, encompassing a wide spectrum of learners and abilities.

### **How we got started**

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We believe that one of the most important aspects of being an educator is to meet the needs of all of our students. When we thought about different groups of students and their potential needs, our initial thoughts were of second language learners. Next the focus went to below grade-level readers, followed by gifted students. We realized when we reached the end of our list that neither of us considered the needs of our highly mobile students. Why is this?

In our schools, an urban 6-8 middle school of 700 students and a 6-8 middle school of 400 students from predominately low socioeconomic homes, the student mobility rate is fairly high. We have always recognized that mobility was a definite issue in both our own classrooms as well as for our entire schools, but we never really stopped to think about what special needs these learners might have. More frightening was when we thought back to our teacher prep programs and Masters Degree programs; neither of us could remember ever learning any strategies or “best practices” for highly mobile students. In fact, was this group ever mentioned? Again, our minds asked “why?”

According to the state of Colorado, we both work at “low” performing schools, in other words, schools that do not perform well on the state’s standardized tests. One focus for our schools is to improve our scores on the state assessments. If one of the main objectives as an educator is to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom and consequently increase test scores for our schools, we realized that we had to learn more about highly mobile students. We felt that it was important to incorporate a wide variety of instructional techniques in all of our lessons to help meet the needs of different learners; however, the personal lack of knowledge regarding mobile students left us wondering to what extent we meet their needs.

## Our Research

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Most research indicates a correlation between student mobility and achievement. According to the Colorado Affordable Housing Partnership, stability may be most important in primary grades. Multiple moves can result in the cumulative effect of children missing critical learning opportunities and may cause these students to struggle in later years because they lack basic skills. Although moving once or twice during the public school year may not be harmful, most research shows that high mobility lowers student achievement, particularly when the students are from low-income, less-educated families (Sewell, 1982; Straits, 1987). One study that tracked children from early childhood to young adulthood found that residential mobility reduced the odds of high school graduation even after controlling for a variety of family background variables (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994). Finally, several studies based on the same national database of over 10,000 high school students found that school mobility between the first and eighth grades increased the odds of dropping out of school during high school (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996).

As we continued to read and learn more about mobility we noticed almost all of the research recommended the same practices. It seemed obvious that these were important to note and incorporate into our research. For example:

- to establish a buddy program so all new students have an immediate friend and mentor;
- to treat every day like it's the first day of school (take some time to talk to new students);
- to plan welcome and farewell rituals for students transitioning into or out of school;
- to identify any mobility patterns that exist; and
- to provide training for teachers in schools with highly mobile students.

While researching we also learned that homeless students are usually highly mobile as well. As we began to reflect upon the research pertaining to mobile

students, we started to think about engaging in action research to help us understand and meet the needs of this group of learners.

### **Beginning the Action Research Project: The Reconnaissance**

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Before either of us could plan our first cycle, we had to identify our highly mobile, including homeless, students. We decided to talk to our secretaries to learn any information they knew pertaining to mobility. We also wanted to inquire about our current intake processes for new students. Our secretaries informed us that new students do not start classes on their first day. First they complete the necessary forms and sometimes get a brief tour of the building. They do not actually start school until the following day.

Next, we asked them to retrieve last year's enrollment and withdrawal data. We inquired if they had noticed any trends or patterns in mobility for our schools. Based on their observations, they felt that January was the busiest month for students enrolling in our schools. They also felt that from Thanksgiving through winter break the number of students enrolling slowed down.

After analyzing the data, we confirmed that January did see the most growth, while February experienced the most withdrawals. For example, 135 students enrolled in ACMS during the last year and 102 withdrew. Of the 135 students that entered the school 27 withdrew before the end of the 2002/2003 school year. Removing these 27 students from the enrollment data so they were not counted twice, 210 students were in at least two schools during the 2002/2003 school year. This number accounted for one-third of the students at ACMS.

The final focus of our discussions surrounded the welcoming climate of our buildings. When we asked each secretary if she felt our school was welcoming for new students, the responses were quite similar. "Some clusters do a great job of making new students feel welcome, while other clusters don't do anything at all. It really just depends on which team the new student is placed."

We learned from our meetings with COPAR that every school district by law has to have a homeless liaison, and we found out who ours was and sent them an

email. We were curious to learn how our districts identified homeless students, what types of services our schools provided for homeless students and their families, how many homeless students we had in our schools, and who they were. The liaison for ACMS returned our email and informed us that we have fourteen homeless students in our district. We were also informed to direct any other inquiries to either the Child Advocate or the Attendance Liaison at ACMS. They informed us that we have no homeless students currently at ACMS and neither one could explain how the district identifies homeless students. I knew that we had a few students that were homeless based on the McKinney-Vento Act definition and I was certain other teams had these students as well. I discussed this information with a few of my colleagues; they were just as surprised and disappointed as I was. Through conversation, we identified eight seventh grade students that were currently or had been homeless during this school year.

My former Assistant Principal at ACMS and I set up a meeting with Jill Smith, the program supervisor for an emergency housing shelter located within our school district. Jill described the shelter for us; it contains eight two-bedroom apartments and occupants can stay for thirty days and then apply for an extension. Only families are admitted into the shelter. From January through September of 2003, 135 school aged children resided in the shelter and 75% were middle school aged or younger. According to Jill, the majority of these children were attending our schools. At the conclusion of this meeting, I asked our secretary if she could find out if any students were currently living in the shelter. She searched the records using the address and found three students that were currently living in the shelter. That was eleven newly identified homeless students; sure we don't have any homeless students in our school! Sharing this information with the appropriate people in the school could really help these students so why isn't there any communication?

At SMS, our homeless liaison was new to the district this school year. She didn't have a lot of numbers to back up historical figures; however, I was aware of her doing amazing things with our homeless and mobile populations, from translating to clothing drives. I knew those families were in real "helping hands."

Now that we had finished identifying the highly mobile learners in our schools and researching best practices relating to this group, we were ready to devise an action research plan.

## **The First Cycle: Welcoming Climate Baseline Data**

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### **Planning and Action**

Based on our reconnaissance, we decided that our first step was to understand new students' perceptions of the school's welcoming climate. To accumulate baseline data regarding the welcoming culture of our schools, we designed two surveys for all new students to complete. The initial survey asked questions about the student's former school and life. We administered this survey in a slightly different manner, at one school the survey was included in the registration materials by the secretary so new students could complete it while their parents were completing the registration materials, and at the other school the survey was administered by a teacher. The initial survey had a multi-fold purpose; first, it provided teachers with some personal information about new students and second, it provided information regarding homeless status. For research purposes we focused on three questions. The survey asked:

- Overall, how much did you like your last school?
- Where do you live? and
- Who lives with you?

A follow-up survey was given to new students four to six weeks after their arrival at ACMS or SMS. It focused on the welcoming climate of our schools. Again the administering of the survey was different at each school. The survey was given by a teacher at one school and by the media center specialist at the second school. Students had to indicate what they liked and didn't like about our schools so far, how they felt about their teachers, how welcome they felt so far, and who (if anyone) made them feel welcome at our schools. Although all of the questions related to the welcoming culture of our schools, we choose four questions for research purposes:

1. Overall, how much do you like ACMS/SMS so far?
2. Are there any teachers/adults at ACMS/SMS that you like so far?
3. Overall, how welcome has everyone at ACMS/SMS made you feel?
4. Who are some of the people that have made you feel welcome?

### **Observation and Reflection**

The baseline results were extremely consistent when comparing answers between questions and schools. Students that loved their old schools viewed ACMS/SMS poorly, while students that did not like their old schools had a positive view of ACMS/SMS. We were surprised that 42 – 43% of the students surveyed reported that they liked ACMS/SMS, while an additional 25% claimed to love ACMS and 14% loved SMS. Only 7 - 8% did not like our schools. Based on these numbers between 57 - 67% of new students have a positive view of our schools. Impressively, 100% of the students reported that there was at least one adult that they liked in our buildings. When asked how welcome everyone has made you feel, 0 - 8% reported that nobody wanted them in our schools, 14 - 25% believed that some people wanted them to be around, 50 - 72% claimed that most people made them feel welcome, and 14 -17% believed that everyone wanted them to be at our schools.

Immediately, we also noticed a discrepancy. How can every new student like at least one adult in the building but up to 8% of new students feel that no one wants them to attend our school? We talked to the individual who comprised this 8% and we learned that he had been thinking only about his peers while he was answering the question. Apparently he had an “issue” with some of his peers earlier in the day that influenced his response. When questioned again he changed his answer to “some people want me here.” Once again 67% of the students surveyed feel welcome at ACMS, while an astounding 86% feel welcome at SMS! When we analyzed the data relating to who made a student feel welcome the results were varied, the top two welcoming groups were other students and teachers. The media-center specialist and the two secretaries followed these groups closely. Numerous members of the administrative and student advocate teams also received votes.

Overall, this data suggests that over two-thirds of new students felt welcome at our schools. This also meant that almost one-third of new students did not feel welcome. What can we do to make these kids feel comfortable in our schools?

## **Second Cycle: Determining the Needs of Our Highly Mobile Learners**

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### **Planning and Action**

Following the completion of the identification process, it was now time to complete three sets of interviews to determine the needs of our highly mobile students. Although all new students completed the surveys, we decided to narrow our research focus to only our students. We interviewed 23 students between our two schools on two separate occasions. The first interview consisted of three basic questions to provide us with more specific baseline information, while the second interview focused on understanding the student's needs. Our second set of interview questions was geared towards our faculties. The purpose of these questions was to determine if our colleagues understood what mobility means, if they believed we had a mobile student population, and finally what types of strategies they used to welcome and assess new students in their respective classrooms. The final set of interview questions was designed for the parents of our previously identified highly mobile students. The purpose of these interviews was for us to achieve a better understanding in regards to what parents believed their children's needs to be upon entering a new school. We provided a take home questionnaire for each student to bring to his/her parents; unfortunately, the response to date has been extremely low.

### **Observation and Reflection**

From the first student interview, we were able to ascertain that 66% of our new students were unhappy about changing schools and 69% were in two or three different schools since entering middle school. In our opinion, the second interview really helped us to assess the needs of our highly mobile students. When we asked,

“What makes you feel welcome in a new classroom?”, the overwhelming response (94%) was the teacher introducing himself or herself and then introducing the new student to either the entire class or a portion of the class so they would have someone to talk to and get help from. In response to the question, “What can a teacher do to help you feel more welcome in school?” 88% of the students reported that making introductions and talking to a new student was the key to feeling welcome. At SMS, one student stated, “I really like it when my teachers talk to me and tell me about themselves. I can get to know them as people. They become people I can really like.” The majority of the students questioned indicated that they would rather “blend in” than “stick out” when they were new students. Finally, 60% reported that participation in an after school club or sport motivated them to do well in school. We then decided to ask the students one more question that was not included on the interview sheet. What is the one thing that either made the transition into our school easier or could have made the transition better? The students that were assigned a buddy for the day claimed this really helped them understand the rules and expectations in the different classes. They also informed us, “It was nice to have someone they could talk to.” The students that were not assigned a buddy believe that a buddy could have helped them during their first few days.

The staff interviews indicated that our staff understands the term mobility as it related to students and schools. The majority of the faculty recognized they were working with a mobile student population. Fifty eight percent believed they had encountered numerous instances of mobility and 29% reported having experienced some mobile students in their classes. When asked about welcoming strategies, 48% reported pairing a new student with a partner or buddy, 52% stressed the importance of introductions both of themselves and the new student, and 32% provided individual attention towards a new student on the first day. The question pertaining to initial assessment strategies was extremely intriguing. The majority of the staff reported performing either formal or informal reading assessments during our literacy block, but only two teachers reported assessing a new student’s content knowledge.

From the few responses we received, parents reported that a school's history and reputation played a role in both choosing a new school and feeling comfortable with that choice. When asked what types of factors motivated your child to succeed academically and socially, the parent response indicated inclusion by both teachers and peers into the school setting. Finally, when asked, "What can a teacher and/or school do to make you and your child feel more welcome?" the parent response was to increase communication. One parent stressed the importance of "teachers listening to a student's problems" while a second parent indicated, "talking to new students and their families will help make them feel at home."

All three surveys appeared to emphasize the same results; personal communication by a teacher towards a new student really helped a child feel welcome in school. The surveys also stressed the importance of introducing new students to at least a few of their peers so the student felt comfortable asking for help and had a few new friends to make them feel welcome.

### **Third Cycle: Increasing the School's Awareness About the Needs of Our Highly Mobile Students**

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#### **Planning and Action**

To help address the needs of our highly mobile learners, we decided to summarize and present our research findings to our colleagues during our team meetings. The presentation included the definition of a homeless student and some statistics about these students, the correlation between mobility and achievement, and the results of our various interviews with our students, parents, and staff. We concluded our presentation by asking for support surrounding our idea to create a "welcome team" for our schools. The "welcome team" would consist of student volunteers that received training in how to welcome new students to our buildings. Our colleagues agreed to discuss this idea with their students and to provide us with a list of possible volunteers as soon as possible.

## **Observation and Reflection**

Discussing the issues that highly mobile students bring to schools with our colleagues seemed to open a floodgate. Each team engaged in a lively discussion and had many questions for us. One group decided to look online for curricula guides for surrounding districts and another teacher asked if she could use the information we provided and create a new student checklist for teachers to use in their classrooms! What a great idea! We discussed the creation of a “welcome team” and everyone was supportive of the idea. The “welcome team” reminded many of my colleagues about the transition class our principal had talked about creating for new students. “What happened to that class?” Although none of us knew the answer, we agreed that creating a transition class for new students coupled with the “welcome team” and a list of practical strategies/ideas for new students in your classroom would really address the needs of these students and consequently improve the welcoming climate in our building.

## **Epilogue**

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As the school year ended, we realized we could continue to collect data during the next year. We are curious to learn if the teacher checklist and the “welcome team” positively affect the welcoming climate of our schools. We are also curious to look at the MAPS and CSAP scores of our highly mobile learners to see if there is a correlation between their scores and both the recognition of their individual needs and the school’s welcoming culture.

On a personal level, this research has made a great impact on our classrooms. Every time a new student is admitted to our class, we make sure to introduce ourselves and have a quiet, personal chat with the student. We ask every student if they would like us to introduce them to their classmates and we always assign a few buddies to explain the class procedures. Due to this research, we make a point of checking with each new student numerous times during the class and we make sure

to say goodbye to the student on their way out the door. We are both much more prepared for the mobile students entering our classrooms!

This research project also afforded us an opportunity to truly get to learn about our mobile students' lives. We often converse with our students outside of the classroom, but we noticed a difference when we asked to talk with the students in regards to this project. Our students seemed to feel empowered when we explained why we were interviewing them. They were extremely willing to participate and felt that our conversations and, more importantly, their answers were valuable. Consequently, these kids now feel able to talk to us about anything and we feel honored because of this! Due to this fact alone we feel that we currently do a much better job meeting the needs of our highly mobile learners!

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**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 10**

***In the Face of Standardization: The Challenges  
and Realities of Building a Program that  
Attracts and Stabilizes Highly Mobile Students***

**Sabrina Hodges**

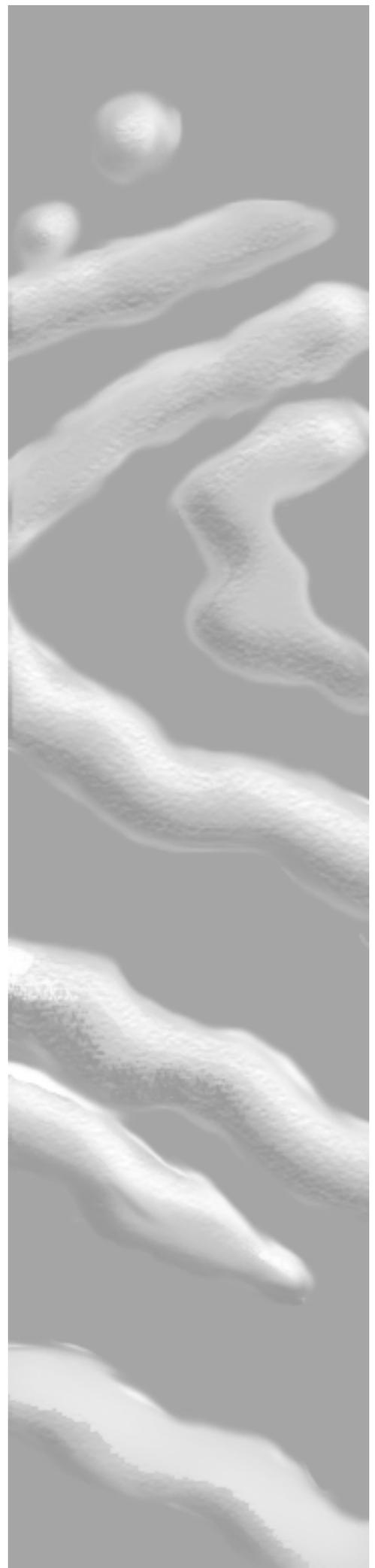
**Social Worker**

**PS1 Charter School**

**Karla Haas-Moskowitz**

**Principal**

**PS1 Charter School**



*P.S.1 witnesses cases where students, who live traumatized lives and frequently run from academic or social-emotional challenges, leave the school. This is particularly heartbreaking because some of these students are finding success for the first time in their lives at our school, but they leave despite this success (or because of it through habitual self-sabotage) because we surmise that it is more comfortable to leave than to confront the discomfort and work to remedy the situation.*

## **The Nature and Politics of Charter Schools**

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In Colorado, a legislative act authorizes public schools to respond to the concerns and educational needs of underserved populations through charter schools. However, individual charter schools hold different interpretations of the definition of underserved or at-risk populations. Some public charter schools define “underserved” as gifted and talented students, others focus on “at-risk” youth—those who struggle in school for a variety of reasons and are “at-risk” of dropping out of school, still others target students who are identified with special needs or have Individual Educational Programs or I.E.P.s. In addition, some charter schools express their responsiveness by developing curriculum and programming to address the unique needs of students based on race, culture, and socio-economics as Afro-centric and Latino schools, schools for the homeless, and schools for gay and lesbian youth.

The political underpinnings of the charter movement are an important consideration. The curriculum and assessment strategies that develop within any particular charter school can be representative of that charter school community’s expressed belief system and the related prescribed educational methodology. In other words, a charter school can be the manifestation of a specific ad hoc movement, where the school is a vehicle to express a particular educational agenda. The school can also hold a specific intention to align with the expressed, or potentially unexpressed, need or political agenda of a particular identified population that desires a unique educational intervention. Because of this dynamic, one can find everything from schools that identify with Core Knowledge and Back to Basics agendas, Experiential/Constructivist approaches, Montessori and Waldorf

philosophies, Expeditionary Learning, Science and Technology-Based curricula, and curricular designs that support the education of ADHD children. These schools are as diverse as the populations served, making the charter school world a controversial one as well as a dynamic and ever-evolving one.

### **Background: P.S.1 and its Evolution**

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P.S.1 is the oldest charter school in Denver. It is presently in its ninth year of operation. It began with a student population of 60 fifth through 12th grade students; it currently has an enrollment of over 350 students, ages 11-21. I believe that the school responded to the needs of students whose personal, social, and academic needs not met at their neighborhood schools as well as to serve as a model for school reform.

P.S.1 offers an alternative to students who desire a more active and engaging learning environment, where they can participate in learning outside the walls of a classroom to construct the knowledge that they would need to grow personally and intellectually as well as to be able to effectively serve their community. In its beginning stages of development, P.S.1 drew a predominantly white, middle class population. It also enrolled and served a disproportionate number of students with special needs including several who had the type of severe need that might place them in a special program or classroom in another school (autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury).

P.S.1 still serves a diverse population with a 25% of the students identified with I.E.P.s, serving between 75-90 students on the school's caseload. The national average is 10%. Thirteen percent of these students have emotional disabilities; this is very high proportionately, as 8% of students with I.E.P.s nationally are emotionally disabled (E.D.) and 18% of the school's special education population have an E.D. designation. P.S.1's diversity, in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economics, and other factors has substantially increased and the school has become a "minority-majority" school with no one race significantly more predominant. The school serves an average of 35% Anglos, 34% Latinos, 25% African Americans, 1%

Asian or Pacific Islander and 5% American Indians, as well as a critical number of students who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, and transgender students who are homeless, and those referred through social service agencies. In past years, free and reduced lunch statistics have ranged from 32%-45%. We find this statistic to be unreliable, as many families are reluctant to submit the qualifying paperwork. In addition, the numbers are misleading because we are not a neighborhood school and our demographics do not represent a specific residential area within Denver. We draw from all over the metro area from more affluent urban and suburban neighborhoods to areas that represent the working poor or impoverished citizens.

P.S.1's stated vision is to *be a community of compassionate and contributing members who are informed and aware, healthy and happy and have a passion for life-long learning*. The school's mission is to use our city as a classroom in order to reinforce qualities within the learner that will help them be more capable to thrive and to contribute within a diverse world. We hope to accomplish this simultaneously with our strengthening of the caliber of our urban core. In other words, we want our students to be good people, well-informed citizens, collaborative, cooperative, creative, and able to contribute to and improve their community, the City and County of Denver. The intent is to prepare students through literacy and character development, in and out of the classroom, locally and globally, collectively, and individually.

In has been a relatively rapid evolution at P.S.1 from a small school of primarily white middle class families seeking an experiential setting to a school community serving over 350 diverse students. Our population is getting older. The school used to serve 5th through 12th grade, primarily 9 to 10 year olds to 17 year olds. Now, we see a reduction of incoming middle school students, elimination of the fifth grade, and an actual decrease in the numbers of sixth and seventh graders. The majority of our incoming middle school students are now 8th grade students. Many of these children are lacking in literacy, credits, and social skills. A growing number of these students have been expelled, or at least been asked to leave their previous school. The vast majority of our students are now high school age, with an

increasing number being 16 years of age and older who are lacking in academic credit and need to “catch up” significantly to be able to graduate before they turn 21.

## Assumptions

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I entered as principal of P.S.1 Charter School in 1999, with almost a quarter of a century of experiences in classrooms serving preschool through university-aged students. I worked within and coordinated programs that served diverse populations including those identified with multiple handicaps or whose native language was not English. I also worked with students who were at-risk of dropping out of school or who removed from their previous educational programs through negotiation and/or formal suspension and expulsion. As teacher and administrator, I view the purpose of public schooling as a political one; it is a forum and process to create and nurture freedom through literacy development and dialogue. I saw the mission of public schools as the instrument of social change as well as the vehicle to *all* students.

As a witness to P.S.1’s significant demographic shift, I embraced it as an opportunity. I believed that it better serves our school to use our vision and mission to guide our instructional methodology, rather than influence our student selection. In the past, P.S.1 through a formal application process and intentional marketing campaign strove to represent itself as a place where experiential learners could show their self-direction through project-based learning. Instead, I hoped to represent our school to the community as a public educational organization that *uses* experiential learning and *teaches* self-direction to *all* students, no matter how diverse, unempowered, marginalized, or hard-to-serve. As a result, as a school of choice, it was not surprising that we attracted a growing number of families who are in search of an alternative. Sometimes they came to us through an empowered and informed choice; other times, more frequently, they came to us out of desperation, seeking any place that would give the student another chance at hope for an education that worked. These latter cases, by admission, were seeking a setting that was safe, flexible, individualized, and responsive to the needs of unique learners such as themselves. We, therefore, enrolled students who exhibited behaviors and expressed

needs that may make them “hard to serve” as well as “underserved”. Rather than discourage the enrollment of these populations of students, or “weed” out those who may not be able to make it in an experiential, self-directed, and project-based setting, I believed it was ethical, as well as reality-based, to embrace the opportunity to serve these students. This type of education is liberating to the students, as well as to the community where the student resides.

We stand by our unique school vision, mission, and educational practice as the best and most appropriate for *all* students primarily due to our interpretation of a public school mandate and commitment to what we believe is right. This also expresses our ethical stance as well as our accountability to the laws of our land that protect young people from educational discrimination. Our approach, however, also invites the challenging reality that we, by the nature of our unique existence, attract, perhaps with intention, extremely hard-to-serve students due to their distinctive qualities and circumstances that drew them to the school in the first place. These qualities include lack of academic credit (some come with no credit at all, even though they approach adulthood), documentation of turbulent histories of struggle with adults and peers, records that reflect poor school attendance (i.e. significant gaps in attendance, truancy, evidence of social promotion rather than movement based on skill development). In addition, other factors include police records (misdemeanor to felony), drug and alcohol involvement, evidence of unique learning style, lack of literacy development, low-self esteem, clinical depression, trauma, mental illness, identifiable disabilities (learning, cognitive, emotional, physical), low socio-economic status, and homelessness. All of these factors contribute to another characteristic of our population: high mobility or transience.

P.S.1 is a school of choice. We are, therefore, not surprised when we are “chosen” for a variety of reasons. Through Open House enrollment sessions and other means (pamphlets, mailings, web site development), the school hopes to educate and support the community of interested families to make a well-informed choice. Because we already have the propensity to enroll highly mobile students, we do not want to increase the chances of families enrolling and then leaving dissatisfied because P.S.1 did not turn out to be the school they imagined.

It is important to note, that P.S.1 has grown in popularity, especially over the last four years, as a school of choice and a school of referral. Students and their families choose P.S.1 because they are looking for qualities more representative of their preference for an educational setting. These include a smaller school, a more dynamic school, and a more individualized and compassionate setting. Also, they seek a safer school, a more challenging and academically rigorous school, a more individualized and supportive school, a school closer to their home, a school where the student will be happier, a school that will be more inclusive of parents, a more flexible and forgiving setting, and overall a fresh start for the students. Students receive referrals to P.S.1 from counselors, therapists, community advocates, school administrators, probation officers, mentors, and advocacy agencies for specific populations (i.e. American Indian Agencies, Urban League, I Have a Dream Foundation, churches). Some students come to the school because their friends come to the school. Some come to the school because they have faced expulsion; the district refers some students to P.S.1 as an alternative to the district's expulsion school.

### **Observations of Mobility at P.S.1**

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As we examined the population dynamics and demographics of P.S.1, mobility became a critical issue to study and understand. Students with a history of high mobility were choosing P.S.1, and these students, at times, inevitably chose to leave P.S.1. Our school, therefore, was facing the challenge of enrolling and serving students who were highly mobile and behaved as such. We could assume that the presence of high mobility in some students' lives is a contributing factor and/or a product of their struggle in school. In addition, despite P.S.1's extensive interventions and comprehensive services, some students exit P.S.1 in the middle or at the end of the school year in search for something better. Anecdotally, we observed that some families had a history of short stays at the schools that their child attended, including ours. We labeled these families as "school shoppers", people who found comfort, safety, and accountability by frequently moving to new school

sites, in search of the perfect fit, or simply in response to a situation that arose where it felt better to leave the school than to try to change or mediate the situation. P.S.1 also witnessed cases where students, who live traumatized lives and frequently run from academic or social-emotional challenges, left the school. This was particularly heartbreaking because some of these students were finding success for the first time in their lives at our school, but they left despite this success (or because of it through habitual self-sabotage) because, we surmised, it was more comfortable to leave than to confront the discomfort and work to remedy the situation.

Within our community, family dynamics affected mobility in an increasing rate. In many cases, families' highly mobile lives as citizens translated to high mobility for their children at school. Students whose parents divorced during their tenure at the school sometimes moved to a new location and transferred to a school closer to the custodial parent. Some students' parents were incarcerated or deceased and extended family members were now the primary caregivers, including grandparents, aunts or uncles, and older siblings. A number of students lived temporarily in alternative housing such as crisis centers, detention facilities, foster care, residential childcare facilities, or emergency shelters. These situations significantly affected whether the student remained at P.S.1.

Socio-economics played a role in the mobility rate of our school. As the effects of the recent recession became more widespread, some families chose to relocate to find work and pulled their child from the school. There were times when they returned to the school the following year, usually after school began, to reenroll when the job search did not result in permanent satisfactory employment and the family returned "home". Students and their families who were or had become homeless often ended up leading transient lives. They moved from motel to motel or in and out of different homes belonging to a variety of relatives and friends. Some lived in cars or shelters. Some older students lived with the families of boy and girlfriends. These circumstances created disruption to the schooling of the children involved. We also recognized that increased trauma and transience in the students' personal lives encouraged stability in their education, as the families saw school as the only safe and consistent influence in the children's lives. In some cases, as the

student's life outside of school filled with inconsistencies and disruptions, his or her life at school was routine and predictable.

### **P.S.1 and COPAR**

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It was advantageous timing that P.S.1 was included in a statewide study to consider mobility on a quantitative and qualitative level. In order to continue to develop responsive programming and effective interventions for students, as well as to address accountability issues around academic achievement, attendance, and continuation/graduation, it became critical that we evaluate our community with greater depth and breadth. The current mandated measurement of student and school progress centers on the doctrines of No Child Left Behind, including the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). This standardized approach uses a criteria and methodology that does not consider the unique demographics and educational philosophy of our school (or any school, for that matter). Historically, the P.S.1 staff has been able to describe the nature of our community intuitively, viscerally, and anecdotally with some reliance on a growing database of quantifiable statistics. With standardized assessment becoming the government's primary approach to evaluate and communicate about schools, we needed to be able to consider alternative indicators that better describe our school's population and evaluate progress in a way to measure our success proactively and authentically. NCLB legislation leaves little room for the qualitative, the narrative, or the "out of the box" thinking needed for school reform. NCLB's limited and narrow-minded quantitative analysis has the great potential to misrepresent and miscommunicate about a student and a specific school, especially one as unique and diverse as P.S.1. It would be to our advantage to develop a program of assessment that will better represent the nature and progress of our community and of our programming. It would also be interesting to see if the correlations we identify and assumptions we develop intuitively, philosophically, and experientially survive the scrutiny of more data-driven processes.

## Data Collection: the Challenge and Process

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Since its inception, P.S.1 has recognized that its unique scheduling, assessment, and communication needs fall outside the parameters of SASI, the networked database for student information in the district. A teacher at the school, Eric Messerli, who is now the assistant principal, developed and maintained a unique database using FileMaker Pro that is flexible enough to manage and communicate information on each student in a very individualized manner as well as to support systems and schedules very unique to our project-based school. Eventually, we saw the need to fit ourselves into SASI for most data management, but our FileMaker database works the best, with SASI support, to begin compiling, analyzing, sorting, and communicating our data about our students.

We used the strength and core of our school, relationships and advisement, as the vehicle to gather the data. We created a section on our database with different “buttons” that identified areas of information we were hoping to gather. We asked that advisors conduct personal interviews with their 16-18 advisees and their families using a written guide to assist them in asking the questions and utilizing buttons with drop down menus for data entry. For example, we asked for the number of schools that the student attended in the last three years prior to enrolling in P.S.1, the relationship to the primary caregiver, the status of housing (mobile, foster, detention, live with person who is not a relative), attitude about school, and the reason for choosing P.S.1. In addition we collected the following data: behavioral history (i.e. suspensions, expulsions, court involvement), attendance history, special education data, whether or not the student attended preschool, mental or physical health issues, history of abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional), social service involvement, drug or alcohol use in self or family, and if the student is a parent him or herself. We also compiled some basic updated demographic information around age, sex, grade, number of siblings, current address (number of times moved in the last three years), phone, and address.

We provided ongoing support and training for the advisors to use the questionnaire guide and database to collect information. The advisor asked clarifying

questions and relied on their relationships with their advisees and families to make sure to collect reliable information. The interview process itself allowed for increased relationship building between advisors and students as well as introduced the possibility of creating class-wide curriculum around this data collection project. For example, the advisor may choose to discuss with the entire class some of the interesting dynamics around changing schools, housing situations, or life with grandmother, etc. Of course, the advisor would have to maintain an adequate level of safety, appropriateness, and confidentiality around discussing these issues, but bringing up commonalities and differences that exist with different students' situations can be part of a strong community-building approach to education.

### **Stability and Achievement: Portraits of Success through the Lens of a Social Worker**

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The mission of school social work in Denver Public Schools is “providing diverse, culturally competent support services to schools, students, parents and communities. These services seek to assure all students are emotionally and mentally fit, safe, secure, drug free in their educational settings, and attending regularly.” At P.S.1, we manifest this mission with as much authenticity and grace as our limited resources allow us to muster. Student advisors, special education teachers, and even administrative assistants employ pseudo social work approaches to meet the needs of our increasingly challenging population. We have a district social worker one and a half days a week to gate keep social/emotional assessments for special education. This worker does not engage in clinical settings with students, threat assessments, family referrals, or crisis interventions. P.S.1’s social work services exist via a teacher turned MSW graduate intern. Through this position, I have developed an intimate knowledge of our community. Although we continuously grapple with limited resources, we magically serve the bewildered students that find their way through our doors. Often, it is through our thoughtful programming and services that we witness students’ success unfurl.

Denisha (not her real name) was an African-American student who attended our satellite program for transient students, P.S.1 @ The Spot. Upon beginning the 2003/2004 school year it was obvious that her often-unpleasant attitude reflected her painful experiences in traditional schools. Her mobility was high due mostly to transitional housing and guardianship. Struggling with stability, she was unable to build relationships in traditional schools, and due to her “attitude”, she often found herself in trouble. Actually, by the end of her junior year in high school, Denisha had found herself in four different high schools. Expelled from a public alternative school, she had mixed feelings about her lack of academic success. This, coupled with her transient lifestyle and being responsible for getting her five nieces and nephews to elementary school each morning, finally led her to drop out of high school. After abandoning public education for over six months, a friend recommended our school, and after enrolling in P.S.1, Denisha had minimal problems recommitting herself to her education. Aside from the occasional tardy and smacking on the teeth, Denisha built relationships nicely. She has been the recipient of several P.S.1 Vision Awards, a participant in Denver’s Career Education Center (CEC) Child Care course, and engaged in a semester long internship at a local day care center. She found joy in caring for developing children, and will be graduating next winter. Her resiliency has truly been remarkable. When reflecting on her recent success, Denisha attributes it to the relationships she has built at P.S.1. She has benefited from the individualization of our program and ample support. She believes that the one-on-one help and career guidance she has received is her most noteworthy experience at P.S.1.

The P.S.1 career of Juan (not his real name) was another example of our stabilizing force. Juan came to P.S.1 in the fall of 2003. He has ADHD, a severe emotional disability, and is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. His high rate of school mobility was due to his behavioral problems and family homelessness. At the beginning of the school year, he was a regular “visitor” to our assistant principal’s office. Witnessing Juan’s uncontrollable and often frightening behavior from the second floor balcony of our school’s atrium was a daily treat for the social worker. The scenario goes like this: Juan busts open the door to his classroom. Juan looks

back into the class and exclaims multiple profanities. Juan slams the classroom door. Juan runs across the school's commons. Math teacher removes herself from the classroom and runs after Juan. Math teacher chases Juan all the way to assistant principal Eric Messerli's office. To say the least, the seventh grader's classroom behaviors have been extremely challenging for teachers at our school. In a traditional school, these behaviors may result in confinement in a self-contained classroom or a more restrictive environment. For a student with an acute emotional disability such as Juan, one year in a residential treatment facility may cost anywhere from \$8,760 to \$17,560 and for one year in a day treatment center, the Department of Human Services may bill up to \$14,000. Juan's infractions included provoking peers, exclaiming sexually inappropriate statements and throwing projectiles across the room. It was ugly. As frustrating as it was for professionals, it was triple that for him. Friendships were nonexistent. Through the P.S.1 network approach, including the IEP team, Juan's family and community clinician, his treatment plan changed dramatically. His medication changed, a strict behavior plan began at school, and he received ongoing counseling in house. Juan set goals regarding his impulsivity and social skills. It has been rewarding to watch this young man tackle his disabilities and employ techniques to have more success in the classroom. Within four months, there was a dramatic shift in his behaviors; his behavior plan having become his closest, most intimate friend. The consequence he loathed the most? Being sent home. Simply, Juan now felt safe and nurtured in our community, and had taken on his issues in order to stay. Project and expeditionary learning fit him well. Of course, he had his struggles. However, his recent success has been breathtaking for his family and our community. At a recent staff gathering, a social studies teacher made the following comment regarding Juan: "He is not the same creature that came to us in September!" On the last day of the 2003/2004 school year, at our annual appreciation celebration, Juan will receive the "Renewed Spirit," award for his academic and personal growth.

Because of an augmentation in district referrals, our openness to affording expelled students a second chance, and our blossoming programs (Late Shift and P.S.1 @ The Spot) that serve highly mobile students, we are serving more and

younger people with significant needs. Reflecting on these two success stories allows me to communicate the true beauty of P.S.1. Perhaps Denisha and Juan were just simply ready. Perhaps they would have changed their lives around at any school. However, the voices of our students and their families propel me to deduce that the awesome success students experience in our care is very much indicative of the materials crafted into our fabric. This includes our school vision, inclusive programmatic opportunities, impeccable leadership and an admirable staff, individualizing experiences and fostering the importance of human relationship with truth, courage, and trust. However, for every student who has success, I fear there is one who flies below the radar. I grieve for the missed students, due to collective exhaustion not intention. This is the reality of our school, with a restricted budget, and serving marginalized students, including severe mental pathologies, generational poverty, familial gang-involvement, ongoing trauma, learning disabilities and discrimination. However, coupled with the smorgasbord of “issues” professionals at P.S.1 are faced with, a plethora of attributes sustain our student population: culture, critical thinking, a willingness to be venerable and open-minded, the beauty of friendships between Eastside Crips and Cheesman Park “gay” boys that make P.S.1 an enchanting school for a social worker!

## **Conclusions and Proposed Action: Overall Demographic Analysis**

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It took approximately half a year to develop the “buttons” and collect the data. Out of our 350 enrolled students, were we able to interview and log data for 205 students. In mid-May of the 2003-04 school year, the school was able to determine that four percent of our population are unaccompanied youth; 7% students live with caregivers other than biological parents (i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or foster parents); three are living in shelters or crisis centers; and 49% live in single-parent homes. Thirty-three percent of our students experienced two or more homes in the last two years; 22% reported historical attendance issues; 10% are on behavior plans; 13% experienced expulsion from other schools; 6% were

involved in child protection services; 11% faced misdemeanor charges; 4% faced felony charges; and 13% faced juvenile diversion.

Eighteen percent of our students attended three or more schools in the last 2 years (not including natural transitions from feeder schools). We identified them as *highly mobile*. Of our highly mobile population, 20% came to P.S.1 because they were dissatisfied with their last school, 29% came due to disciplinary action. Twenty two percent sought an alternative school setting and moved by choice. Of these, 20% experienced homelessness in the last two years. Twenty three percent lived in three or more homes in the last two years. Twenty percent identified with special needs, 77% reported struggling academically at previous schools and found support at P.S.1, 71% experienced court involvement, 26% lived below the poverty line, and 26% had irregular attendance with 14% facing truancy hearings. Twenty-three percent of the highly mobile population experience mental health and/or emotional issues and 11% were currently on a behavior plan. Thirty-four percent of these students experienced suspension from the school because of misconduct. Only 29% were involved in any extracurricular activity.

Of the highly mobile population, P.S.1 has stabilized 63% of these students as evidenced by their consistent yearlong attendance at the school. These students received a variety of interventions including special education services, opportunities to enroll in the school's special safety net programs, flexible scheduling, and accommodation.

In addition, our school registrar ran monthly reports analyzing how many students entered and exited the school on a monthly basis; this data compared to the previous year.

When students were interviewed about what they valued at P.S.1 that did not exist in their previous schools, students overwhelmingly reported that P.S.1 offered opportunities to develop strong relationships with teachers, an advisement program, support to work at their own pace, and hands-on learning experiences. In addition, they could participate in internships, work-study, travel and community projects, and, perhaps most importantly, students found at least one caring adult in the community. Overall, teachers cared about them at P.S.1 and that is why they stayed.

Students identified outside needs that they wished the school would address as employment opportunities and transportation. Our report showed that students identified a variety of factors as obstacles to learning including personal life challenges and adversity, job demands, drug use, influence of peer groups, family and life instability, and struggles to attend regularly. When asked what services families were accessing in the community, families identified few. Those mentioned included were Urban Peak (support services for unaccompanied youth), Youth Opportunities (city-sponsored agency that offers coaching and mentorship), Steps Ahead (program through Colorado Youth at Risk that offers mentorship and training), Rainbow Alley (local non-profit supporting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Youth), and The Spot (a local drop-in center).

Our demographic research revealed what we already suspected. P.S.1 is not a poor school. Twenty percent of our overall population self-disclosed an income of below \$15,000 per year. Twenty-three percent made between \$16,000 and \$30,000; 39% recorded incomes of \$31,000 and \$85,000. The most influential factors in our school community related more to historic academic struggle, irregular attendance and/or truancy, mental health and emotional disabilities, the staggering number of students identified with special needs, and history of mobility. When we considered our population, several cases came to mind where a student came to P.S.1 with challenging behavioral issues, a history of high mobility with regards to school and/or home, and an income of well above poverty. Therefore, in other words, some students come to P.S.1 with many challenges that impede academic, personal, and social success at the school, but with a family that may be stable and affluent on paper. Although poverty clearly influences the student's potential for success at P.S.1, it is clearly not the determining factor to influence individual and community wide achievement and culture.

### **Proposed Action Based on Demographic Analysis**

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P.S.1's statistical analysis offered little new information to our community. Rather, it affirmed many of the dynamics that we suspected:

- P.S.1 has a significant number of students identified with special needs, of these a disproportionate amount face emotional and behavior challenges
- As a small school, our highly mobile numbers have a significant impact on our school's culture. Students with highly mobile histories show great struggle in a variety of areas from academic achievement, attendance, mental health, and ability to access services and become involved in extracurricular activities.
- Our students desire more assistance with job development and transportation.

There was some surprising information. We did not predict that the number of students who lived in homes with guardians other than biological parents was much less than we anticipated, but school staff agreed that these families, although statistically low in number, consume a disproportionate amount of the school's time and resources.

Regarding the future, P.S.1 will use these findings to create and maintain programming. We will continue to build capacity regarding special education, including staff development and training. We will work to expand our inclusion staff by one to two in the coming years. We are in the planning process of creating a special self-contained classroom to serve our students with severe emotional disabilities. This program will also interface with other transition and more vocationally oriented programs in the building that support students who struggle emotionally. In addition, we are connecting with some local and national university programs that may help us create an onsite and ongoing cohort that will train and certify our staff in special education.

We will increase programming and encouragement around after school and summer programs to increase support and intervention for the populations in our school who would benefit, but are currently not accessing, these "extracurricular" programs.

Our school's young adult population is growing significantly and so is the need for P.S.1 to increase transitional services, vocational preparation, employment coaching and job development, in addition to all post-secondary programming. We

are currently increasing our college counselor position from half time to full time to assist our upper-class men and women in their preparation for college and work. We are collaborating with the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development to create an onsite computer lab and employment counseling services to support our youth 14 and older.

P.S.1 is fulfilling its charter's commitment by reaching out and serving the hardest to serve youth in the district and beyond. In doing so, ironically it is attracting and providing outreach services to students who bring the kind of issues to the school site that will challenge its very existence and bring gloom and doom statistical scores. In an effort to understand better our school community and its challenges, we need to examine carefully and authentically the individuals who comprise our community and evaluate them in alternative ways.

This project is just the beginning of an annual evaluation that will help the school better understand itself and its place in local and national educational efforts. Ultimately, the hope is that through this community wide self-reflection and analysis, the school will better serve the young people and their families who come to P.S.1 looking for answers and looking for hope.

**An Action Research Study:**

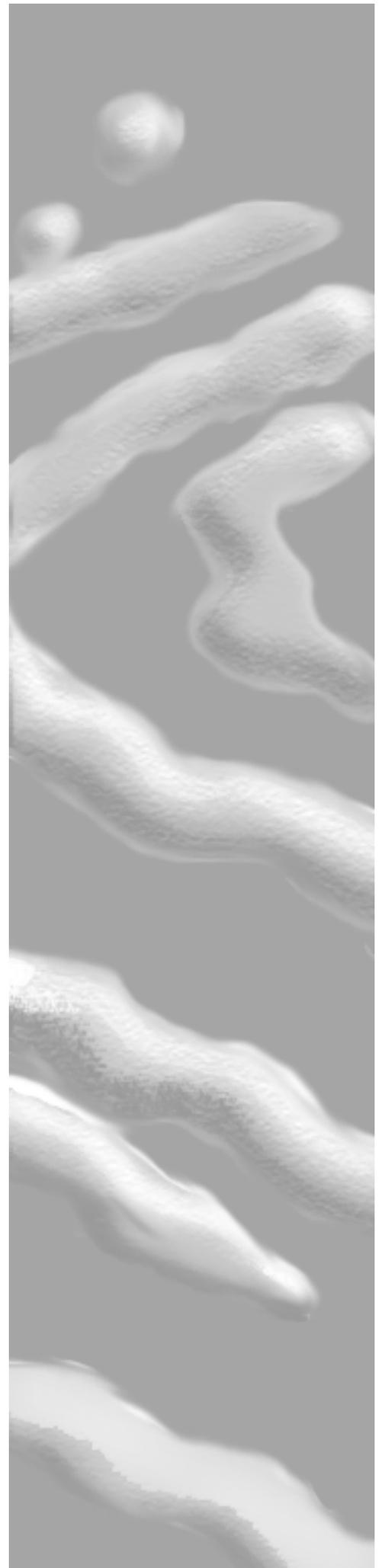
**CHAPTER 11**

***No Teen Left Behind?***

**Steve Dobo**

**Education and Employment Coordinator**

**Urban Peak**



*With such great potential inherent in these students, the need is great to create more and more effective programs to help them realize their potential.*

## **Background**

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When I started working at Urban Peak, a runaway and homeless youth shelter in Denver Colorado, two observations surprised me. One was the extraordinary academic potential of the homeless youth residing in the shelter, and the other was their lack of substantial progress in finishing their high school education. Our on-site GED lab was serving a modest number of youth, having graduated between 19-33 students annually over the past three years. Since Urban Peak serves approximately 800 homeless youth per year, this figure represented a modest 2-4 % of the population obtaining their GEDs. I also noticed youth arriving at the shelter that attended neighborhood high schools and were intent on staying in school, but within three weeks had completely dropped out of school. In addition, I met some who had attempted to enroll in high schools, but found themselves denied because they were older than the traditional high school population and would probably not be able to obtain their diplomas before age 21. Others were discouraged from enrolling having arrived at their new school mid-semester, and the school had no process for granting them credit for partial semester work. I also heard “war stories” of attempts that my predecessors had made to work with neighborhood high schools over the last couple of years to enroll our youth in their schools, but had run into walls of disinterest. It was clear that traditional neighborhood high schools were not very effective in serving the needs of homeless youth within our city.

## **How I got started**

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As I continued to meet individual homeless teenagers in these situations and heard their incredible stories, the tragedy of their situations struck me more and more. Here was a group of young people, many with the potential and the desire to succeed educationally, but with no viable avenue to complete their high school

education. As I began to comprehend the extent of the situation, and the huge loss of human potential, it became my personal passion and mission to do all I could to create opportunities for their educational success. What I envisioned was the creation of a menu of educational services designed for the unique needs of homeless youth.

As I pursued this mission, I started to meet other professionals within the community working on similar issues. I started working on a project with Alana James at the Center for Research Strategies, who was conducting research on the effect of student mobility on the educational success of homeless youth. The study would result in a position paper commissioned by Margie Milenkiewicz, the State Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth of the Colorado Department of Education. I worked with Alana to organize focus groups of twelve homeless youth in the Urban Peak homeless shelter and twelve youth receiving services at our urban drop-in center, the Spot, that wanted to give input concerning their past school mobility and their experiences with school. From a review of literature and the results of these focus groups, Alana gathered evidence to suggest that successful educational strategies for highly mobile homeless teenagers share three key attributes: ease of access to educational services, flexible instructional strategies and an inclusive and welcoming school culture. As it turned out, these findings represented an ideal conceptual framework for me to judge the effectiveness of any program claiming to serve homeless youth, and a framework to use in creating new, more effective, educational strategies.

In working with Alana and Margie, I became aware of a similar project that they were planning to study the effects of mobility on the educational success of students. With the Colorado Participatory Action Research Project (CO PAR), they were in the process of recruiting an administrator and a teacher from ten different schools across the state of Colorado to participate in a yearlong research study on this issue. As I joined this project, the initial meetings in August and October were very informative, and I started to recognize the connection between the problems that traditional schools were having in educating highly mobile youth and the problems that the schools are having in educating homeless teens. Within these first few

sessions, the class began to conceptualize and frame its research in terms of the previously discussed three domains defining successful educational practices for highly mobile students. As participants in the project, we were all learning about the process of action research and our responsibility was to apply these principles to a salient problem in our workplace. It was at this time that I decided to write the current paper focusing on my efforts to understand the educational needs of highly mobile homeless teenagers, along with my attempts at creating a viable educational continuum for this population.

### **Beginning the Action Research: My data**

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To gain a greater understanding of the educational status of the clients that Urban Peak was serving, I instituted a new education intake form that gathered data on the last grade completed by all youth accessing services. From this data collected over the last twelve months, 277 youth received education and employment services at Urban Peak. Of these 277 youth, 18% arrived at Urban Peak already having received their high school diploma, 19% arrived having completed their GED, 29% finished 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 18% finished 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 10% finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 5% finished 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and 1% finished 7<sup>th</sup> grade or below. This data indicates that 82% of the youth dropped out of traditional school environments, and that 63% of the youth entering the shelter had a need to access educational services to complete their high school education.

### **First Steps**

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My first step in creating a continuum of educational services was to beef up our current educational program involving GED preparation services. After having limited initial success, I hired an experienced GED teacher, and within the first year, we had increased our number of graduates from between 19-35 to over 80 students. Given the phenomenal success of this GED program, I decided to evaluate it as a model in terms of the above-mentioned CO PAR framework of successful

educational practices. Located within the shelter only a few feet from the residential dormitories, all youth have easy physical access to the classroom. The instructional program is completely flexible, so that students can stay thirty minutes per day or eight hours per day working on their GED depending on their motivation and attention span. They can come to class every day or once a week, or they can even disappear for six months and then return to work more consistently on their GED. The teacher operates the classroom based on respect, so that each youth is welcome and included in the room, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race or educational level. Some enter the program reading at elementary grade levels, while others are ready to pass the GED immediately with a limited amount of refreshing. Teaching emphasizes a personalized approach and relationship with each youth. The success of this program is demonstrated by the large number of GEDs received within a year, and also the evidence that over 73% of the youth that pass one of the five subtests of the GED go on to complete their entire GED successfully. Within our CO PAR framework, the GED program certainly excels in all three key categories of easy access, flexible instruction and welcoming culture.

### **Unmet Needs**

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The GED program has clearly been successful, but over this last year it has become more and more apparent to me that there are youth that were not being adequately served by this sole educational option. In fact, in focus groups, when asked whether they would rather get their GED or high school diplomas, the vast majority of students indicate that they would rather obtain their diplomas. As it turns out, the majority of these youth enrolled in our on-site GED program by default for reasons of convenience, and more importantly because of the inability of the youth to be successful in accessing high school diploma programs.

As I continued to explore the educational needs of youth served by the agency, I began to focus my attention on teens that arrived at the shelter with only a few credits remaining to obtain their diploma. I have found success over the years working with at-risk youth by starting with small projects, creating a greater chance

of success. My thought was that if I could make public high school work for homeless youth with five or less credits remaining to graduate, then I could learn and build on this success and tackle tougher issues. Over a six-month period, I worked with a handful of youth in this situation, trying to help them finish up at their previous high school. What I soon discovered was that even this small task was a difficult one. With the time it took to obtain school transcripts, contact school personnel, obtain Individual Education Plans, and coordinate the help of district homeless liaisons, the youth in all of the situations had moved out of the shelter before the educational process resolved. I found it frustrating to do that much coordination work, along with getting a number of district personnel involved, only to have the youth disappear before I could devise a solution. In addition, each of these youth happened to be enrolled in different schools within different school districts and counties, with each process involving the coordination of a completely different set of school staff. I soon realized the complexity of this issue, given that there are six counties serving Metro Denver, and another handful of counties surrounding the metro area. Youth could arrive a few credits short of graduating from any of these schools within these county school districts, and I would be in the position of coordinating the solution to the problem with a different group of school personnel. In other words, it was going to be very difficult to build on any success I might find with one particular youth at one particular school.

## **Transitions**

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At the same time that I was working with youth short a few credits from graduating, the agency started discussing collaborating with an innovative charter school in Denver called PS1. The principal of PS1, Karla Haas-Moskowitz, was interested in serving Urban Peak youth, and boosting the enrollment of the school up to its cap. Urban Peak had recently merged with a nighttime urban drop-in center for youth called The Spot. The facility remained unused during the day, and seemed ideal for a satellite location for PS1. Since opening in 1996, PS1 has been very effective at serving at-risk youth, and we felt that an educational program created

under PS1's direction and philosophy would be a nice fit for both Spot youth and Urban Peak homeless youth. Because the satellite school was located within a few miles of the shelter and accessible by bus lines and light rail, we thought that the school would draw a good mix from both facilities. Although proving a wonderful success, and enrolling double the number of the youth that we initially projected, there were surprisingly few Urban Peak homeless youth that ended up enrolling. Although we continued with this collaboration with PS1 at the Spot, we realized that we needed to continue to look for other avenues for Urban Peak youth to obtain their high school diplomas.

Given our lack of success in helping youth finish their diplomas at their neighborhood high schools, and our relative success with the satellite school with PS1 Charter School, we decided to approach PS1 with our initial issue of helping homeless teenagers that are short a few credits finish their diplomas and continue on to post-secondary programs. When approached again, Karla was willing to take on the challenge, so we created the High School Transitions Program. The program planned to utilize the existing PS1 resources, including the regular day program, late shift program, post-secondary options program, special education resources and the PS1 satellite school at the Spot, in order to create individualized educational transition plans for homeless teenagers. Currently, one youth is an apprentice with the PS1 shop teacher, and attends construction classes at Red Rocks Community College in order to finish two credits. Another is in a work-study experience and transcribing his experience working at the Hyatt, along with meeting with the late shift advisor to finish one-half credit. A third started night shift classes each evening in order to finish 9.5 credits for graduation. Additionally, a handful of students with few or no high school credits that have a desire to complete their diploma instead of GED are now enrolling at the regular PS1 day program and the PS1 at the Spot satellite school. These students previously had settled for getting their GED. These students go to class during the day, and receive additional support services of case management and employment counseling from Urban Peak staff during the off school hours. The success of High School Transitions speaks strongly to the need for educational programs, which combine once again the three documented aspects

of successful education programs: easy access, program flexibility and a welcoming culture. The program can be immediately accessed by any homeless youth who is short high school credits, has flexible program elements, which are customized for each student's needs, and is housed in a school environment totally accepting of homeless teenagers.

### **Action Research with Youth**

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Since Urban Peak operates within a youth leadership framework, I viewed it as critical to augment my research with the opinions of the homeless youth that we were attempting to serve. Through a review of the literature on homeless youth, along with readings about innovative school programs and an understanding of the CO PAR framework, I was beginning to conceptualize program elements that I thought would be successful with homeless teens. To test the desirability of these educational program elements, in the winter of 2004 we administered an online survey to over fifty homeless teens that were clients of Urban Peak educational services. Along with demographic questions, I asked the youth to rate 64 potential characteristics of high school programs in order to get an indication of a school design that they felt would be beneficial to their success. In reviewing these elements, the vast majority fit the categories within the CO PAR educational practice model. Over 50% of youth confirmed that these three types of program elements are either extremely important or somewhat important to include in a high school program designed to meet the needs of unaccompanied homeless teenagers.

### **Conclusion**

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In summary, my journey to create new programs to fit within an expanded educational continuum for unaccompanied homeless youth has produced a number of options for youth across the three domains of educational practice. The PS1 at the Spot program has been successful for some students, but has lacked the extreme ease of access needed by homeless teenagers residing at the Urban Peak shelter.

Traditional high schools have proven lacking in all three categories, and have been unable to meet the educational needs of homeless teens short credits of graduating. The High School Transitions Program continues to expand and work effectively for homeless teens, because of the customization of individual learning plans, which fulfill all three aspects necessary for a successful program. The GED program works well for a number of youth, but should not be the only option for homeless youth wanting to complete their high school education, especially those only lacking a handful of credits to graduate. Finally, unaccompanied homeless teenagers are reporting that they would rather be able to obtain their diplomas, and indicate that they want programs based on the three key elements identified within the CO PAR framework.

### **Future Directions**

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Given this evidence, in pursuit of my mission, I am embarking on several new educational projects that will ideally adhere more closely to the CO PAR model of easy access, flexible programming and welcoming culture. In the first project, Urban Peak recently received a grant from the Colorado Department of Education to research the successful practices of traditional high schools to engage homeless teenagers in educational programs. Initial research has identified two promising approaches: welcoming centers that transition youth slowly into the culture and academics of high school, and case managers to follow highly mobile youth from school to school to lessen the effects of school moves. Educators from across the state of Colorado and the nation are sending in information on innovative programs and practices, and we plan a pilot project this fall within a local traditional high school to test some of these practices.

The other project that shows promise involves the development of a charter high school specifically designed to meet the needs of highly mobile and homeless youth. Using the class model and the results of the high school design survey, we will incorporate elements deemed important by the youth. We will also build upon the success of the fore-mentioned educational endeavors in order to create a high

school diploma program with ease of access, flexible instructional strategy, and an inclusive and welcoming school culture. An educational project administrator has been hired, and the charter application will be written this summer, with a projected school opening of summer 2005. I anticipate that we will learn much from this new project, and plan to share these lessons with the local high schools to improve their educational outcomes with homeless youth. With such great potential inherent in these students, the need is great to create more and more effective programs to help them realize their potential.

Urban Peak is a homeless and runaway youth shelter serving 800 youth annually between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. The agency provides a continuum of comprehensive services to this population, including street outreach, shelter services, educational counseling, employment counseling, case management, mental health services, and housing. For additional information contact:  
[stevedobo@hotmail.com](mailto:stevedobo@hotmail.com)

# Appendices

## **CHAPTER 1**

COPAR Questionnaire

## **CHAPTER 4**

Permission Letter  
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## **CHAPTER 5**

Placement Interview  
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## **CHAPTER 9**

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## **CHAPTER 11**

School Design Survey- Combined Positives

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1*

**CO PAR Questionnaire**

**Are you:**  Male  Female

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ years

**Grade level:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity:**  Anglo/White  Hispanic  Indian  Other

1. Do you live...  in town  out of town  
 not on a farm/ranch  on a farm/ranch
2. Where do you think your parents get information about the world, your town, and your school? Choose 2 answers
- Saguache Crescent
  - Pueblo Chieftain or the Denver Post
  - TV News
  - General TV
  - Radio
  - Friends
  - Family members
  - School
  - Church
  - Telephone
  - Internet
  - None of the above

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1*

3. Where do you get your information about the world, your town and school? Choose 2 answers.

- Saguache Crescent
- Pueblo Chieftain or the Denver Post
- TV News
- General TV
- Radio
- Friends
- Family members
- School
- Church
- Telephone
- Internet
- None of the above

4. Do you think you will graduate from High School?

- Yes
- No

If no, what will prevent you from graduating?

5. How many of your friends do you think will graduate from High School?

- 0
- 1 – 3
- 4 – 6
- 7 – 9
- 10 – 15
- 15 – 20
- All of my friends

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1*

6. What do you think your job will be when you graduate from High School?
7. What kind of jobs do you think your friends will have when they graduate from High School?
8. Do you think you will enroll in college?
- Yes
  - No
  - Maybe
9. Do you think your friends will enroll in college?
- Yes
  - No
10. Do you think you will attend a:
- Community college
  - A small 4-year college
  - A large university
  - A trade school
  - Don't know what kind of school I will attend
  - Don't want to go to any more school

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1*

11. What do you think your job will be when you graduate from college?
12. What do you think your friends will do for work after they graduate from college?
13. What do you think you will be driving when you are grown up? (When you are thirty.)
- Brand new vehicle
  - A used vehicle
14. What do you think you will be living in when you are grown up?
- A rental home
  - Low-income housing
  - You will own your own home
15. When you are grown up will you be:( check all that apply)
- Married
  - Single
  - Divorced
  - With children
  - Without children
16. When you are grown up will you be:
- Self-employed (work for yourself)
  - Be an employee (work for someone)
  - Not have a job
  - Living on welfare

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1*

17. How much money do you think you will make when you are grown up?

- \$14,000.00
- \$30,000.00
- \$80,000.00 or more

18. How many of your friends do you think have life-long dreams?

19. What are your life-long dreams? (What do you want to be when you grow up?)

20. Do you dream about being a:

- Doctor
- Lawyer
- Scientist
- Teacher
- Business owner
- Clerk
- Farmer/rancher
- Nurse
- Fireman
- EMT
- Law enforcement officer
- Wildlife officer
- Forester
- County employee
- Other. Please list \_\_\_\_\_

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 1*

21. Have your parents gone to college?

Yes

No

If so, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

Do they have a college diploma? \_\_\_\_\_

Of all the adults that you like and consider a role model for your life what was their highest level of education?

22. The reason for leaving my last school was:

23. How many elementary schools have you attended? \_\_\_\_\_

24. Where or with whom do you live?

With friends

With parents

With grandparents or other relatives

A homeless shelter

**Permission Letter**

Dear Parents,

Your child has been selected to participate in a research project at Sheridan Middle School. We would like to find out how well we are assisting all children in school. We have a number of different programs designed to help kids who might be at risk for failing school. Your child may be involved in some of these programs already. They include programs such as the reading lab, special clubs, or weekly progress reports. We would like to talk with you and your child about how well they are working. Our questions should not take more than fifteen minutes.

Their names and other personal information will be kept confidential and not published in any form. Thank you in advance for your cooperation. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Your Partner in Educational Excellence,

Vernita Mickens  
Principal

-----  
Please sign below if you would not like your child to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent /Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 4**

**Charting Services**

	Julia	Thomas	Sam	John	Cathy	Ethan	Brandon	David
Planner				X	X	X		X
Parent Conf	X	X						X
Dean								X
SPC		X	X	X	X		X	
Detours		X	X	X	X		X	
Counselor		X	X	X			X	
Placement				X			X	
Study Hall			X		X	X	X	
Parent Shadow				X			X	
Special Ed				X			X	
Police		X					X	
Substance Counseling		X			X		X	
Home Visit							X	
Reading Lab							X	
Summer School							X	
Athletics							X	
Homeless Liaison						X		
Comm. Tool					X			
Teacher Mentor				X				
Awards				X				
Saturday School			X	X				
Psychologist				X				

**Placement Interview**

**Child's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**A. Educational Background**

1. What is the child called at home?
  
2. Who are the members of the child's family? Who among these lives with the child?
  
3. Who should receive communications from the school that concern the child? How should those communications be made?
  
4. Who will respond to communications from the school? How will those communications be made?
  
5. How many schools has your child attended?
  
6. Has your child had any disciplinary referrals? If so, for what?
  
7. Has your child been in any special programs?
  - Special Ed. Disability
  - Title 1
  - Literacy Plan
  - Gifted/Talented
  - Preschool: \_\_\_\_\_ Head Start \_\_\_\_\_ Child Find
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

## *APPENDIX: CHAPTER 5*

8. Is your child currently on a literacy plan?

### **B. Language Issues**

1. What language did your child first speak?
2. What language was your child instructed in at their last school?
3. How much English does your child speak?

### **C. Learning Style**

1. What would you like me to know about your child?
2. What do you see as an area of strength for your child?
3. What do you see as an area in need of improvement for your child?
4. What kind of teacher best fits your child?
5. How does your child learn best?

### **D. Health Issues**

1. Does your child have his/her immunizations?
2. Is your child on any medications? Will he/she be taking the medications at school?
3. Does your child have any severe allergies?

## ***APPENDIX: CHAPTER 5***

4. Has your child been hospitalized in the last 2 years? If so, for what?

5. Are there medical issues/concerns we should be aware of?

6. Does your child have insurance?

- Medicaid
- Colorado Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+)
- Private Insurance
- None

### **E. Behavioral Concerns**

1. What type of discipline is used at home?

2. What works?

### **F. Legal Issues**

1. Are there any legal issues/custody issues (arrangements)?

2. Is there a current restraining order?

### **G. Parent Involvement**

1. What do you hope your child will get out of school this year?

2. In what ways do you think you can help at home to support your child's education?

3. What roles do you see parents having at the school site to support the education of their children?

4. What can a school do to make you feel welcome?

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9*

**Mobility Questionnaire**

How many times have you moved in the past 3 years?

Were you happy about moving?

Did you change your mind when you started your new school? Why or why not?

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9*

**Student Interview Questions**

1. What makes you feel welcome in a new classroom?
2. What things in school make you want to have good grades and get involved with clubs or sports?
3. Have you ever not liked going to one of your classes? Why?
4. What can a teacher do to help you feel more welcome in school?
5. When you're new in a class, would you rather blend in or stick out?

**Parent Interview Questions**

1. What makes you feel comfortable about sending your child to a new school?
2. What kinds of things motivate your child to succeed academically and socially in school?
3. Has your child ever not liked going to a new class? Why?
4. What can a teacher and or the school do to make you and your child feel more welcome?
5. Are you involved with your child's school, i.e. field trips, PTO, sporting events?

**Teacher Interview Questions**

1. Describe what you think mobility means.
2. What experience do you have with mobility in your own classroom?
3. What strategies do you have in place to welcome a new child to your classroom?
4. What strategies do you have in place to assess the child's ability in your subject area?
5. How would you describe the actions of a new student in your classroom?

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

Name:

**Welcome to SMS Survey**

*We are very excited to have you as part of our school. To help us get to know you as a person and as a student please answer the questions below.*

**What school did you used to go to?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Overall how much did you like your last school? (Circle ONE answer)**

(hated it) 1                      2                      3                      4                      5 (loved it)

**What are some of the things you liked about that school? (Check all that apply)**

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                      activities
- all teachers                       art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**What are some of the things you didn't like about that school? (Check all that apply)**

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                      activities
- all teachers                       art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

**What kinds of things make learning new information easiest for you?**

**(Check all that apply)**

- working in groups       working on my own       looking at something
- listening to someone talk about something       doing activities about something

**Think about a teacher you liked in the past. Why did you like that teacher? (Check all that apply)**

- respected students       welcomed students       flexible about things
- variety in assignments       gave us choices       gave us chances  
(did different things in class)
- the teacher was fun/had a personality       knew the teacher as  
 provided lots of examples to help us learn      an actual person
- the teacher was fair    other \_\_\_\_\_

**Think about a teacher you didn't like in the past. Why didn't you like that teacher? (Check all that apply)**

- were rude and /or       not welcoming       not flexible about things  
disrespectful       no choices       no chances
- no variety in assignments (did the same thing everyday)
- the teacher was not fun/had no personality
- the teacher did not explain things well       teacher embarrassed students
- the teacher was not fair       other \_\_\_\_\_

**How much do you read? (Circle one answer)**

Never      A little      Sometimes      All the time

**What is the title of the last book you read? \_\_\_\_\_**

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

**What kind of reader do you think you are? (Circle one answer)**

Not very good      OK      Good      Awesome

**What do you like to do, or have to do after school? (Check all that apply)**

- play sports       watch TV       do homework       work at a job
- play computer games/video games       read       draw
- baby-sit brothers/sisters       talk on the phone       sleep
- eat/cook       hang out with friends
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**Where do you live? (Circle one answer)**

House      Apartment      Hotel/Motel      Trailer Condo/Townhouse  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Who lives with you? (Check all that apply)**

- Mom       Dad       Brother(s)       Sister(s)       Aunt(s)       Uncle(s)
- Step-mom       Step-dad       Mom's boyfriend       Dad's girlfriend
- Grandmother(s)       Grandfather(s)       Cousin(s)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Is there anything else you would like us to know about you?**

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

Name:

**Welcome to SMS- Follow-up Survey**

*Now that you have been at SMS for a little while we want to know how things are going.*

**Overall how much do you like SMS so far? (Circle ONE answer)**

(hate it) 1                      2                      3                      4                      5 (love it)

**What are some of the things you like about SMS so far? (Check all that apply)**

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                       activities
- all teachers                       art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**What are some of the things you don't like about SMS so far? (Check all that apply)**

- friends                       lunch time                       health class                       after school
- some teachers                       gym class                       science class                       activities
- all teachers                       art class                       math class                       sports teams
- music class                       social studies                       homework                       reading
- class assignments                       English (language arts) class
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**Are there any teachers/adults at SMS that you like so far? (circle one answer)**

Yes                      No

**APPENDIX: CHAPTER 9**

**Think about a teacher you like so far at SMS. Why do you like this teacher? (Check all that apply)**

- respected students
- welcomed students
- flexible about things
- variety in assignments
- gave us choices
- gave us chances
- (did different things in class)  the teacher was fair
- knew the teacher as an actual person
- the teacher was fun/had a personality
- provided lots of examples to help us learn
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**Think about a teacher you don't like so far at SMS. Why don't you like that teacher? (Check all that apply)**

- were rude and /or disrespectful
- not welcoming
- not flexible about things
- no choices
- no chances
- no variety in assignments (did the same thing everyday)
- the teacher was not fun/had no personality
- the teacher did not explain things well
- teacher embarrassed students
- the teacher was not fair
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**Overall, how welcome has everyone at SMS made you feel? (Circle one answer)**

- |                            |                                |                                |                        |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Nobody wants me to be here | Some people want me to be here | Most people want me to be here | Everyone wants me here |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|

**Who are some of the people that have made you feel welcome? (Check all that apply)**

- Ms. Mickens
- Ms. Willis
- Mr. O'Connell
- Mrs. Kofoed
- Mrs. Henehan
- Mrs. McCarthy
- other students
- teachers
- other adults in the building
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experience at SMS so far?**

APPENDIX: CHAPTER 11

School Design Survey- Combined Positives

	Categ	Comb Pos	Ext Imp	Some Imp	No Ver Imp	Not Imp	Comb Neg
Internships at local businesses	F	100	93	7	0	0	0
Test out of certain classes to get credit	F	100	79	21	0	0	0
Work-study to earn money while learning	F	100	79	21	0	0	0
College Prep activities (college tours, scholarship info, etc.)	F	100	79	21	0	0	0
Flexible schedule	F	96	67	29	2	2	4
Teachers that really know the subject areas	C	96	73	23	2	2	4
Learning while doing	F	94	63	31	4	2	6
Welcoming environment for all no matter what race, gender, or sexual orientation	C	92	74	18	4	4	8
Access to computers and internet	F	92	77	15	2	6	8
Extra in-depth help in reading and/or math	F	92	59	33	6	2	8
Caring teachers that you can relate to	C	91	60	31	6	4	10
Vocational classes (Carpentry, electrical, plumbing, etc.)	F	91	60	31	8	0	8
Open enrollment so that you can start school at any time	A	90	65	25	6	2	8
Finishing diploma quickly (3 months- 1 year)	F	90	63	27	4	4	8
Chance to choose classes to take	F	90	59	31	4	6	10
Evening classes available	F	90	55	35	8	2	10
Testing out of certain classes to get credit	F	90	43	47	2	8	10
Music	C	89	71	18	10	2	12
Option to get a GED on-site	F	88	59	29	4	8	12
High school and college credit at the same time	F	88	61	27	8	4	12
Online classes to obtain credit	F	87	54	33	6	8	14
Art	C	86	71	15	10	4	14
Help with getting jobs	F	85	71	14	14	0	14
Help with making career decisions	F	85	64	21	14	0	14
Tutoring	F	85	58	27	4	10	14
Outdoor education activities (hiking, rock climbing, camping, etc.)	C	83	60	23	13	4	17
After-school activities	C	83	48	35	6	12	18
Start of classes later in the morning	F	83	46	37	12	4	16
One on one teaching	C	82	65	17	12	6	18
Rewards for educational achievements	C	82	51	31	6	12	18
Small class size (15 students or less per class)	C	82	49	33	10	6	16
On-site childcare for the children of students	F	82	47	35	8	10	18
Weekend classes available	F	81	48	33	10	10	20
Chance to have a mentor	C	80	53	27	14	6	20
Small group teaching	C	80	49	31	14	6	20
On-site housing at the school or students to live in while they attend school	A	80	41	39	18	2	20
Graduation ceremony	C	79	58	21	8	13	21
School lunches	C	79	50	29	21	0	21
Credit for volunteering	F	78	57	21	7	14	21
On-site health clinic	F	78	44	34	16	6	22
Study groups of students	C	78	37	41	14	8	22
Field trips to other states or countries	C	77	56	21	15	8	23
Shortened school day	F	77	50	27	12	12	24
Credit for writing about life experiences	F	77	42	35	12	10	22
Welcoming center to help students transition back to school	C	77	44	33	19	4	23
School located at or close to Urban Peak shelter	A	77	37	40	8	15	23
On-site mental health counseling	F	76	45	31	8	16	24
Partial credit for class work	F	76	35	41	12	12	24

*APPENDIX: CHAPTER 11*

**School Design Survey- Combined Positives Cont...**

	<b>Categ</b>	<b>Comb Pos</b>	<b>Ext Imp</b>	<b>Some Imp</b>	<b>No Ver Imp</b>	<b>Not Imp</b>	<b>Comb Neg</b>
Changing classes to learn subjects from different teachers	C	74	35	39	14	12	26
School located at or close to an Urban Peak housing program	A	73	35	38	13	13	26
Interactive classroom discussions	C	72	35	37	16	10	26
Student council	C	71	64	7	14	14	28
Small school size (less than 300 students)	C	70	36	34	18	12	30
Opportunity to have parents / family involved	C	66	35	31	15	19	34
Peer counseling	C	66	35	31	18	16	34
On-site drug and alcohol counseling	F	64	33	31	14	20	34
Full year schedule with school also over the summer	F	53	29	24	24	24	48
Learning all subjects from one teacher in one classroom	C	50	23	27	35	15	50
Teacher lectures	xc	46	22	24	32	22	54