

# Success story: frosh learn from seniors

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What can a freshman learn from a senior in high school? Before you think of all the bad things, take a look at the Princeton Center for Leadership Training (PCLT).

I recently interviewed Dr. Sharon Rose Powell, founder and president of the PCLT, a not-for-profit corporation founded in 1988 to foster the expansion of the Peer Group Connection (PGC) program. Powell started PGC in 1979 at Princeton High School.

PGC NOW OPERATES in more than 100 urban and suburban high schools along the East Coast and is based on the simple premise that younger kids look up to older kids. In a high school setting, it means that frosh look up to seniors and juniors, a universal phenomenon that characterizes students' behavior in both inner-city and suburban schools.

PCLT maintains that a first-year high school student who has difficulty talking to parents about almost anything still looks up to seniors and juniors and is much more likely to confide in and discuss problems with them.

The program's mechanics are fairly simple. A specially trained faculty member teaches a core group of seniors how to serve as team mentors to incoming students, helping new students adjust to high school and the pressures of adolescence.

The mentoring seniors, and in some cases, juniors, receive both special training, including a summer retreat, and course credit. According to PCLT, "During weekly 'peer group' meetings, the seniors and the first-year students practice communications and team-building skills, develop greater respect and appreciation for individual differences, and learn problem-solving skills that they can apply to real-life situations."

The team mentoring approach helps seniors to develop their leadership skills while offering support and guidance to younger students on problems they face in and out of school.

The PGC program, originally designed by Powell while she was working at Cornerhouse, Princeton's community counseling and drug treatment program, produces results.

According to PCLT, "Teachers report that peer group meetings have a significant impact on student moti-

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vation and achievement. The students are quick to apply in class the communication, active listening, and problem-solving skills they acquire through the program. Teachers are able to cover more material and to elicit greater participation and better-quality work from their students."

It sounds almost too good to be true, but it appears to be so. According to a 1989 study of 435 students in three New Jersey urban high schools, conducted by Stanford University Professor Jane Hannaway and Anne Marie Senior of Educational Testing Service, the program produced positive effects on both the school-related behavior and school performance of the participants.

Those involved in the program experienced significantly fewer absences, suspensions and discipline referrals, and were tardy fewer times than those who were not in the program.

ACCORDING TO the executive summary of the study's findings, "Over the course of the year, PLT students were in school 6.8 more school days than the control students. The PLT group also had a larger proportion of students with no absences compared to the control group and a smaller portion of students with 11 or more absences.

"Control group students were about 1.5 times as likely as PLT students to be suspended, and they received 50 percent more discipline referrals than their PLT counterparts."

Even more important, the program had significant effect on the academic performance of the participants. For two quarters, the differences in math grades were statistically significant, as were the differences in final grades.

In math, 7.3 percent of the PLT students received A as a year-end grade and 18.9 percent received F. In contrast, not one student from the control group received a year-end grade of A, and 26.7 percent received an F. Similarly impressive results were found when English grades were compared.

The preliminary output data on the PGC program are better than

good — they are mind-bogglingly clearly suggesting that the program has significant positive effect on in-school behavior and academic performance. The Ford Foundation recently announced it will support a full-blown national evaluation of various peer group support programs, including the Peer Group Connection program.

If this study, to be conducted by the highly prestigious evaluation group Public Private Ventures of Philadelphia, replicates earlier findings, then strong consideration should be given to implementing the PGC program nationwide.

The bulk of this column has focused on the PGC program because of the strong evidence that it works. Given the dearth of validated educational programs, this is extremely noteworthy. I am also pleased to report that PCLT has developed various other exciting programs as an outgrowth of the PGC.

One of them is the Parent Involvement Corps (PIC). PIC trains parents to reach out to other parents, motivating them to become involved in their children's education and equipping them with the skills necessary to participate effectively in both school and community-based programs.

THE NEWEST PLT initiative is its Partners in Learning Middle School (MGP) project. MGP's grandiose goal is to create learning communities in which students' academic performance improves, all members of the learning community work collaboratively to bring about positive changes, and leadership teams serve as models for their colleagues, creating a school climate in which the impetus for change comes from within the school.

Through its latest initiatives, Sharon Powell is taking PLT's team mentoring leadership model to new heights. If MGP proves as successful when applied in the urban schools in which it will be piloted, as the initial findings were on PGC, that would represent convincing evidence for an approach that should be implemented, no matter what the cost, in every school in New Jersey's special needs districts.

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