

The Power of Peers



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High schools throughout New Jersey have reaped the rewards of having ‘peer leadership’ programs, which allow upperclassmen to address adolescents’ social and emotional needs, facilitating academics and personal development in the process. By Kara Corridan

Pat Pagan, a senior at River Dell Regional High School in Oradell, NJ, had been chosen to be a “peer leader,” an appointed mentor for freshmen. His charge: to help students make the adjustment from middle school and offer a forum in which to share their concerns about the pressures of high school life. During weekly peer group meetings, Pagan would often strike up conversations with a girl who, he could tell, was very depressed. She wouldn’t come out and say so, but she’d make comments to Pagan about her hatred of school and her dislike of her friends. She couldn’t talk to her parents, and her grades were poor. After an assembly that addressed the signs of suicide and prevention methods, the girl thanked the or-

ganizers for sharing the information—and wrote a letter to Pagan with a photo of the group. “She said, ‘You made peer leadership so enjoyable. I thought it was going to be so stupid but I got a lot out of it,’” says Pagan. “And she thanked me. That honestly made me feel really cool.”

Peer-leadership or peer-education programs are becoming increasingly valuable to high schools throughout New Jersey. Each school takes a slightly different approach, but the goal is generally the same: to help freshmen make the transition from middle school to high school and to teach students about issues such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and homophobia. The key is that students themselves, usually juniors and seniors, lead the programs.

“There is tremendous value in using peers because students listen to and believe each other,” says Lorraine Brooks, principal of River Dell Regional High School. “Peers are not seen as preachers the way adults are; in fact, students feel that their peers know what they face and can provide them with realistic ways of dealing with teenage pressures and stress.” A pioneer in the field of peer leadership is Sharon Powell, Ed.D., president and founder of the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. Dr. Powell started the first program in 1979 at Princeton High School, after she’d been a middle school teacher and seen her students “scared to death about going into high school and falling through the cracks.” She applied for and received a grant to design a course for seniors to take as an elective. They would meet with freshmen every week for 45 minutes to discuss their concerns and fears. The program was opened to the entire freshman class—about 250 students—and 50 signed up. The following year 100 joined, and by the fourth year, all 250 were part of the program. One hundred percent participation is still the goal because “every freshman is at risk for problems,” says Dr. Powell.

Since then, the organization has implemented more than 100 programs in every county in the state—in high schools, public and private, urban and suburban—and the numbers are growing. “It’s part of a new focus on character-building,” Dr. Powell explains. “More schools are starting to think of that as an is-

sue, especially after incidents like Columbine.”

She shares the credit for her program’s success with the state’s school system. “You have a lot of administrators in New Jersey who are risk-takers,” she says. “They see something that might be a problem and they want to step in. New Jersey is one of the more advanced states in addressing AIDS/HIV and teen-pregnancy issues.”

In addition to peer leadership, many high schools have peer-mediation programs in which students work with other students who are having conflicts to come up with appropriate solutions by listening to and sharing opinions. Global Learning Inc., a Union, NJ-based nonprofit educational organization, has brought conflict-resolution programs to more than 60 schools (including elementary and middle schools) throughout the state since its inception in 1987, according to executive director Jeffrey Brown. While these programs are undoubtedly useful for many students, they’re often considered less comprehensive than those that focus on peer leadership. “Peer mediation teaches students how to negotiate conflicts—after the fact,” says Dr. Powell. “Our emphasis is on prevention of problems.”

A typical peer-leadership program follows the Princeton Center’s Peer Group Connection model. Upperclassmen—in junior-senior or senior-senior pairs—meet with groups of approximately a dozen freshmen each week. The student leaders are graded for their work; freshmen usually take the course on a

pass/fail basis. Through ice-breakers, role-playing and group discussions, the younger students can share their feelings on virtually any topic on their mind, including stress, family relationships, romantic relationships, friendships, peer pressure, harassment, bias and academic pressure. But the biggie? “To be honest, sex,” says Chris McAllister, now a sophomore at River Dell, who, like his entire freshman class, participated in a peer leadership program last year. “Who’s done it, who hasn’t, how to protect yourself, where to get protection.” Pat Pagan, a former peer leader at River Dell, agrees. “Our students—especially the girls—ask a lot of questions about pregnancy, oral sex and diseases.” Boys were more concerned with learning how to cope with being the target of stereotypes and teasing, according to Pagan.

A major factor in the success of these groups is, of course, the students chosen to run them. Schools make every effort to pick a diverse group, including leaders of different races, religions and ethnicities. It’s not necessary for students to be leaders in other groups. In fact, it’s preferred that they are not so that more students have the chance to serve as mentors. (Pagan, an exception, was the captain of his school’s football, basketball and track teams.)

Another key facet: Leaders ideally serve in male-female pairs. “A lot of school districts have moved away from that, but we’ve held on to it,” says Marilyn Weichman, Ph.D., school psychologist at South

Brunswick High School, who brought peer leadership to the school in 1984. “It’s a critical piece of the model. We want to teach young men as much as young women that caring for, helping and connecting with others are good values.” This can also lead to better-controlled groups. “In our school, some of the female-female leaders didn’t have that much authority over their groups,” says peer leader Pagan.

It would seem that when you put a group of teenagers together to have them compare sexual experiences and other personal matters, it’d be a matter of seconds before the gossip starts flying. But it’s usually not the case—a feat for River Dell, which has been nicknamed Rumor Dell (“Even the teachers call it that,” says McAllister.).

“Everything we talked about in our group stayed in our group,” he says. “We might talk about what we did during the ice-breakers, but not what we said.” It also helps that such a high value is placed on trust. There are no adults in the room when groups meet—though supervisors are on hand, if needed—and leaders sign statements promising complete confidentiality unless a student’s life is in danger.

Peers groups are exactly what some students need,

whether they know it at the time or not. However, it can be difficult for leaders to gauge the impact they have on their peers because the freshmen aren’t required to speak up during meetings. “Part of the leaders’ training is to understand that it’s participation by choice and that if a student isn’t saying anything, it doesn’t mean she’s not gaining anything,” says Dr. Weichman.

Sometimes the peer leaders actually need the program more than the freshmen. Dr. Powell remembers one who’d had behavioral problems but was still encouraged to join because he was a natural leader and his teachers felt he had a great rapport with students. But it didn’t help. He continued to miss classes, fight and yell in the hallways.

“The students and teachers were beside themselves,” she says. “They discussed their options and the students asked, ‘If we kick him out of the program, who does he have left?’”

Instead, they came up with a contract of expectations for him and said, “We’ll be with you every step of the way.” He agreed to and met those expectations: “It was the first time he’d had people not giving up on him,” says Dr. Powell. He ended up turning his situation around and going to college; he’s now a teacher for children with special

needs in Atlanta.

Of course, not every student experiences—or needs—this kind of dramatic impact. “I didn’t gain an enormous amount of knowledge,” says McAllister. “But I liked the classes where we had debates because everyone expressed their opinions, and I learned more about other people’s views. And I made new acquaintances—kids I wouldn’t normally get to know.” He plans to apply to be a leader when he becomes a junior.

The biggest benefit of peer-leadership programs may be their ability to help students feel that they fit in. “If freshmen come to a senior party, most of us know each other because of peer leadership,” says Pagan. “I think it’s really cool that we can all hang out together, no problem. I remember when I was a freshman, I felt like I was on top of the world just because some senior wanted to hang out with me.”

This sentiment comes as no surprise to Dr. Powell, of the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. “The most important incentive kids have is the need to belong,” she says. “What peer groups do is ensure that every child has people he can trust and count on. High school doesn’t need to be so hard. If you pay attention to a child’s social and emotional needs, his academics will fall into place.”

