Students who are at risk in middle school need a second chance for success. Closing the achievement gap and the age disparity among students is the goal of programs that are committed to overaged students or those at risk for retention. “Across all age groups, 2.6% of white students, 3.8% of Hispanic students, and 5.5% of African American students are two or more years over the expected age for their grade” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). And overaged students are increasing in numbers because more and more states mandate in their school reform legislation that low-achieving students be retained.

Because “retention in grade has the unintended consequence of increasing the odds that a retained student will drop out of school—by 75% for those retained early (K–3) and by 90% for those retained in grades 4–6” (Roderick in Phi Delta Kappa, 2000), a timely intervention is an opportunity for a second chance at success. Turning those statistics around is the mission of middle level programs in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Kansas that make the commitment to transform disengaged students into active learners. A variety of practices and techniques hold promise for middle level students who need a second chance.

Double-Dose Academics
At Central East Middle School in Philadelphia, students who need help to succeed in a standards-based curriculum are assigned two classes (i.e., two math classes or two language arts classes) to get a “double-dose” of content and instruction. To further foster student-teacher connections, students are part of a small learning community and remain with the same team of teachers (i.e., loop) for three years. Students are grouped heterogeneously for core classes and regrouped homogeneously during elective periods for pull-out programs if they need extra help (Wheelock, n.d.).
John Frangipani, the principal of Central East, reports steady growth in the program, which was initiated in 1995 (personal communication, April 2, 2002). The school’s performance index shows promotion rates of 99.6% in the 1999–2000 school year, up from 87.3% in 1995–96 and 81.2% in 1998–99. The Johns Hopkins Talent Development model is the mainstay of the language arts curriculum with a special emphasis on “students seeing themselves as writers.” In mathematics, a computer lab with individualized programs targets each student’s specific skill deficits. The lab may account for the rise in the 1999–00 math performance index score of 51.4%, up from 32.9% in 1995–96 (J. Frangipani, personal communication, April 2000; School District of Philadelphia, n.d.).

Central East is an urban school in the Feltonville section of north Philadelphia and has a culturally and linguistically diverse faculty members and students. The school celebrates diversity and the faculty members actively promote cross-cultural understanding through designated teaching and learning activities, such as the schoolwide reading of a novel that was chosen for its academic engagement and cultural diversity. Student leadership is encouraged through a student council and a school council composed of parents, students, and staff and community members.

The student-teacher bonds created by teachers working with students over multiple years are the kind of support at-risk students need. Because teachers know the strengths and weaknesses of students, they can target instruction to individual students. “Cooperative learning teams support individual learning and encourage student achievement, active engagement, and development of social skills” (School District of Philadelphia, n.d., p. 2). Heterogeneously grouped in language arts, math, science, history, and social studies classes, lower performing students homogeneously regroup for extra help in math or reading labs and English as a Second Language tutoring. In addition to academic support, health professionals and counselors ensure that students continue to develop physically, socially, and emotionally.

**Telescoping**

The Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program (UCAP) in Rhode Island is an alternative school for overaged students that enables them to complete seventh, eighth, and ninth grades in two years instead of three (Finnan & Swanson, 2000). In its 13th year, UCAP is a comprehensive program that includes motivation and recognition events. A case-manager approach provides individual and group counseling, social work support, as well as follow-up support in high school. UCAP serves about 130 students from participating districts in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence. In support of the academic goal, UCAP holds a tutoring and homework Saturday program. There is also a full range of activities after school, on weekends, and during vacation time, including choir, computer robotics, student yearbook, flag football, ice skating, weight lifting, career exploration, ski trips, plays, and cultural events.

Author Christine Finnan (personal communication, April 3, 2001) highlights the UCAP program because she believes that “educators do not need winners and losers and that remediation efforts often leave students further behind. The gap becomes too big and students eventually give up.” Finnan believes that “acceleration is an answer— compact
the curriculum; handle the basics; and then go deep.”

Is the UCAP program working? In the UCAP annual report, scores for UCAP students have “generally improved over the last four years” and the “achievement gap between UCAP students and others in the state narrowed during this time” (Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program, n.d.). Director Robert DeBlois reports that UCAP is working and that about 50% of students accomplish the three grades in two years (personal communication, May 9, 2002). He believes that the other 50% of students are also successful, accomplishing a year’s growth in a year’s time, a goal that had previously eluded them. The students advance to high school more “credit heavy” than before.

UCAP graduates visit the school frequently to share their successes; a former student is now a Brown University graduate. She was days away from dropping out of school when she enrolled in UCAP. As a middle level student, her profile contained many of the characteristics of retained students (Sakowicz in Robertson, 1997), including limited English proficiency, low socioeconomic status, poor academics, and minority status. Her success story is full of firsts—first to complete two grades in one year at the UCAP program, first in her family to graduate from high school, and first in her family to earn a college degree.

DeBlois (personal communication, May 9, 2002) contends that it is not easy to sustain a mission in an alternative school and that you are never stronger than in the first year of your program. Successful alternative programs require a substantial degree of independence and diverse students and staff members. He believes that many alternative programs fail because they lose sight of their mission. This loss of mission coupled with diminished funding cause disenchantment among teachers and students. UCAP’s success rides on the continued commitment of the staff, credibility from the community it serves, and the vitality of debate among and between the school and community members on achievement of the mission.

All Students Can Learn

Southwestern Edison Junior Academy School in Battle Creek, MI, motivates all students to complete work. In lieu of failure, grading practices include “incomplete” grades with follow-up for students in the form of reteaching and extra support for resubmission of unacceptable work (Wheelock, n.d.). John Burrill, the director, describes the “A-B-I” plan as an expectation that every assignment will be completed and merit a grade of A or B (personal communication, April 2, 2002). The grading plan requires more bookkeeping on the part of teachers and innovative student participation incentives.

To avoid a grade of D or E, disengaged students are encouraged to actively participate in Success Clubs (after-school assignment make-up sessions) and a Homework Center. Incentives for students to attain honor roll and honor guard (exemplary behavior) status come in the form of field days, movies, recreation nights, bowling, and roller-skating. Participation in these activities requires being current with school assignments.

Meaningful After-School Study Hour

To ensure success of 100% of the 200 students at Saint Peter Middle School in Stevens Point, WI, Principal Anne Rogalski and School Counselor Rebecca Jacoby initiated the Meaningful After-School Study Hour (MASH) (Rogalski & Jacoby, 2000). Staffed by two teachers and three volunteers (a senior citizen, a university student, and a parent), MASH originally served 3–9 students who were at risk for failure and about 45 students who were struggling in one or more classes.

The program’s success is attributed to two hours a week of academic support, study skills instruction, and an academic motivation plan. The motivation comes in the form of cocurricular activities that are available to students who meet the academic and behavioral conduct requirements set forth by a committee of staff members and parents. After MASH, there is a zero grade-level failure rate, down from 3%. The number of students failing one class has decreased from 23% to 5%.

Rogalski (personal communication, May 14, 2000) said that the success from participating in activities was immediate. “I never believed playing football could be so motivating,” she said of one young man who was failing every subject but who now suddenly had a B average to meet the needed academic requirement to play a sport. Rogalski believes it is not just one factor that accounts for student success in the four-year-old program. All students have weekly planners and, when necessary, are required to have routine parent and teacher signatures to ensure communication. Friday Progress Reports are another connection between home and school. Staff members work closely with the public school to share strategies for at-risk learners and monitor special education individualized education programs and 504 plans. The staff members also follow up on graduates, meeting with high school personnel to ensure that students who need academic support are enrolled in special study halls.

Everybody-Has-to-Get-It Program

In Indiana, Jon Bennett, the principal of Bluffton-Harrison Middle School, believes in committing all resources to help students learn (Wheelock, n.d.). Impressed by a colleague’s statement that “there should be no throwaway kids,” Bennett (personal communication, March 4, 2002) leads the staff in multiple opportunities for at-risk students—Saturday School, after-school programs, tutoring, weekly social worker home and workplace visits, learning contracts, and positive news calls. The Bluffton-Harrison Middle School program has three key components: multiple strategies to head off an academic or social crisis, time to complete all required assignments, and commitment by staff members to connect with the most at-risk students.
During the first year of the program, the number of students who could have failed dropped from 70 to 8. Bennett reports that failure rates continue to remain low and achievement is rising steadily. He attributes the school’s philosophy—“Everything for All Students”—as the motive for moving the school from a middle-ranking school to one of the top-scoring schools in the state. The school’s efforts are paying off. Bluffton-Harrison received a 2000–2001 four-star rating from the Indiana Department of Education, the first school in its district to receive such an award. The school also scored in the top 25% in the state in academics and attendance.

Core Knowledge Acquisition
What is a successful learner? To Jerry Singer, the principal of Haysville (KS) Middle School, a successful learner has acquired a core set of knowledge before being promoted (Singer, 2001). For those students who did not meet standards, staff members agreed to develop a program that moved students toward the requisite core knowledge. Their “no more marching in place” individualized program has four cornerstones—summer school, normal school year, after-school assistance, and alternative school.

Teachers who recommend that students be retained have the responsibility of writing the objectives and developing the materials for the students’ summer school program. As an incentive, the objectives can be met in less than the planned five-week summer school program if the student opts to pick up the pace. The normal school year support is patterned after the summer school plan—individualized objectives, student-paced goal achievement, teacher support, and a return to the regular grade level class when ready. After-school assistance programs support all students, including those who are at risk. As an incentive, transportation is provided to the sports/activity center or the students’ homes after the programs.

Finally, for those students who still did not meet standards, there was an alternative middle level school where a student worked individually with teacher support. According to Singer (personal communication, April 15, 2002), the alternative school was eliminated in 2001–2002—partially because of decreased financial support, but best of all because summer school, normal school year, and after-school assistance programs were successful to the degree that only two students remained in the alternative school program.

In its place, Haysville Middle School initiated the Individual Development in Every Area (IDEA) room, a place for students who fall behind. The IDEA room, which acquired its name from the “does anyone have any idea what to call this program?” question, begins in September with 20 full-time students who make up previously failed classes in math, science, social studies, and language arts. As students catch up, they can return to their age-appropriate classes. Singer indicated that about 75% of IDEA room students in grades 6 and 7 do catch up, and in the second semester, the IDEA room is transformed into a pullout program focused on students at risk for failure in one particular subject.

The Challenge
Retained students do not automatically catch up in a retention year (Roberston, 1997) and they are at high risk for dropping out of school (Setencich in Robertson, 1997). These six programs ensure that overaged students and students at risk for retention are not dropouts. Instead, students have an opportunity to catch up with their peers and increase their likelihood of graduating from high school. These opportunities come through programs that address the whole student. The programs are personalized and use unconventional means to tie academics to students’ personal lives. Haysville Middle School’s mission sums up the prospects for engaging overage middle school learners: “All students can learn regardless of previous performance or personal background.” These programs are the hallmarks of commitment by administrators and teachers to give students a second chance at success. PL

References

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