



CTA Institute for Teaching

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Students and Staff Agree that Positive Deviance Is Helping to Change the Culture of Merced High School

Merced High School teachers and students are working together to increase the chances that at-risk students will remain in school as part of the Positive Deviance project. Under a grant from the Hewlett Foundation, the dropout reduction project is now in its second year at the school. (At right and below), Science teacher Anthony Gonzalez and PD Consultant Mark Munger listen to ideas at a February student forum.



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Merced High School senior Brianna Dartas never considered herself a role model. In fact, the 17-year-old's life story overlaps the experiences of many a high school drop-out.

Dartas, who was raised by a single mom, worked part time to help the family. They were poor and lived in a tough neighborhood known for gangs and crime. Many of her peers from the same background have already dropped out of school, but she did not give up. Dartas, of mixed Native American and Latino descent, will be graduating this year, and plans to attend college.

"I want a white collar job," said Dartas, adding that setting specific goals and holding oneself accountable are the keys to success. "There is no excuse; we make our decisions." The young woman singled out her grandmother as a mentor who instilled in her the value of education.

"I used my Grandma as a rock for not dropping out," said Dartas, adding that her Grandma was the driving force behind her desire to be the first one in her family to graduate from college. That desire to keep herself and her friends in school inspired her to join a new program at her high school.

Called Positive Deviance (PD), the innovative program started two years ago at Merced High to tap the experiences of students like Dartas, who keep themselves out of trouble and excel at school despite setbacks in their lives. One aim of the program is that their peers will learn from them, perhaps reducing the school's high drop-out rate as a bonus.

Instead of approaching the problem in a traditional way – looking at students who drop out of school -- the program relies on outliers, or the exceptions. Those are the outstanding students, who stay in school and thrive despite such social factors as poverty, family problems, crime and gangs.

"It's like looking at the flip side of a coin," said Mark Munger, senior associate of the Positive Deviance Initiative at Tufts University in Boston. An advisor for the school's pilot program, Munger, said he regularly visits the school to provide guidance and advice to teachers.

Munger described the program's two-steps approach. The first is tapping into the knowledge of the community outliers, who somehow come up with the solutions to problems. Second is to share those solutions with the rest of the community and grow as a whole. In this case, Munger said, the "outliers" are outstanding students like Dartas, and the school is the community.

Merced High School is the first anywhere to apply this two-step idea to curbing the drop-out rate. This is thanks to veteran math teacher Sheila A. Whitley, who applied for the grant that funds the PD program after witnessing the alarming dropout rate at the school.

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Positive Deviance: Combating high school dropouts in Merced

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Among them, Whitley said, African American and Latino students are more likely to drop out, as well as Hmong and Vietnamese girls, because many of them shoulder the burden of caring for family members, causing them to fall behind on their studies.

Merced High has a very diverse student body: Over half are Hispanic, a fifth are white, another fifth are Asian and less than 10 percent are black. Almost a tenth of the student population are English learners. For most, Spanish or Hmong are their first language.

Each year, teachers in the program recruit students who are flagged by their teachers as either "at-risks" or "positives."

"At-risks" describe students showing signs tending to lead to dropping out, such as failing grades, low attendance and involvement in gang-related activities. "Positives" describe those doing well on their homework and earning good grades despite their disadvantaged backgrounds.



At left, Mark Munger, PD Consultant from Tufts University, introduces participating students and staff at a February MHS faculty meeting. Below, core PD teachers Katina Austin and Julie Rivard listen intently as their students and colleague Sarah Morgan speak about how their participation in the program has benefitted them and others on campus.



As part of the MHS Positive Deviance project, an "Every Bear Counts" poster hangs on the wall of the Staff Lounge. The poster, which displays a color photo of every Merced High student, has checkboxes for teachers and support staff to fill-in each time they have a positive interaction or relationship-building experience with one of their students.

However, these groupings merely serve as guidelines to find students, who can benefit most from the program. After the program starts, the labels disappear because some at-risk youth can very well become "positive" students...

That's what happened to Merced High senior Gary Womack. Now in the "positive" pool, representing the school for speech contests and holding on a 3.80 G.P.A., he'll head to the University of California, Davis, next fall, majoring in Food Science and Business. Only two years ago, Womack was headed down the wrong path.

Womack was raised by a single mother and spent part of his early childhood in foster care. In his freshman year, he frequently committed thefts, used drugs and was involved in petty crimes. In his sophomore year, he was adopted by his friend's parents, who have helped restore stability to his life.

Womack said he would like to help others going through similar situations. He believes the student-to-student conversation format of the program allows him to make positive impacts on others effectively with his real-life experiences. "I learned it the hard way," he said. "I am helping other students because I have been through all that."

Currently, participants in the program meet every other week during lunchtime. Students come up with their own topics of discussion and brainstorm solutions. They cover a wide range of school related issues, from homework and tardiness to cell phone use on campus and the effects of budget cuts. Although it is a teacher-driven program, teachers act only as facilitators of these conversations.

Teachers also learn more about their students through the PD program. One of the program's founding teachers, Katina Austin, realized that opening conversations directly with students about the risk of dropping out is difficult because many feel the topic is irrelevant while they are in school. Austin found it worked better to begin a conversation about issues leading to dropping out, such as problems with homework and studying.

Other teachers said they learn about various everyday challenges that affect students' school performance. For example, students said they often feel obligated to stop and socialize with others in front of their lockers, because they don't want to be considered rude among their peers, even if they risk being late for class. Students also shared that they are unable to finish homework because they didn't have money to buy paper and pens. Teachers said the information allows them to know where to offer help.



The deadline for this year's IFT Grant application is April 30, 2011.
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