Building a Multi-Ethnic Family-School-Community Partnership: Coalition for PRIDE

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Like many schools across the country, the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District (SMCISD) is a multi-ethnic school district (59% Hispanic, 37% white, and 4% African-American) with an alarming school dropout rate. For example, the class of 1990 alone lost 225 students (40 percent) throughout its four high school years (1986-90). Despite numerous problems including poverty, lack of achievement, language difficulties, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and teenage pregnancy, SMCISD is a district that recognizes it has natural resources within the school, the home, and the community, and this district is restructuring its approach to education so that all students can be successful learners. Two key programs are crucial to this restructuring effort: the PRIDE Center and Coalition for PRIDE.

In 1989, SMCISD instituted the PRIDE Center, an alternative high school of choice for dropouts and potential dropouts. PRIDE embodies the philosophy of the new school—positive, responsible individuals desiring an education. This is a different kind of school, a restructured school which enables students to begin and complete courses at any time of year and follow a self-paced curriculum that is competency-based rather than time-based. The curriculum includes mentoring, counseling and guidance services, tutoring, computer-assisted instruction, college preparation, career decision making, a positive atmosphere, and high expectations. The program is staffed by a principal, four teachers, a counselor, and the Coalition for PRIDE social worker.

Building on the enthusiasm associated with this new school of choice, school social workers took the lead in building a coalition of community, business, and family forces to support prevention, intervention, and recovery of dropouts. Officially beginning in January 1990 with funding from the Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching (F.I.R.S.T.), Coalition for PRIDE is a partnership among the university, the

business community, social services, and families. The Coalition is founded on the principle that collaboration among a wide range of community agencies is essential to reduce the current critically high dropout rate. No single agency can possibly provide for the needs of all the families and children; there is overlap, confusion, and disarray when individual businesses, community groups, and social agencies develop their own agendas for helping at-risk students. With its emphasis on multi-faceted collaboration, Coalition for PRIDE's goal is to join all of these entities together, to share, to listen to others' perspectives, and to work together toward the common goal of decreasing the dropout rate. While the PRIDE center's focus is on dropouts and potential dropouts at the high school level, Coalition for PRIDE focuses on prevention, intervention, and recovery of at-risk students from pre-kindergarten through high school.

Two school social workers and four social work interns, with support from two university faculty co-directors, have built a coalition of community, business, and family forces to address the various needs of at-risk youth and their families. Key components of the program include: counseling at-risk youth and their families; consulting with teachers and school counselors; providing inservice training for school personnel on working with minority families; linking youth and the families to appropriate community and school resources; advocacy for youth and their families; and implementing innovative programs such as the tutoring program (PRIDE Center students tutor pre-kindergarten students) and mentoring program (volunteers from local businesses mentor PRIDE Center students).

The following examples provide a portrait of the daily operation of Coalition for PRIDE:

- **Social Services/Family Support:** An at-risk adolescent was referred for poor attendance (27 absences in three months) and emotional outbursts at school. When the educators met, their recommendation was to suspend this student from school because of poor attendance. The bilingual school social worker met with the student and her mother (who spoke no English) and discovered the student had witnessed the murder of her father during the holiday break and was afraid for her own safety. The mother and daughter had been moving from residence to residence. The social worker counseled with the family about possible community resources and found them a safe place to live. As a result, her school attendance improved. The social worker's consultation resulted in a changed recommendation. The social worker asked for copies of the attendance records and verified that her attendance had improved dramatically (only 2 absences in three months), since she had a safe place to live and was receiving counseling at a community agency. In fact, during the current month she had not missed any days. The student's attitudes, self-esteem, and grades are still improving.

- **Self-Esteem/Tutoring:** A sixteen-year-old student was referred because she stutters in stressful situations. There was concern that she
would not be able to function well as a tutor because of her stuttering. The social worker, the principal of the PRIDE Center, and the teacher at the pre-K school collaborated and decided to give the student the opportunity to try being a tutor. The result was that the student did not stutter with young children; in fact, she was an excellent reader with a young audience. The student’s self-esteem soared, and she is now applying herself to her own academics in the PRIDE Center.

• **Motivation/Teacher Leaders:** Twenty-one teachers have volunteered for a newly organized Student Success Team. These teachers were selected from more than seventy teachers at all grade levels who wanted to help at-risk students achieve better. Working with the social workers, these teachers will become teacher leaders and train other teachers about the most effective strategies for working with at-risk students and their families.

• **Career Awareness/Mentoring Program:** The social worker made a brief presentation at the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce about the need for Hispanic role models and left the meeting with 29 volunteers from local businesses. These mentors come from a variety of professions and occupations (hairstylist, teacher, accountant, small business owner, real estate broker, library assistant) and are being matched with students who have similar job interests.

• **Family Involvement in Education:** The social worker spoke with a group of more than 100 low-income, minority parents about both their rights and their responsibilities as parents. Many parents did not know they could attend school board meetings without a specific invitation. They were excited to hear that teachers and administrators welcomed their input. Several parents are now taking leadership roles on school district boards and committees.

This multi-ethnic family-school-community partnership has implications for the restructuring of education in many other schools and communities. Education is not the responsibility of the school alone; family and community have a stake in education. They must and will accept the responsibility for ensuring the success of education.

Recommendations for other communities interested in "joining forces" for dropout prevention with the school, businesses, social service agencies, and families include:

• **Voluntary Alternative School:** Involuntary enrollment in alternative schools is often seen as punishment by parents, dropouts, and potential dropouts. The voluntary aspect of the PRIDE Center has resulted in students actively seeking enrollment and being motivated to do their best.

• **Multi-Ethnic Staff:** If a dropout prevention program is to be successful with minority students, it is essential to hire key personnel who represent ethnic minorities. In addition, majority staff must receive training in working with multi-ethnic students and their families.
Parental Involvement: Parental involvement in the education of children is mandatory if the dropout rate is to be reduced. School personnel often complain that minority and poor parents are not involved with the school. School social workers are key personnel in linking parents and schools.

Collaboration Not Competition: The competency-based, self-paced curriculum of the PRIDE Center and the highly visible collaborative efforts of the Coalition for PRIDE reflect the value of collaboration. Ethnic minority groups work best with schools when collaboration is emphasized.

School-Based Social Services: The school is the only one of the collaborative entities which sees every child; the school is the universal agency and the most appropriate place for families to go to find out about social services. All services may not be provided at the school site, but the school can be the "broker" for where to go to receive services.

Emphasis on Self-Esteem: Low self-esteem is a key factor in educational achievement for at-risk students. The more a school can do to help students believe that all students can be successful, the more successful the students will be.

Education has been restructured in San Marcos. In a little more than a year, 20 would-be dropouts have received regular high school diplomas, and 75 former dropouts are now in the classroom. The school has broad support from community organizations who provide mentors and scholarships for students. A concerned-citizens group of minority parents meets frequently with the superintendent. Tracking has been eliminated in the elementary school. Businesses and the higher education community send representatives to the school on a regular basis; proposals for joint projects have been written. Social service agencies have direct links with the school and are providing better services to children and their families. A multi-ethnic family-school-community partnership has restructured education in San Marcos; the vision of education for all children is becoming a reality.

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