

It All Began With a Handshake

Roxy Sherwood

Because Cleburne High School (CHS) was entering over 500 freshman each year and graduating half that number, administrators formulated a plan to reverse that trend. A teacher was trained to offer a Teen Leadership class based on Flippen's Teen Leadership workshops. CHS soon found positive changes occurring in their students' lives. Therefore, Judy Senter, campus principal, made a decision to implement Flippen's Teen Leadership curriculum in an experimental program for a targeted "at risk" incoming group of freshman. As a result of the PASS program (Project for Affecting Student Success), absenteeism is down, grades are up, and some solid peer and teacher relationships have formed. Because of the positive atmosphere, teachers and students alike look forward to coming to school. This change began with a simple handshake.

"You can't teach a kid to learn unless they know you care (Flip Flippen). Based on my conversations with fellow teachers, we are in the profession because we sincerely care about students, but the pressure of meeting TAKS, completing modifications, preparing for TAKS, managing classroom discipline, and the day to day workload has worn us down. Even though we care for the students, often the energy drain has reduced our focus to merely imparting the knowledge, developing the skill, evaluating the learning, and attempting to recharge for the next day. However, Cleburne High School (CHAS) students and staff alike are rekindling a love for learning with a mutual respect for each other. This is due to F.B. (Flip) Flippen's Teen Leadership (2002-03) curriculum that CHS developed into the Project for Affecting Student Success (PASS) program designed for incoming freshman.

Teen Leadership and PASS evolved from an in-service program presented in January, 2001. The purpose of the pro-

gram was to prevent Cleburne from becoming another Columbine. While many schools were trying to prevent students from carrying weapons on school grounds by installing metal detectors, Cleburne was looking for a more positive approach to controlling violent outburst. Carolyn Cody, assistant superintendent, had invited Flip Flippen of College Station as presenter. Flip Flippen is a rancher and psychologist who developed a theory for teaching troubled adolescents, especially males, through observing and training horses. In a video segment about his work with Monty Roberts, "The Horse Whisperer," Flippen showed a parallel between horses, teens, and anti-social behavior resulting from emotional and physical abuse. His premise was that through building a relationship of trust, horses and students alike can be trained or taught to overcome their emotional scars, problems and difficulties. This in-service presentation gave Cleburne Independent School District (CISD) professional educators food for thought and many in the audience believed

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that improving the quality relationship between teachers and students should be a high priority of the district. Because of the brevity of the presentation, we were left without the “how” or the tools to build and implement this type of relationship with our students. Fortunately, Mr. Flippen mentioned additional curricula and in-service presentations that he was developing.

After the meeting, CHS’s soccer coach and social studies teacher, Coby Bird, expressed to Mrs. Cody and Mrs. Senter an interest in attending a workshop offered by Flippen. Judy Senter was principal at CHS and is now curriculum specialist at CISD. Mr. Bird attended “Capturing Kids’ Hearts,” a three-day workshop in a retreat format in which Flippen’s Teen Leadership curriculum was presented. This course presented the skills involved in creating trusting relationships between teachers and students while fostering a student monitored classroom management system to develop a quality classroom learning environment. An additional day of training was required in order to be a Teen Leadership teacher. After attending, Mr. Bird returned to CHS ready to teach a Teen Leadership class and soon began to witness life-changing results in students.

Mr. Bird’s first class of Teen Leadership were in November, 2001. He had two classes of twenty students each. CHS is on the trimester system and the course was offered to any student as a 1/2 credit elective. Some students were targeted by administration and counselors because of teachers’ and administrators’ perceived need for positive academic and personal lifestyle changes.

The Teen Leadership model described specific steps that help teachers to develop a positive relationship with their students. The first step in the curriculum is meeting students at the door with a handshake, eye contact, and verbal greeting everyday with every student. This process is called engaging. After the teacher has learned all his/her student’s names, a class social contact is created by the students to give them a part in their own classroom management. The contract addressed four questions:

1. How do you want to be treated by me, your teacher?
2. How do you want to be treated by others?
3. How should you treat me, your teacher?
4. How will we deal with conflict?

The student’s responses to the four questions always included the word *respect* and often included the word *trust* and *The Golden Rule*. Discussions included defining the terms of the contract and giving possible scenarios to insure understanding of expectations.

At the beginning of class each day, students were given a personal, reflective journal prompt and then a few minutes to share “good news.” The teacher reminded students to actively listen and ask questions and encouraged feedback among students. Within a couple of weeks, Mr. Bird was reporting to administrators and co-teachers some dramatic turns in his students’ attitudes and lives. From the numerous required speeches given in class, students began to admit previous poor choices, including skipping classes, fighting, creating conflicts within their families, and abusing drugs and alcohol.

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Through peer and teacher support, these destructive patterns and behaviors were beginning to change. Parents of the students were hearing about their child's Teen Leadership class and noticing positive changes. One mother called the school to see what was going on with her child. He had admitted his drug use and had made a public commitment at his church to lead a Christian life.

On the second day of the Capturing Kids' Hearts workshop, about a half-dozen students from other schools were invited to share with the trainees what Teen Leadership has meant to them. Coach Bird prepared his students to present to a workshop, and soon after that, they were speaking at CISD board meetings and to CHS faculty and staff about their ability to make good choices for their academic and personal lives. Needless to say, grade averages, attendance, self concept, maturation, and desires for successful futures appeared to be on the rise.

About halfway through the trimester, with a targeted focus from central administration on the dropout problem and contrast between the ninth and twelfth grade class numbers, Mrs. Senter formulated a plan to experiment with implementing the Teen Leadership philosophy in a program for targeted "at risk" incoming freshman. In 1999, an existing upstairs library was converted to classrooms and a faculty workroom while a new library media center was built at the front of the high school. Four of the classrooms were clustered in a hallway and provided a perfect physical housing for the plan. Because of the arrangement, the program was beginning to be referred to as "the pod."

The idea was that there would be eighty students, twenty per class, who rotated through their core academic subjects: English, math, social studies, and Teen Leadership. The teachers had a shared conference period while the students were in physical education.

To hire the appropriate teachers for the program, Mrs. Senter considered suggestions, especially from site-based committee members and department chairpersons, along with some teachers who volunteered for the opportunity. Besides being good teachers, other qualities Mrs. Senter looked for were nurturing personality, enthusiasm, and a positive outlook. She then chose an assistant principal, Jim Phillips, and a counselor, Janet Mauldin, to be contact persons so that communication between "the pod" and administration would be optimal.

In order to create stronger relationships between teachers and students, CHS staff decided that the pupils would be in the program for an entire year while the other CHS students changed classes each trimester. Because several of the PASS students had failed portions of the TAAS and classes in middle school, a reading class and math skills for pre-algebra class earning local credit were part of the curriculum. Also for local credit, a problem solving class, which is considered social studies credit, was added to the "pod" curriculum. The Teen Leadership class included the TAKS requirements for the students' speech credit. The teachers targeted to man the program were Roxy Sherwood for Reading and English; Diane Crosby for math; and Karen Owens for social studies. All the teachers participated

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in the Capturing Kids' Hearts workshop in late April, 2001. Because of Mr. Bird's coaching responsibilities, he was not able to teach all four classes of Teen Leadership the entire year; therefore, veteran teachers Lorna Smith, Lyle Lackey, and Ron Garcia were also selected and trained to teach the Teen Leadership course. Coach Lackey attended the workshop during the summer and was scheduled to teach with the PASS program beginning second trimester along with Teen Leadership as an elective to the general student body.

The criteria for selection of PASS students included those with failing or borderline TAAS scores and middle school grades along with students that had failed a grade or two but had not previously been in ninth grade. Social immaturity, which manifested in shyness, fighting and aggression, and disciplinary action by the middle school, was the other factor considered. Some of the students had been sent to an Alternative Education Program (AEP) for drug use at school and some were chosen from the Bright Tomorrows program, a school service for unwed mothers. These students often ask why they were chosen and we explained their middle school counselors had chosen them due to their leadership capabilities. Most of the students realized their low grades were a factor, and possibly also the fact that they spent a lot of time in the principal's office; however, their self esteem and self confidence seemed to be stronger. When asked why they are in PASS, they beamed and replied that they *were chosen*.

It was necessary to do some creative scheduling for students involved in choir, band, and ath-

letics; however, school involvement, leadership, and developing special skills and talents were goals of the program so we managed to hurdle the scheduling challenges. Some of the students were mainstreamed into regular social studies classes to meet their scheduling needs. In addition, some student combinations in classes needed to be adjusted; however, it was a simple process to make the changes.

As stated earlier, the program's primary focus is building a trusting relationship, teacher-to-student and student-to-student. After the consistent engaging process and social contract was in place, promoting empathy is the next step in the process, specifically, breaking down social barriers. Students began to appreciate each other's uniqueness and positive qualities. Because we had the students for a full year, we came to understand their personal and academic backgrounds. On a day-to-day or period-by-period basis, The PASS teachers were able to assess if a student seems troubled, determine the source and communicate with the student to help him/her find solutions to deal with his/her concerns. At times, students experienced health and family problems and all teachers became aware of the problems. If there were conflicts between students and their peers, teachers were able to de-escalate the situation. Having the students for an entire year, as opposed to twelve weeks, seemed to promote a more nurturing atmosphere than is possible on the traditional schedule.

One of the major relationship builders in the program was taking the students to the Tarleton's Ropes Course. This was

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a suggestion from other schools that were offering Teen Leadership. Students and teachers were guided through team building and problem solving activities in the morning and the afternoon was for individual challenge and success. Everyone, including the teachers, was congratulated on attempts at climbing and crossing the cables. We witnessed that each person gave his best effort even though not each one was able to complete the task. They were praised for what was accomplished. The students and teachers experienced in a physical, “hands on” way that because they attempted a challenge, they were able to overcome their fears and low expectations of themselves. They experienced success. Two days after we returned from the Ropes Course, I gave a test. It was not the usual format. Several students began to panic, turn their papers over, slam down their pencils, and make comments to the effect that they would fail or make a zero and couldn’t do the work. I quickly reminded them of the Ropes Course experience and that there could be no success without an attempt. They were able to reframe, another skill presented in their Teen Leadership class, and began to focus on working through their test.

The relationship-building philosophy definitely spilled over into the academic area, creat-

ing high motivation in the students. At the time of this writing, we have completed our first six weeks reporting period. Table 1 illustrates the freshman passing rates from the previous year’s first six weeks and the total freshman’s class’s current passing percentage compared to PASS rate in English, Math, and Social Studies.

Another way of looking at academic success is that for the first six weeks of 2001, 59% of the freshman failed at least one class. For the same reporting period in 2002, 24% of the freshman failed at least one class while only 13% of the PASS students experienced a failing grade.

When I was passing out report cards during second period, I noticed many high grades, unlike my experience with my previous freshman classes. The next day, I asked the students to share their reactions, their parents’ reactions, and to set goals for the next reporting period. Many said they hadn’t had all A’s since elementary school; others commented that this was the first they had straight A’s. Some reported that their parents were very pleased since they had had so many failing grades during middle school. The teachers are beginning to see morale and self-confidence soar supporting the adage that “success breeds success.”

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Table 1 Freshman Passing Rates

	English	Math	Social Studies
9th grade passing % 1st 6 weeks 2001	64.7	71.4	81.1
Total 9th grade passing % 1st 6 weeks 2002	76.2	80.7	91.0
PASS passing % 1st 6 weeks 2002	95.5	92.6	98.5

Attendance percentages are also on the rise. This year, total freshman attendance the first six weeks was 95.6%, compared to 2001's 94.23%. PASS attendance was 98%. An example of students' rekindled enthusiasm about coming to school occurred last week. During fall break the previous week, one young lady was hit by a car and had some facial contusions, including jay injuries and tooth loss. Her stepmother came to school to pick up her assignments for the coming week since the student would be out because of her soreness an embarrassment over her appearance. She was back on the third day instead of being out the entire week because she didn't want to miss school. The teachers and students, aware of here discomfort, approached her with encouragement and appreciation for her "105 percent effort," another skill taught in the Flippen curriculum.

An additional factor contributing to the above statistics is that PASS classes have fewer than twenty students. Eighty-six students were scheduled into the program; however, after registration the total in PASS is sixty-six which is divided into the four-class rotation. The lower class size allows for the key relationship factor to be created, and academically, teacher are able to do a better job at assessing learning styles and deficiencies while monitoring student progress.

The only concern expressed by parents of the students was that they would be isolated and negatively labeled; however, over one third of the students are involved in extra-curricular activities including men and women's soccer, band, choir, football, cheerleading, debate, and a newly-formed poetry club.

Because of the skills learned in PASS, the students are taking leadership roles in these organizations. Also, two students have been named freshman "Student of the Week," another positive recognition program started by Mrs. Senter.

Even with all of the successes experienced in PASS, realistically speaking there have been some challenges. Two students have been suspended for fighting ans some for dress code violations. There have been a few personality clashes among students and some classroom behavior problems, but because of the solid relationship foundation and teaching/mentoring skills learning the Teen Leadership/Capturing Kids' hearts curriculum, those normal setbacks have been minimal and turned into learning experiences. Justin Marchel, the current Cleburne High School principal, is amazed with the success that he is seeing in the PASS program, not only academically, but in the maturity and cooperative attitudes of the students. After a discussion of how the class's social contract was violated after the aforementioned fight, the class decided that the young men should apologize to Mr. Marchel for infringing upon his time as a result of their poor choice. The young men looked Mr. Marchel in the eye, shook his hand, and in clear voices admitted that they had learned a valuable lesson from the incident and were sorry for the inconvenience. Mr. Marchel plans to expand the program yearly, working toward a freshman campus based on this philosophy.

Although it will take over three years to evaluate whether or not PASS will meet the goal of bringing the number of graduating seniors closer in line with

the class size of incoming freshman, many life-changing successes of sixty-six freshman are occurring. These academic and social accomplishments have increased motivation, self esteem, and self confidence. Seeing these positive results spill over into encouragement for the teachers and administration make Cleburne High School an enjoyable learning and working environment. These changes all began with a handshake.

Roxy Sherwood is in her eleventh year at Cleburne High School. She is currently teaching ninth grade reading and English. She is also UIL Academic co-coordinator and a Certified UIL One Act Play Critic Judge. She holds a BFA degree in Theatre from Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas.

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