

III. Tools/Handouts

Using a “Prereferral Intervention Process” to Re-engage Students in Learning

As soon as a student looks like they are disengaging from learning at school, it is essential that teachers and support staff begin to try “something different.” A useful set of strategies are those that have been developed as “prereferral interventions.” Optimally, such strategies can re-engage the student; minimally, they add additional assessment information about what has gone wrong. As every teacher knows, the causes of student problems are hard to analyze. What looks like a learning or an attentional problem may be emotionally-based. Misbehavior often arises in reaction to learning difficulties. What appears as a school problem may be the result of problems at home.

A prereferral intervention process delineates steps and strategies to guide teachers. The following is one example. As has been stressed, the first steps in re-engaging a student involve getting the youngster's view of what's wrong (including, as feasible, exploring the problem with the family).

Some Steps in Prereferral Intervention

(1) *Understanding the Problem*

The following are some things to consider in seeking more information about what may be causing a youngster's problems. (See accompanying examples of interview instruments.)

- (a) Through enhanced personal contacts, build a positive working relationship with the youngster and family.
- (b) Focus first on assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes at school and in class).
- (c) Ask about what the youngster doesn't like at school.
- (d) Explore the reasons for "dislikes" (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)
- (e) Explore other possible causal factors.
- (f) Explore what the youngster and those in the home think can be done to make things better (including extra support from a volunteer, a peer, friend, etc.).
- (g) Discuss some new things the youngster and those in the home would be *willing* to try to make the situation better.

(2) ***Try new strategies in the classroom*** – based on the best information about what is causing the problem.

(3) ***If the new strategies don't work, talk to others*** at school to learn about approaches they find helpful (e.g., reach out for support/mentoring/coaching, participate with others in clusters and teams, observe how others teach in ways that effectively address differences in motivation and capability, request additional staff development on working with such youngsters).

Prereferral Interventions Some Things to Try

- C Make changes to (a) improve the match between a youngster's program and his/her interests and capabilities and (b) try to find ways for her/him to have a special, positive status in class, at the school, and in the community. Talk and work with other staff in developing ideas along these lines.
- C Add resources for extra support (aide, volunteers, peer tutors) to help the youngster's efforts to learn and perform. Create time to interact and relate with the youngster as an individual.
- C Discuss with the youngster (and those in the home) why the problems are occurring.
- C Specifically focus on exploring matters with the youngster that will suggest ways to enhance positive motivation.
- C Change aspects of the program (e.g., materials, environment) to provide a better match with his/her interests and skills.
- C Provide enrichment options (in and out of class).
- C Use resources such as volunteers, aides, and peers to enhance the youngster's social support network.
- C Specifically focus on exploring ways those in the home can enhance their problem-solving efforts.
- C If necessary include other staff (e.g., counselor, principal) in a special discussion with the youngster exploring reasons for the problem and ways to enhance positive involvement at school and in class.

(4) ***If necessary, use the school's referral processes*** to ask for additional support services.

(5) ***Work with referral resources to coordinate your efforts with theirs*** for classroom success.

Clarifying Student Perceptions of Disengagement

I'd like to get to know you a bit more before we talk about school.

(a) What are some of the things you like to do when your not at school (e.g., special interests, fun activities)?

(b) What, if anything, is there that you like to do at school?

Some students have “turned off” to school. That is, they don’t really want to go to class or do what the teacher asks them to do. This happens for a lot of reasons. We think if we can better understand some of the reasons we might be able to make schools better places.

(1) About how many students at this school do you think are “turned off” to school?

1-10% _____ 11-25% _____ 26-50% _____ 51-75% _____ 76-90% _____

(2) How about you? How often do you feel that way about school?

never _____ sometimes _____ pretty often _____ all the time _____

(3) When you feel that way, what is the school or your teacher(s) doing that you don’t like?

(After the student responds, you may want to do a bit more probing: (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)

(4) What would you like the school and your teacher(s) to do differently?

(5) What would need to change to make going to school worth your time and effort?

Clarifying Parent Perceptions of their Child's Disengagement

(1) What are some of the things your child likes to do when not at school (e.g., special interests, fun activities)?

(2) What, if anything, is there that s/he like to do at school?

We realize that some students “turn off” to school. That is, they don't really want to go to class or do what the teacher asks them to do. This happens for a lot of reasons.

(3) Do you feel that your youngster has “turned off” to school?

no_____ sometimes_____ pretty often_____ all the time_____

(4) When s/he feels that way, what is the school or the teacher(s) doing that s/he doesn't like?

(After the parents respond, you may want to do a bit more probing: (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)

(5) What would you like the school and teacher(s) to do differently to re-engage your youngster in learning at school?

Guiding the Re-negotiation Process

Thank you for sharing your views and ideas with us. What you have told us about what you would like the school to do differently and what you would like changed to make going to school worth your time and effort is very important.

We would really like to make school a better place for you and other students who have been “turned off.”

We think maybe a good place to start is by working together on a plan for how to proceed.

Let’s begin by looking at some of the changes and new opportunities that the school wants to offer you.

Then, let’s try to identify some of the things you would really see as good ways for you to spend time at school and in class.

(After the assisting the student in sampling new processes and content –)

(1) Now, let’s talk about some of things you would like to learn about.

(2) What would be the best ways for us to help you to learn these things?

(3) Let’s make some plans for how to start all this. We can redo these plans whenever you feel they need to be changed.

For a while, let’s plan to meet at the end of each day to talk about whether you feel the plans need to be changed.