

**An Action Research Study:**

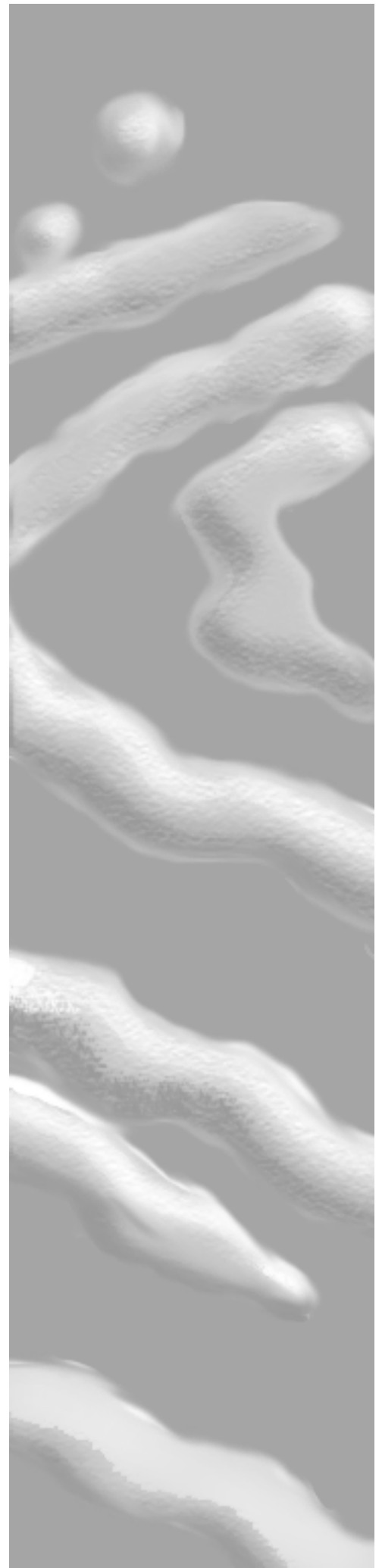
**CHAPTER 11**

***No Teen Left Behind?***

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*With such great potential inherent in these students, the need is great to create more and more effective programs to help them realize their potential.*

## **Background**

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When I started working at Urban Peak, a runaway and homeless youth shelter in Denver Colorado, two observations surprised me. One was the extraordinary academic potential of the homeless youth residing in the shelter, and the other was their lack of substantial progress in finishing their high school education. Our on-site GED lab was serving a modest number of youth, having graduated between 19-33 students annually over the past three years. Since Urban Peak serves approximately 800 homeless youth per year, this figure represented a modest 2-4 % of the population obtaining their GEDs. I also noticed youth arriving at the shelter that attended neighborhood high schools and were intent on staying in school, but within three weeks had completely dropped out of school. In addition, I met some who had attempted to enroll in high schools, but found themselves denied because they were older than the traditional high school population and would probably not be able to obtain their diplomas before age 21. Others were discouraged from enrolling having arrived at their new school mid-semester, and the school had no process for granting them credit for partial semester work. I also heard “war stories” of attempts that my predecessors had made to work with neighborhood high schools over the last couple of years to enroll our youth in their schools, but had run into walls of disinterest. It was clear that traditional neighborhood high schools were not very effective in serving the needs of homeless youth within our city.

## **How I got started**

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As I continued to meet individual homeless teenagers in these situations and heard their incredible stories, the tragedy of their situations struck me more and more. Here was a group of young people, many with the potential and the desire to succeed educationally, but with no viable avenue to complete their high school

education. As I began to comprehend the extent of the situation, and the huge loss of human potential, it became my personal passion and mission to do all I could to create opportunities for their educational success. What I envisioned was the creation of a menu of educational services designed for the unique needs of homeless youth.

As I pursued this mission, I started to meet other professionals within the community working on similar issues. I started working on a project with Alana James at the Center for Research Strategies, who was conducting research on the effect of student mobility on the educational success of homeless youth. The study would result in a position paper commissioned by Margie Milenkiewicz, the State Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth of the Colorado Department of Education. I worked with Alana to organize focus groups of twelve homeless youth in the Urban Peak homeless shelter and twelve youth receiving services at our urban drop-in center, the Spot, that wanted to give input concerning their past school mobility and their experiences with school. From a review of literature and the results of these focus groups, Alana gathered evidence to suggest that successful educational strategies for highly mobile homeless teenagers share three key attributes: ease of access to educational services, flexible instructional strategies and an inclusive and welcoming school culture. As it turned out, these findings represented an ideal conceptual framework for me to judge the effectiveness of any program claiming to serve homeless youth, and a framework to use in creating new, more effective, educational strategies.

In working with Alana and Margie, I became aware of a similar project that they were planning to study the effects of mobility on the educational success of students. With the Colorado Participatory Action Research Project (CO PAR), they were in the process of recruiting an administrator and a teacher from ten different schools across the state of Colorado to participate in a yearlong research study on this issue. As I joined this project, the initial meetings in August and October were very informative, and I started to recognize the connection between the problems that traditional schools were having in educating highly mobile youth and the problems that the schools are having in educating homeless teens. Within these first few

sessions, the class began to conceptualize and frame its research in terms of the previously discussed three domains defining successful educational practices for highly mobile students. As participants in the project, we were all learning about the process of action research and our responsibility was to apply these principles to a salient problem in our workplace. It was at this time that I decided to write the current paper focusing on my efforts to understand the educational needs of highly mobile homeless teenagers, along with my attempts at creating a viable educational continuum for this population.

### **Beginning the Action Research: My data**

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To gain a greater understanding of the educational status of the clients that Urban Peak was serving, I instituted a new education intake form that gathered data on the last grade completed by all youth accessing services. From this data collected over the last twelve months, 277 youth received education and employment services at Urban Peak. Of these 277 youth, 18% arrived at Urban Peak already having received their high school diploma, 19% arrived having completed their GED, 29% finished 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 18% finished 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 10% finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 5% finished 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and 1% finished 7<sup>th</sup> grade or below. This data indicates that 82% of the youth dropped out of traditional school environments, and that 63% of the youth entering the shelter had a need to access educational services to complete their high school education.

### **First Steps**

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My first step in creating a continuum of educational services was to beef up our current educational program involving GED preparation services. After having limited initial success, I hired an experienced GED teacher, and within the first year, we had increased our number of graduates from between 19-35 to over 80 students. Given the phenomenal success of this GED program, I decided to evaluate it as a model in terms of the above-mentioned CO PAR framework of successful

educational practices. Located within the shelter only a few feet from the residential dormitories, all youth have easy physical access to the classroom. The instructional program is completely flexible, so that students can stay thirty minutes per day or eight hours per day working on their GED depending on their motivation and attention span. They can come to class every day or once a week, or they can even disappear for six months and then return to work more consistently on their GED. The teacher operates the classroom based on respect, so that each youth is welcome and included in the room, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race or educational level. Some enter the program reading at elementary grade levels, while others are ready to pass the GED immediately with a limited amount of refreshing. Teaching emphasizes a personalized approach and relationship with each youth. The success of this program is demonstrated by the large number of GEDs received within a year, and also the evidence that over 73% of the youth that pass one of the five subtests of the GED go on to complete their entire GED successfully. Within our CO PAR framework, the GED program certainly excels in all three key categories of easy access, flexible instruction and welcoming culture.

### **Unmet Needs**

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The GED program has clearly been successful, but over this last year it has become more and more apparent to me that there are youth that were not being adequately served by this sole educational option. In fact, in focus groups, when asked whether they would rather get their GED or high school diplomas, the vast majority of students indicate that they would rather obtain their diplomas. As it turns out, the majority of these youth enrolled in our on-site GED program by default for reasons of convenience, and more importantly because of the inability of the youth to be successful in accessing high school diploma programs.

As I continued to explore the educational needs of youth served by the agency, I began to focus my attention on teens that arrived at the shelter with only a few credits remaining to obtain their diploma. I have found success over the years working with at-risk youth by starting with small projects, creating a greater chance

of success. My thought was that if I could make public high school work for homeless youth with five or less credits remaining to graduate, then I could learn and build on this success and tackle tougher issues. Over a six-month period, I worked with a handful of youth in this situation, trying to help them finish up at their previous high school. What I soon discovered was that even this small task was a difficult one. With the time it took to obtain school transcripts, contact school personnel, obtain Individual Education Plans, and coordinate the help of district homeless liaisons, the youth in all of the situations had moved out of the shelter before the educational process resolved. I found it frustrating to do that much coordination work, along with getting a number of district personnel involved, only to have the youth disappear before I could devise a solution. In addition, each of these youth happened to be enrolled in different schools within different school districts and counties, with each process involving the coordination of a completely different set of school staff. I soon realized the complexity of this issue, given that there are six counties serving Metro Denver, and another handful of counties surrounding the metro area. Youth could arrive a few credits short of graduating from any of these schools within these county school districts, and I would be in the position of coordinating the solution to the problem with a different group of school personnel. In other words, it was going to be very difficult to build on any success I might find with one particular youth at one particular school.

## **Transitions**

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At the same time that I was working with youth short a few credits from graduating, the agency started discussing collaborating with an innovative charter school in Denver called PS1. The principal of PS1, Karla Haas-Moskowitz, was interested in serving Urban Peak youth, and boosting the enrollment of the school up to its cap. Urban Peak had recently merged with a nighttime urban drop-in center for youth called The Spot. The facility remained unused during the day, and seemed ideal for a satellite location for PS1. Since opening in 1996, PS1 has been very effective at serving at-risk youth, and we felt that an educational program created

under PS1's direction and philosophy would be a nice fit for both Spot youth and Urban Peak homeless youth. Because the satellite school was located within a few miles of the shelter and accessible by bus lines and light rail, we thought that the school would draw a good mix from both facilities. Although proving a wonderful success, and enrolling double the number of the youth that we initially projected, there were surprisingly few Urban Peak homeless youth that ended up enrolling. Although we continued with this collaboration with PS1 at the Spot, we realized that we needed to continue to look for other avenues for Urban Peak youth to obtain their high school diplomas.

Given our lack of success in helping youth finish their diplomas at their neighborhood high schools, and our relative success with the satellite school with PS1 Charter School, we decided to approach PS1 with our initial issue of helping homeless teenagers that are short a few credits finish their diplomas and continue on to post-secondary programs. When approached again, Karla was willing to take on the challenge, so we created the High School Transitions Program. The program planned to utilize the existing PS1 resources, including the regular day program, late shift program, post-secondary options program, special education resources and the PS1 satellite school at the Spot, in order to create individualized educational transition plans for homeless teenagers. Currently, one youth is an apprentice with the PS1 shop teacher, and attends construction classes at Red Rocks Community College in order to finish two credits. Another is in a work-study experience and transcribing his experience working at the Hyatt, along with meeting with the late shift advisor to finish one-half credit. A third started night shift classes each evening in order to finish 9.5 credits for graduation. Additionally, a handful of students with few or no high school credits that have a desire to complete their diploma instead of GED are now enrolling at the regular PS1 day program and the PS1 at the Spot satellite school. These students previously had settled for getting their GED. These students go to class during the day, and receive additional support services of case management and employment counseling from Urban Peak staff during the off school hours. The success of High School Transitions speaks strongly to the need for educational programs, which combine once again the three documented aspects

of successful education programs: easy access, program flexibility and a welcoming culture. The program can be immediately accessed by any homeless youth who is short high school credits, has flexible program elements, which are customized for each student's needs, and is housed in a school environment totally accepting of homeless teenagers.

### **Action Research with Youth**

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Since Urban Peak operates within a youth leadership framework, I viewed it as critical to augment my research with the opinions of the homeless youth that we were attempting to serve. Through a review of the literature on homeless youth, along with readings about innovative school programs and an understanding of the CO PAR framework, I was beginning to conceptualize program elements that I thought would be successful with homeless teens. To test the desirability of these educational program elements, in the winter of 2004 we administered an online survey to over fifty homeless teens that were clients of Urban Peak educational services. Along with demographic questions, I asked the youth to rate 64 potential characteristics of high school programs in order to get an indication of a school design that they felt would be beneficial to their success. In reviewing these elements, the vast majority fit the categories within the CO PAR educational practice model. Over 50% of youth confirmed that these three types of program elements are either extremely important or somewhat important to include in a high school program designed to meet the needs of unaccompanied homeless teenagers.

### **Conclusion**

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In summary, my journey to create new programs to fit within an expanded educational continuum for unaccompanied homeless youth has produced a number of options for youth across the three domains of educational practice. The PS1 at the Spot program has been successful for some students, but has lacked the extreme ease of access needed by homeless teenagers residing at the Urban Peak shelter.

Traditional high schools have proven lacking in all three categories, and have been unable to meet the educational needs of homeless teens short credits of graduating. The High School Transitions Program continues to expand and work effectively for homeless teens, because of the customization of individual learning plans, which fulfill all three aspects necessary for a successful program. The GED program works well for a number of youth, but should not be the only option for homeless youth wanting to complete their high school education, especially those only lacking a handful of credits to graduate. Finally, unaccompanied homeless teenagers are reporting that they would rather be able to obtain their diplomas, and indicate that they want programs based on the three key elements identified within the CO PAR framework.

### **Future Directions**

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Given this evidence, in pursuit of my mission, I am embarking on several new educational projects that will ideally adhere more closely to the CO PAR model of easy access, flexible programming and welcoming culture. In the first project, Urban Peak recently received a grant from the Colorado Department of Education to research the successful practices of traditional high schools to engage homeless teenagers in educational programs. Initial research has identified two promising approaches: welcoming centers that transition youth slowly into the culture and academics of high school, and case managers to follow highly mobile youth from school to school to lessen the effects of school moves. Educators from across the state of Colorado and the nation are sending in information on innovative programs and practices, and we plan a pilot project this fall within a local traditional high school to test some of these practices.

The other project that shows promise involves the development of a charter high school specifically designed to meet the needs of highly mobile and homeless youth. Using the class model and the results of the high school design survey, we will incorporate elements deemed important by the youth. We will also build upon the success of the fore-mentioned educational endeavors in order to create a high

school diploma program with ease of access, flexible instructional strategy, and an inclusive and welcoming school culture. An educational project administrator has been hired, and the charter application will be written this summer, with a projected school opening of summer 2005. I anticipate that we will learn much from this new project, and plan to share these lessons with the local high schools to improve their educational outcomes with homeless youth. With such great potential inherent in these students, the need is great to create more and more effective programs to help them realize their potential.

Urban Peak is a homeless and runaway youth shelter serving 800 youth annually between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. The agency provides a continuum of comprehensive services to this population, including street outreach, shelter services, educational counseling, employment counseling, case management, mental health services, and housing. For additional information contact:  
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