

"Just Do It!": High-Risk Teenagers Help Themselves While Helping Others

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"We don't want those bad kids teaching at our school," said a group of elementary teachers. This and other derogatory statements associated with youth at risk groups are unfortunately too common. This article presents the results of a pilot study that showed that high-risk youth can be effective volunteer teachers, and through this experience they can improve their attitudes toward school.

Why should we be concerned about youth at risk issues? We are increasingly aware of the costs to society if large numbers of youth fail in school and are unable to become productive adults. Getting or keeping a job and the high crime rate among high school dropouts are two reasons to be concerned.

High school graduation rates are declining while the workplace is demanding better education. Graduation rates have declined from 76% in 1980 to 73% in 1989 (Hodgkinson, 1989). Studies show that dropouts are less likely to be employed than high school graduates and are more likely to have low paying semiskilled manual jobs. For example, in terms of employment compare the 68% of high school dropouts to the 87% of high school graduates between the ages of 16 and 24 in the work force in 1989 (Orr, 1989).

School dropouts impact our society in other ways. The relationship between education and crime is particularly interesting. States with the highest high school graduation rate have the lowest

prisoner rates (Hodgkinson, 1989). Eighty-two percent of America's prisoners are high school dropouts (Hodgkinson, 1989). The average cost of incarceration per inmate was \$20,000 per year nationally in 1989. The current cost of educating a child in the aforementioned pilot study was \$1,800 per year.

PROGRAMS THAT WORK

Orr (1989), in a grant funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, studied fourteen programs to keep students in school and found four core components directly related to successful high school dropout prevention programs. These components include:

1. Basic skills remediation—reading, writing, and computation.
2. Support services—referrals to service agencies for housing, welfare and medical needs.
3. World of work exposure—work experience and training.
4. Personal development—increased self-esteem and responsible behavior (*e.g.*, peer educator approaches).

Peer educator approaches are seen as effective teaching strategies to increase self-esteem and positive attitude toward school. According to Dryfoos (1990), "Students selected to act as peer mentors gain the most, probably because of the individual attention and enrichment they receive in the training and supervision."

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Most studies agree that students at risk of dropping out of school are not experiencing success in school (Alpert & Dunham, 1986). These students often get poor grades, have discipline problems, do not get along with teachers, and generally do not like school. It is argued that the earlier the at-risk child is identified, the more likely an intervention program is to succeed (Peck, 1988).

"JUST DO IT!" PROGRAM

A local coalition of agencies in north-east Nevada dealt with the school dropout issue. The program "Just Do It!" was organized using the peer educator approach to influence potential dropouts' attitude toward school and themselves.

Eight high-risk teenagers participated in this pilot study. These youth served as volunteer teachers by presenting latchkey skills lessons to third-grade students.

"Just Do It!" was adapted from an earlier study which used 4-H volunteers as peer educators (Smith, Havercamp, and Waters, 1990) and is based on other research directed at teaching high-risk youth (National Collaboration for Youth, 1989). Nevada Cooperative Extension, a federal, state, and locally-funded work program, and a county school district came together in a preventive effort to increase the number of youth completing high school. The local high school principal and elementary school principal had worked with Cooperative Extension on the first volunteer teacher program (Smith, Havercamp, and Waters, 1990) and supported working with high-risk youth. The JOIN program coordinator recognized the need to help high-risk youth and agreed to collaborate on this project.

Selecting High-Risk Volunteer Teachers

Eight freshman and sophomore high school students were chosen for "Just Do It!" Selection criteria were based on JOIN's standards for participation in its other programs:

1. S/he is a member of a family living at or below the poverty level.
2. S/he has poor attendance record (e.g., frequent absences or tardiness).
3. S/he has a poor academic record (e.g., failure to advance to the next grade).
4. S/he has significant deficiencies in computing, reading or writing.
5. S/he has insufficient credits for high school graduation in the senior year.
6. S/he has documented emotional or behavioral problems which may lead to suspension.
7. S/he is a teenage parent or a pregnant teenager.
8. S/he has dropped out and returned to school.

Students had to satisfy two of these criteria to be eligible for "Just Do It!" As an incentive to participate in the program, they were offered \$100 by JOIN.

Program Support and Training

Volunteer teachers worked in small groups getting intensive adult and peer support. The number of total participants was kept small so that each person not only would receive individual attention but also would be able to work in teams.

A volunteer teenager and a Nevada Cooperative Extension staff member were given primary responsibility for coaching and guiding the volunteer teachers. The volunteer teenager served as a mentor and coach to high-risk participants and was given the title of "Coach" by the volunteer teachers. The Cooperative Extension Specialist, who had 15 years experience working with youth, served as program coordinator.

The "Coach" was selected for her enthusiasm, leadership abilities, and excellent communication skills. She had been one of the 4-H volunteer teachers in the

first project (see Smith, et al.) which gave her elementary classroom experience.

Training of participants was held at the JOIN office, a two block walk from the high school. This location was chosen to give the volunteer teachers a chance to get acquainted with JOIN office staff.

Weekly two-hour training and coaching sessions were provided to volunteer teachers over a seven-week period. The training program included self-esteem, self-responsibility, decision-making, communication, peer relationships, career awareness, career goals and expectations, and lesson planning. Following a lesson planning session, the participants were given a specific lesson to practice. These practice presentations were videotaped so that changes in presentation styles, dress, or mannerisms could be made.

Teaching Curriculum

The high-risk teenagers chose the curriculum "Stayin' Alive, A Teaching Guide for Latchkey Programs" (Norris, R., Martin, S., 1987) to teach elementary students. The program provided information on staying home alone, rules for outside and indoor safety, handling hazards and emergencies, and feeling OK when alone.

While the latchkey curriculum includes some lecture, the primary emphasis consists of hands-on experiences and role playing. For example, students role play how to answer the phone or door when home alone and what to do if attacked. This curriculum is especially useful in the targeted elementary school because a large number of latchkey children attend the school.

Teaching Experience

After completing fourteen hours of training, the volunteer teachers gave presentations to 90 students in three different third-grade classes. They taught in teams of two, presenting a total of two hours of latchkey skills information to each class.

Four lesson plans were presented by the teams. Each team member taught a portion of a lesson. The amount of time individuals taught was based on their ability and enthusiasm for teaching.

Following the school presentations, the volunteer teachers presented program evaluation results to high school and elementary school principals. Several of them were invited to present these results to the local school board as well.

EVALUATION

A primary emphasis of this program was placed on initiating a change in the high-risk volunteer teachers' attitude toward school. School attitudes were measured in several ways with data taken from the Coopersmith Inventory (Coopersmith, S., 1989), self-evaluation, teacher and parent evaluations, and school grades and attendance. Teaching effectiveness data were collected using a pre- and posttest of elementary students' knowledge of latchkey safety skills and a "parent" (includes guardians) survey to see if the latchkey information would be used at home.

The Coopersmith Inventory (Coopersmith, S., 1989) was administered as a pretest to the eight volunteer teachers at the beginning of the training program, and a posttest was given six months following the teaching of elementary students. The volunteer teachers' pre- and posttest school self-esteem scores were also compared.

The Coopersmith Inventory is a standardized test of self-esteem. It consists of four sub-scales which measure for aspects of self-esteem. This study used the school scale which consists of eight statements related to school attitude. (Example: I find it very hard to talk in front of the class.) Respondents indicate whether each statement is "like me" or "unlike me."

The self-evaluation, teacher and parent evaluations were given at the end of the program. Teachers and parents were

asked ten questions about attitude and behavioral change and were requested to "best describe your observations of the student before the program began and now after completion of the program." This "post- then pre-approach" was used because, by the end of the program, observers would be more likely to see change. If a pretest was used at the beginning of the program, observers had no way to change an answer at the end of the program if they made an inaccurate assessment in their first response (Rockwell and Kohn, 1989).

Data on the participants' teaching effectiveness were collected based on a pre-test given before the latchkey skills program began and a post-test following the completion of the teaching sessions. At the completion of the latchkey teaching program, third-grade students were also asked to take home a questionnaire for their parents to complete and return to school the next day. The questionnaire

asked parents and guardians if their children had discussed the latchkey program and if families would be implementing any of the ideas from the programs at home.

Results

Seven high-risk students were able to increase their school self-esteem scores while only one student did not show an increase (Table I). This particular individual (HR #8) was having difficulty in social situations, such as not getting along with peers and fearing attending large group assemblies. Following the program, this student reported that he was able to overcome this particular fear.

A comparison of grade point averages and attendance records, before and after the program, also showed positive improvements. Especially interesting was the absentee record of HR #8 who showed a decrease in absences, from 24 days to 8 days (Table II).

TABLE I
School Self-Esteem Scores of High-Risk (HR) Volunteer Teachers

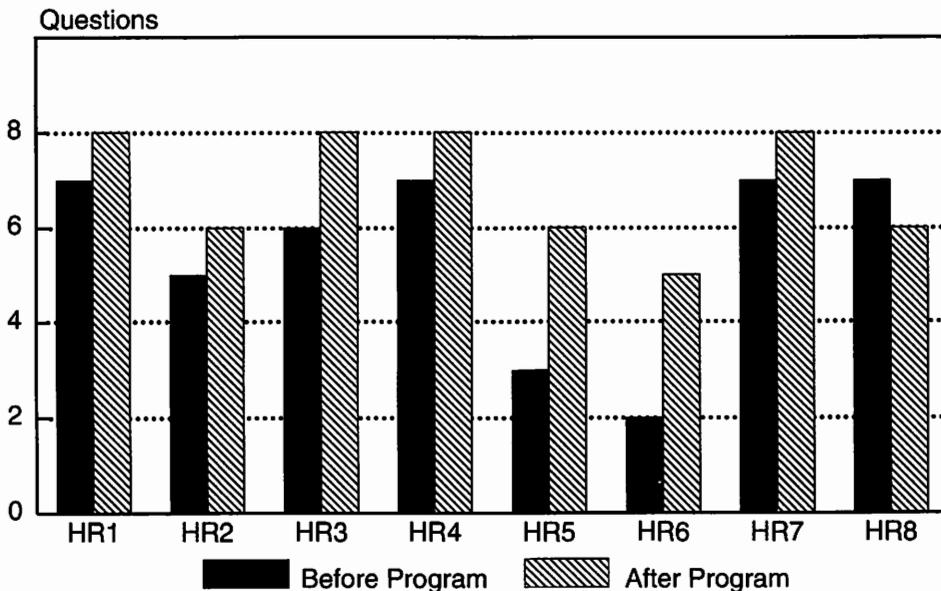


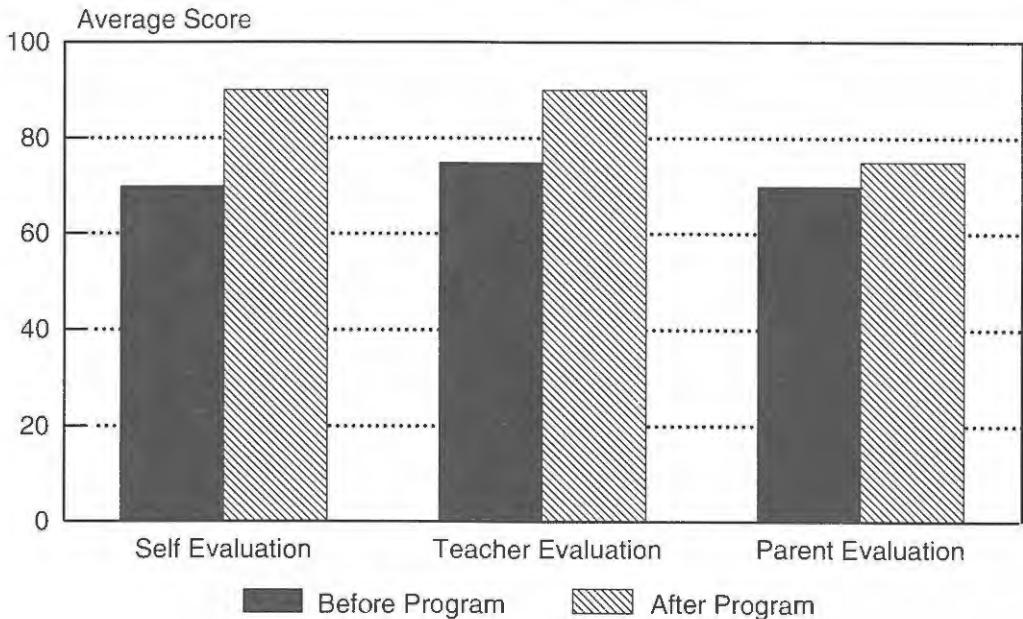
TABLE II
Comparisons of High-Risk Volunteer Teachers' Absences
Before and After Teaching

High-Risk (HR) Students	# of Absences	
	<u>1st Semester</u>	<u>2nd Semester</u>
HR #1	4	0
HR #2	1	0
HR #3	4	4
HR #4	7	2
HR #5	5	5
HR #6	11	7
HR #7	14	13
HR #8	<u>24</u>	<u>8</u>
	70 days	39 days

The academic records of the participants did not change appreciably. However, these students will continue to be observed over time to see if there are any changes in their grades.

The results of teacher and parent assessments, and self-evaluations indicate positive changes in the participants' attitude toward school as well (Table III).

TABLE III
Attitude and Behavior Changes of High-Risk Volunteers
Before and After the Program



Impact on Elementary Students

In comparing pre- and posttest survey results of elementary students' latchkey knowledge, we found that elementary students in the study showed a 45% increase in knowledge gain. Results of the parent survey also indicated that 80% plan to implement ideas from the latchkey safety program.

Special Observations

Observations by school principals and the JOIN coordinator tell a special story. "What I have seen after this marvelous program is better attendance this year versus last year, and improved self-esteem as shown in personal appearance and posturing," said a high school principal. Furthermore, "There's no question this program will result in students getting better grades and staying in school. This is a win-win situation for all concerned." He hopes this program will be offered to other elementary schools in the community.

The local JOIN coordinator, who supervised the volunteer teachers in a summer job program, said that employers were thrilled by the job performance of the high-risk youth from "Just Do It!" She indicated that the self-confidence, responsibility, and self-esteem gained in the peer teaching program made a difference with the high-risk youth. One employer said that the high-risk students were the best JOIN employees he ever had.

An elementary school principal was impressed to see the bonding between high-risk volunteer teachers and elementary students. Subsequently, she set up a high-risk student committee to discuss future program ideas. The committee is currently planning a training program for high-risk elementary students to teach younger children.

SUMMARY

The opportunity to be a volunteer "teacher" proved an effective method of motivating a group of high-risk youth. In elementary classrooms, volunteer teach-

ers were the center of attention, often receiving the admiration and respect of younger students. This learning experience was successful in building teachers' self-esteem and self-confidence.

"Bad kids" were seen as effective teachers. This success, in part, could be due to the fact that volunteer teachers in the pilot study had been latchkey children themselves. Volunteer teachers were able to help elementary children learn important latchkey skills. Most importantly, the teaching experience helped these high-risk volunteer teachers change their own attitudes about school.

The authors believe that community-based educational organizations, such as Cooperative Extension, should help facilitate empowerment processes where youth at risk are provided volunteer teacher experiences. Dryfoos (1990) reports that effective high-risk youth programs should be connected, in some degree, to the school setting. She recommends that school-based programs do not have to be controlled by school systems and that schools should seek collaborative efforts with other agencies when developing programs for high-risk youth.

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