



Chapter Nine

Catch Them Before They Fall

Gareth was a Dennis the Menace type with precious dimples and a quick smile. He was in our classes only a few days before we held the first team conference about his behavior. Although Gareth was driving us crazy, he was so good-natured and funny that we found it very difficult not to laugh at his antics along with our other students. Because Gareth was on the middle school football team, we could report his behavior to the coaches as a way to keep him in line.

Amanda taught three math classes and one extended block of language arts that year, which meant that she had the pleasure of working with Gareth and his good friend, Carl, for three hours a day. Through horseplay, teasing, and dozens of other distracting behaviors, Gareth and Carl tried to avoid every reading activity Amanda introduced. Finally, we invited Gareth's parents to a team conference.

Gareth's father, a six-foot-five-inch bear of a man, entered the classroom and flashed a smile as broad as his son's. During the conference, we learned that Gareth's mother was bedridden and waiting for a transplant while his father worked nights to support the family. Gareth's dad, a first-generation high school graduate, told us that he would do whatever he could to help us get his son on track. He also shared that as part of an African American family living in an all-white suburban neighborhood, Gareth had had a difficult time fitting into his new surroundings. He preferred to visit Carl and his family, who lived in a distant public housing project.

We discussed how we might use these insights to strengthen our relationships with Gareth and felt hopeful that his father would support our efforts in the classroom. A few days later, however, after Gareth caused another disturbance, Amanda held him back during lunch.

“I have really reached the end of my rope with you,” Amanda said. “I ask you to read and you clown. Why?”

Gareth mumbled and averted his eyes.

“You have to speak up if you want me to hear you,” Amanda said, now fully exasperated.

Gareth looked up at his teacher and spoke slowly, “I can’t read, and neither can Carl.”

Amanda remembers this moment as one of the most shocking of her career. How could she not have noticed the boys’ illiteracy? How had Gareth and Carl made it to the eighth grade with such glaring deficiencies? And now that Gareth had revealed his secret, what was our team going to do about it?

Amanda reached out to Gareth and extended a mutual challenge. “If I can teach you to read, will you stop driving everyone crazy?” she asked.

Gareth agreed, and the deal was set into motion. Amanda went to Monique who suggested the book, *A Taste of Blackberries*, which is written on a low reading level but is still a high-interest story for young adolescents. Amanda asked the school’s speech therapist for a reading diagnostic test so she would know which literacy skills to pinpoint first. The test revealed several gaps for both boys, especially their ability to comprehend text and read fluently. Gareth’s word-recognition skills were adequate, but he did not understand what he was reading. Carl could decode only basic words.

Amanda pulled the boys aside during reading class to work with them one on one with a few simple reading strategies tailored to their needs. For Gareth, Amanda focused on his mental conceptualization of the story by having him read a passage aloud and then discuss what he “saw” in his mind. For homework, she asked him to draw pictures of these mental images and write short summaries of the text.

Carl’s problems were more complex. He began working with the Dolch sight-word list that Amanda had saved from her younger daughter’s class. Amanda put the words on flash cards, and Carl used these to develop rapid recognition skills. Amanda also built on both boys’ decoding skills by teaching them to use context clues to understand text rather than getting hung up on one word at a time. This improved both boys’ fluency. As Carl’s basic skills improved, Amanda added some of the comprehension strategies she had selected for Gareth.

Within a few weeks, both boys had finished the book and were proud of their accomplishment. Throughout the year, they read many more books, along

with stories, poems, speeches, and articles. Gareth and Carl often stayed after school with our team to complete homework or get extra help. At the end of the school year, both boys passed the state assessment, reaching the proficient level in all subjects, although Carl scored at the lowest level of proficient in reading. Gareth sent a letter of thanks to Amanda and promised to invite her to his high school graduation.

During the next two years, Gareth occasionally stopped by to see us. He played football his freshman year, and his mom got a transplant. Although Gareth still misbehaved now and then, he passed all of his classes and seemed to be doing fine.

One afternoon, toward the end of Gareth's sophomore year in high school, Amanda looked up from her shopping cart at the supermarket and saw Gareth approaching. After exchanging hugs and marveling at Gareth's towering height, Amanda asked about school.

"I quit," Gareth said sheepishly and avoided her gaze.

"What?" Amanda gasped. "I thought you were passing!"

"I was, but I just don't belong there, and it was so boring," he said. "I am going to get a GED, maybe, and do something else. It doesn't matter."

The Students Behind the Statistics

In education we say that every student matters. We vow that no child will be left behind. So why are we still losing so many students like Gareth?

As politicians, researchers, journalists, educators, and parents endlessly debate the causes and consequences of staggering school dropout rates, students like Gareth continue to fall through the cracks. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, just 75 percent of U.S. students who enter ninth grade graduate from high school four years later. In Louisiana, that figure drops to 69.4 percent. High school dropouts account for 75 percent of state prison inmates and 59 percent of federal prison inmates (Harlow 2002). High school dropouts cost the U.S. government \$24 billion annually in lost economic opportunity, social welfare benefits, and increased crime (Thorstensen 2005).

Traditionally research cited poverty, race, and socioeconomic factors as barriers to graduation. We do not dispute these findings, but recently we came across a new study that interviewed students to find out when and why they left school. *The Silent Epidemic*, a report sponsored by the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006), painted a different picture of dropouts. Among the surprising top reasons that students gave for checking out early were the following:

- Their classes were not interesting (47 percent).
- They had missed too many days of school and could not catch up (43 percent).
- They spent time with people who were not interested in school (42 percent).
- They had too much freedom and not enough rules (38 percent).
- They were failing in school (35 percent).

It's sobering information, to be sure, but also quite hopeful. Think about it for a moment. Most of those reasons are within our power to change. We can combat those negative forces and get students back on track to succeed. Teaming provides us with a solid battle plan.

Did we hear grumbling in the background? Impatient sighs? Are your arms crossed defiantly across your chest? These are natural reactions to the staggering responsibility before us, but we urge you to resist the impulse to quit or cast aspersions.

As middle grades educators, it's easy to place the blame for student failure on high school teachers who may not extend the system of supports that we strive to provide. High school teachers, in turn, can just as quickly find fault with the way students were prepared in the middle grades. We're not interested in playing this game of pin the blame on the scapegoat, because it distracts us from the problem. Every teacher at every level of education shapes the successes and failures of students. And if we don't start working together to plug the gaps, we will continue to lose students before they've had a chance to reach their full potential.

A crucial part of the process has to do with understanding why students drop out of school. *The Silent Epidemic* offers some important clues. Let's consider each of the students' stated reasons in turn.

Classes Were Not Interesting

As previously discussed in Part II, our students tell us they enjoy our team because we make our classes fun, but they also say they try harder in school because they get to do "real work" on our team. As we examine effective methods to keep students engaged in education, we must consider the critical combination of academic rigor, high expectations, and purposeful learning. Middle grades students, who are on the cusp of independence,

need to feel capable of completing increasingly complex assignments that are connected to the world beyond the classroom. Relevance may be a new education buzzword, but it's still essential to academic success. "Keepin' it real" must become our mantra as we design instruction and assessments that truly matter instead of merely enable us to cover the curriculum or fill the grade book. Students want to see how their educational experiences pertain to the rest of their lives, which is why so many reform models for high school focus on career applications.

As a team, we hold each other accountable for the rigor and high expectations of all classes. We have a deep understanding of our individual subject specialties, but we also know each other's content. We review lessons and assessments for evidence of engagement and authentic connections. Would anyone ever write the sterile business letter to Mr. Brown that's reprinted on page 121 of the grammar book? No! But people often need to communicate with companies and organizations. So why don't we explore some real issues that students care about—product defects, career information, new technology, and the like—and show them how to write a formal letter to express their intentions and get responses?

As administrators, school districts, and state and federal policymakers search for ways to help students and teachers reach higher expectations, they should look to teaming for an effective system of checks and balances. We may not be able to change the circumstances that shape our students' lives outside of school, but we can change what they experience in our classrooms. By feeding them a rich intellectual diet of collaborative, engaging, and purposeful activities, we will lose fewer students to boredom and irrelevance.

Missed Too Many Days and Could Not Catch Up

As a team, we attack absenteeism every day because we know that students are more likely to do well when they attend school on a regular basis. Kathryn is the attendance queen. She monitors attendance throughout the team and tracks absenteeism by sending email messages, making phone calls, writing letters, and talking to students when they return. The consistent follow-through is a strong deterrent to truancy. When families fail to respond, we don't hesitate to contact the school district's truancy officer.

Our administrators expect us to be accountable for students. We had better know why Suzy has missed five days in a row, and we must have the documentation to prove that we tried to contact her family. We also have high standards of achievement, which we repeatedly convey to students so Suzy and her peers understand why it matters that they attend school regularly. In addition to setting the bar high, we try to encourage good attendance by

providing engaging lessons and exciting team activities. Basically, students do not want to miss the fun.

Spent Time with People Not Interested in School

Although we can't choose the people our students associate with before and after school, we can create a team culture that will positively influence their decisions. On our team we use peer mentoring and buddy systems daily in our classes for several reasons. By mentoring one another, the students begin to depend on each other and form bonds. The bonds are beginning connections we will use to strengthen the team. The mentor feels needed and the mentee feels supported. The roles do not remain concrete but may reverse as needed. We also strategically team students to break down personality issues and cliques that may have been present during previous school years. The students also improve communication skills and teamwork skills. As students form new friendships, those relationships often carry over to after-school activities and into high school.

We also bring in outside speakers to talk about their experiences and encourage students to make wise decisions. One of our most successful visitors was Darry Beckwith, a Louisiana State University football standout and one of our former students. Darry stressed the importance of character. He said that when Coach Nick Saban came to recruit him in high school, he talked to Darry's teachers first to find out about his work ethic and character.

Other visitors, such as the state game warden mentioned previously, share how classroom learning relates to real-world issues and careers. Regardless of their occupations, the speakers share the same message: "You are judged by whom you hang out with, and your future will be shaped by your decisions today."

We also use classroom lessons to reinforce these points. For example, we often read *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton and reflect on the fictional characters' struggles with gang initiation and personal loyalty. The novel helps us frame deep discussions about how our social circles define us.

Sometimes we have to walk a fine line. While trying to elevate our students' aspirations and broaden their worldviews, we cannot be judgmental of their families or neighborhoods. Rather, we model civility and respectful behavior so they will see the benefits of treating people fairly. In turn, they start expecting better of and for themselves.

Teaming can be a catalyst for changing a school's entire culture. When we break down the walls that isolate students and keep them from forming strong attachments, we discover why positive relationships help adolescents

stay in school. Every student wants to belong, and teaming builds on that basic human instinct by providing a safe and comfortable place to learn.

Had Too Much Freedom and Not Enough Rules

Many of our students come from homes with limited structure. When they join our team, they often have heard about the fun activities we do but incorrectly associate the promise of enjoyment with anarchy. They don't expect us to focus on discipline. Many students are surprised by our strict requirements for daily reading and the proper procedure for writing math solutions. We have high expectations for all students, and we do not lower those goals.

Shockingly, students usually accept our terms and fall in line. We have few chronic behavior problems. Why? Rules! We explain, practice, and reinforce our expectations constantly. On our team, the rules are the same all day, every day. Students know what to do and revel in the consistency. Young adolescents experience enough upheaval because of their rapid physical, emotional, and intellectual development. They draw comfort from the constancy of a collaborative team.

Structure is crucial to students' success. If your school is in chaos and the classes seem in shambles, consider your procedures and expectations. How should students move from class to class? Does at least one adult know where each student is throughout the school day? How can students find out about missed assignments when they are absent? Who will be responsible for sharing the news that Jim's grandmother died and how that might affect his behavior in class? Teaming enables us to ask and answer those questions daily.

Was Failing in School

If you ask pedestrians on the street to describe a dropout, many will say a student who hasn't passed all of his or her classes. Perhaps many teachers also believe that to be true. Why quit if you are being successful? But surprisingly, the majority of dropouts were not failing prior to leaving school. In *The Silent Epidemic* survey, 65 percent of dropouts were passing, and 88 percent of those had a C average or better. The survey also found that 65 percent of the dropouts surveyed agreed that "at least one teacher on campus personally cared about my success." This statement gave us pause until we considered that many students might need more than one trusted adult to light the way. When teams work well, every student should be able to say, "All of my teachers personally care about my success."

Belonging, vision, and purpose are powerful motivators. In large schools with random classroom assignments, students can easily get lost in the crowd. Teachers who are responsible for 150 students a day have a difficult time connecting with students on a personal level and holding each one to high standards.

As a team we place high priority on the nonacademic aspects of school. We want our students to belong to our team and know we are personally committed to their success. As we work through the year, we help students frame a vision for the future by setting goals and reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses. We do not accept answers such as “I just can’t” or “I dunno.” We are not afraid to ask, “Why did you fail this?” “Why did you not do your reading?” or “Where were you yesterday?” We also try to highlight progress and each team member’s contributions so every student will know he or she has a purpose.

Teaming enables multiple shepherds to keep the lambs from going astray. As a team, our daily notes, observations, and communications about students help us spot trends or possible issues. We do not wait until the nine-week term is over and look at failing grades to find a child in trouble. We know that low or declining grades are seldom the first indication of trouble.

We know what our students’ issues are because we have personal relationships with them and recognize when something is amiss. Through our daily anecdotal notes where we reference missed homework, declining math scores, negative behavior, and many other cues, we continually look out for students who may need more attention. We then can act upon those issues before failure has time to take hold. Our interventions may be as simple as setting up a team conference with the students and their families or recommending after-school tutoring. Many times, just sharing our understanding that adolescence is a tremendously challenging time for students is enough to help them cope.

Extending Teaming Beyond the Middle Grades

Teaming in high school? Yes! We are excited to see more secondary schools recognizing the benefits of teaming as a supportive organizational structure, particularly at the freshman level.

In Louisiana, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is implementing tough high school redesign policies. Much of the process centers on improving high school freshmen’s experiences. In our opinion, these changes

are long overdue. We are always surprised and disillusioned when we discover that one of our formerly successful students dropped out or failed classes in the ninth grade.

For example, Louisa left us with a B average in math and a score that placed her in the sixty-eighth percentile on the state's eighth-grade math exam. During our classes we knew that Louisa often needed extra time to complete exams and some verbal encouragement, but her score on the state assessment placed her firmly in the upper portion of our student population.

We were shocked to learn that she had failed Algebra I with a 14 percent average in the fall of her freshman year and again in the repeat class she took the following spring. "What happens when these kids get to high school?" we asked ourselves repeatedly. "What can we do differently to prepare them for life after middle school?"

We sought answers, of course, from the experts—our former students. The answers were not what we had expected. Although we received plenty of positive comments, the problems our students identified stood out:

"You did not give enough homework."

"You did not use the textbook enough."

"We can't use a calculator at all."

"We don't work in groups in high school."

"No one knows who I am."

While it would be easy to point fingers at high school teachers who would simply point fingers back at us, we take these comments seriously. They reveal some inconsistencies between middle school and high school and suggest the need for teachers in both grade levels to talk to each other and work together on a regular basis to smooth the transitions for students.

In Louisiana, we have been aggressively pursuing the Freshman Academy model, which recognizes the importance of providing extra academic and emotional supports for students in the ninth grade. Teaming is a crucial component of this approach.

Another high school reform model that has received national attention and supports the use of teaming is the Southern Regional Education Board's High Schools That Work initiative. High Schools That Work focuses on high expectations defined by a concise set of standards that are integrated into all classrooms. Teachers are asked to examine their practices for evidence of effectiveness and regularly seek feedback about students' learning. The focus is mastery and application of content and skills, not just high grades.

High Schools That Work also requires more math and science courses that directly relate to career and technical needs. In their junior and senior years, students are encouraged to pursue internships so they will have work experience before they graduate.

The High Schools That Work model encourages teachers to form interdisciplinary teams, integrate curricula, and jointly analyze the quality of their lessons and assessments. Teams also must communicate their expectations to students and their families and provide support as needed. The culture is centered on continuous improvement.

There are many parallels between the key practices recommended in High Schools That Work and the statements of students who were surveyed in *The Silent Epidemic*. High school students need and desire regular opportunities for real-world learning, engaging teaching, smaller classes, better communication between home and school, and increased supervision. If we address their concerns, we will help many more students continue their education.

In our district, one high school, St. Amant High, has seen tremendous growth in the past few years by applying these principles. St. Amant High requires four years of math for all students. The teachers work together daily to increase rigor in their classes through lesson discussion and peer-evaluation of assessments. The school recently received one of the twenty national Pacesetter awards at the national High Schools That Work conference.

Our district draws further inspiration from the High Schools That Work recommendations. All four high schools recently implemented the Freshman Academy model. Like students on our middle school team, the ninth graders are placed in small learning communities with the same English, math, science, or social studies teachers. Three of the four high schools have adopted a block schedule, which enables the teams to use extended and flexible class periods.

The school district also allocated additional funds for an extra administrator, the associate principal, who works as the Freshman Academy administrator. The district hired additional teachers to trim the student/teacher ratio and provided extensive professional development for each Freshman Academy. Teachers have both personal and team planning periods every day.

We are personally invested in this model. Amanda has become the associate principal of the seventh through ninth grades at a school with a 98 percent student poverty rate and a 28 percent passing rate on the state's annual assessment. Monique has joined the same staff as one of two new master teachers who will be responsible for embedding professional development to directly address student needs.

Implementing strategies such as those recommended by High Schools That Work is difficult with a traditional mind-set. Teaming and our new, flexible schedule will give teachers time each day to strengthen their instruction as we try to move from “my classroom” to “our school community.”

As an administrative team member, Amanda will depend on the daily embedded professional development to guide teachers through implementation of the school improvement plan. Just as we did on our middle school team, the Freshman Academy teams will meet daily to discuss issues, research effective strategies, analyze data, and plan for student success. We will not wait for the release of a single set of standardized test scores to tell us whether or not we have achieved our goals. We will know each day what worked and what did not because we are reflective educators.

We believe that when schools provide regular time for shared professional development within the school day, teachers find greater value in the experience. We are quickly moving away from broad and inconsistent inservice training to research-based initiatives that directly address our needs. Accountability is crucial, and administrators must also be involved.

As two of us move to a high school campus, we will not change the core beliefs that shaped our success in the middle grades. High school students do not suddenly become adults when they enter the ninth grade. They are only about ten weeks more mature than they were in the eighth grade. They still need someone to know whether or not they come to school each day, expect them to achieve greatness, hold them accountable for learning and behaving, and love them while they are growing.

When all of us in education consider ourselves members of a team, we will be able to stop focusing solely on our individual classrooms and start understanding our roles in shaping the education of the whole child. We must work together if we want to improve the productivity and culture of our nation twenty, fifty, or one hundred years from now. The future is in our hands.