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Dr. Wiseman

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Problem Identification and Foundation

The problem I have chosen to focus on for my action research project is the high number of students who drop out of high school, especially students with disabilities. This problem is highly interesting and relevant to me because my 8th grade students are transitioning to high school in a few months. I have taught most of these students for the past three years, throughout my entire full-time teaching career. We have formed very close relationships and I care deeply about their future success. I understand that when students drop out of high school, their future opportunities become more limited. I want all of my students to complete high school so they have the option to go to college and/or choose a fulfilling career. I have seen firsthand how dropping out of school can impact your future options because my boyfriend dropped out of high school and got his GED. He is incredibly intelligent and creative but lacked support at home and at school to keep him motivated. When he talks about his high school experience, he recounts many memories of teachers who were verbally abusive or completely indifferent towards their students. As an adult he is hard-working and ambitious, and is attending community college part-time while working full-time, but it is sometimes very difficult. Knowing him and his experiences have left me wondering what else could have been done at his school- and many others across the nation- to prevent students from dropping out.

In researching this topic I have begun to look into the scope of the problem as well as possible solutions. So far I have learned that at-risk students can be identified as early as the first few years of elementary school. If students have more than one risk factor (grade retention, disability, low socioeconomic status, chronic absences, being in foster care, and many more), they are especially likely to drop out. I know most of my students have more than one risk-factor, and that worries me. I feel as though my middle school has limited resources for our large number of needy students. Our administration, counselors and support staff, and teachers are so hard-working but in my opinion there is not a solid foundation of positive support programs in place to be effective on a large scale. Therefore, I am looking into programs that have proven to be successful in other schools so I can hopefully bring them back to my school. At this point, I am especially interested in strategies I can try in my classroom to help build relationships and student self-advocacy as well as ways to get students more engaged in the total school environment.

Since I won’t be able to truly determine whether my efforts were successful in keeping my students from dropping out (both because of time and because many factors play into the decision to continue with school or drop-out during high school), I anticipate that my immediate goals for this study will have to be more short-term. I am initially most interested in hearing my students’ points of view and hearing what they feel about their school experiences so far and in the future. Through measures like student surveys, attendance records, behavioral referrals, and teacher field notes, I hope to see some positive effects from the beginning of my study to the end, although clearly I still need to narrow down my focus areas. I have found so much information on this topic that it has been a little overwhelming to sort through and find the best ideas. I am hopeful that this process will make me a better educator and help me to understand the ways I can positively affect both my students’ futures and the big picture of my school.