



**The TEACHER CENTER of Broome County**  
**Teacher Study Group Grant Award**  
**2003-2004**

**FINAL REPORT**  
**DOCUMENT PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES**

**STUDY GROUP TOPIC: Collaborative Strategies for Addressing Mental Health Concerns for High School Females**

**GROUP MEMBERS: Cynthia Sodeur, Group Leader; Kristine Conrow; Doreen Forrest; Nora Hatem; Linda Parrow; Kim Rusnak**

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The final report must be word-processed and submitted both in print and on disk using this form. Include information under each of the following headings.

**Describe the initial goal of the group noting any adjustments that had to be made as time passed.**

Our initial goal was to review issues that our high school girls had identified as problematic in their lives (depression, coping with death and loss, eating disorders, family problems, violence), and explore ways that guidance and teaching staff can work together to create a network of support for our young women. At the end of our study, we wanted to have developed a program or programs that would be ready for implementation for the beginning of the school year.

We started out with many ideas to explore. The only real adjustment we made to our initial goal was to downsize, identifying and developing ONE collaborative strategy rather than several. We felt that this was all we could do well within the sixteen-hour time frame. Hence, we focused on putting together an in-house mentoring program for high school girls.

**Describe the ACTION PLAN that the group followed.**

The only action plan that we started with was a commitment to have a program of some sort ready for implementation when we finished. We also know that throughout this process we would be immersing ourselves in readings to try to better understand the adolescent female experience. So, our informal action plan could be described as:

1. Identify and read useful literature.
2. Brainstorm programming ideas that might be effective for our population in Harpursville.
3. Choose one option and prepare it for successful implementation.

## Describe how the action plan was implemented.

We scheduled four four-hour meetings and used them as follows:

Meeting 1: We met at Barnes and Noble so we could identify resources that we would collectively like to purchase or ask our school to purchase. Our extensive discussion ranged from sharing our understanding of the issues and needs of our target population, to brainstorming strategies for addressing those issues and needs, to looking at our staff and institution to identify available resources. Among the programming ideas we discussed were: lunch advisories, e-mail mentors from area businesses, field trips to increase our girls' exposure to real-world opportunities and challenges, wellness activities (such as a before school yoga class), the tremendous need for stress management instruction, staff-facilitated support groups for a variety of issues, infusion of more career development information into curriculum, development of a resource library that we could make available to staff and students, development of a bibliography of resources (including on-line resources) that we could make available to students, staff, and parents.

We looked over the resources we had brought to the meeting, and we allowed some time for browsing the resources at Barnes & Noble and identifying books that we would collectively purchase and share

Meeting 2: During our second meeting it became evident that we would have to choose between discussing many programs or successfully developing one. With input from our Assistant Superintendent and High School Principal, who attended parts of this meeting, we decided to focus on developing an advisory program using female high school staff members as advisors to groups of 6-8 students. We spent a significant amount of time discussing why similar programs had fizzled in our district in the past and what we would need to provide to make this one successful in the long run. We decided this program would need:

- A task-based focus. Previous programs never got off the ground because people didn't know what to do in a group. Because our staff advisors have little experience facilitating small groups and our students have little experience on how to function in this type of group, we need to give them something to do. Our task for these groups over the course of the year is for each student to build a personal scrapbook.
- Pre-packaged activities. We don't want our inexperienced advisors to have to scramble for activities. We will provide a wealth of reproducible activity sheets on a variety of topics. These sheets can be stand-alones or ideas for journaling, collaging, etc., and all of them will be things that are appropriate for a binder scrapbook. The advisor and/or students can choose an activity for each week that is relevant to the group. We will make sure we have at least one activity addressing each of what we understand to be core issues for our target population:

Stress management	Hopes and dreams/goal setting
Self awareness	Peer pressure
Depression	Nutrition/eating habits/disorders
Coping with death/tragedy/suicide	Tolerance and prejudice
Bullying	Spirituality
Intimate relationships	Friendship
Family	Belonging
Self acceptance	Careers
Abuse	Dating issues/violence
Decision making	

- Support for advisors. We will ask the High School Principal for 15 minute of staff meeting time once a month so that all advisors can have an opportunity to share, ask for help, and/or problem solve. Additionally, we will provide optional before school meetings twice a month. Our aim is to provide maximum support with minimum demands on our advisors' time.
- Commitment by students. Although we would like to include every high school female student, we don't feel comfortable trying to mandate this service at this time. We will make the program available to all, actively recruit, but take what we get. Hopefully over time the program will be promoted by students and will evolve to become part of all girls' high school experience at Harpursville.
- Support for and by parents. One of our administration's goals is to encourage more parent involvement on the high school level, and we feel that this program can move that goal ahead. We will elicit parent permission for girls to be involved in the program, encourage parent communication with their daughter's advisor, and develop a modest but regular newsletter for parents of girls involved in the advisory program.

Meetings 3 and 4: These meetings were very production-oriented. On our own time we continued with our readings to increase our understanding of the developmental issues of adolescent females. Additionally, we developed or located activities germane to the advisory group topics/scrapbooking. We contacted female staff members to describe the program we are developing and recruit advisors. During our meetings we:

- Continued to discuss our readings.
- Shared, reviewed, and selected activities for the advisories.
- Planned for recruiting students for the program (initially via PE classes).
- Drafted a parent letter/permission sheet
- Reviewed program evaluation tools developed by Kim Rusnak.

**How has participating in this study group changed you as a teacher? Have any of your teaching practices changed?**

Our review of the literature on female adolescent development provided a powerful and poignant reminder that what happens in our classrooms and offices is NOT the focal point of our students' school experiences! How can History and Spanish compete with the gnawing adolescent hungers for safety, acceptance, popularity, boyfriends, true friends, the search for the meaning of life, and sex? While education is more than ever essential for long-term success, our system for providing it is out of sync with the typical adolescent's short-term priorities. However, the literature also reminds us that school is the stage upon which many of these issues are played out, and educators who can meet their students on a human level can have a tremendous positive influence. We will each take this heightened awareness back to our classrooms and offices and continue to look for creative ways to truly connect with our students. One way will be through participation in the advisory program, which we are initiating.

**What evidence is there that student achievement is improving as a result of participating in this study group? What kind of differences are you observing in your students?**

This question is not applicable at this time, given that our study group was conducted over the summer of 2003. We do plan on evaluating our advisory program at the end of the 2003-

04 school year, and would be happy to provide a report to the Teacher Center in July of 2004.

**What evidence is there that the goals of the study group have/have not been met?**

We are pleased to report that the goals of this group have indeed been met. We have an advisor/advisee program ready for implementation in September 2003. Although we decided to focus on one program rather than several for the purposes of the grant, during our brainstorming phase we came up with many worthy ideas. Some of these ideas can be implemented through our individual programs and curricula. For instance, Linda Parrow will be looking at ways to increase awareness of teen issues in her Wellness curriculum. Cindy Sodeur will pilot a mini-course in Stress Management via the Guidance program. All of the group participants will be looking for ways to promote career awareness to their classes.

**Comment on the value of the study group process? Did it work for you?**

**Kris Conrow:** One of the most beneficial aspects of this grant is it allowed me to gain more knowledge about conflicts that teenage girls encounter. Prior to researching this topic I did not realize how many different problems most girls are confronted with. Furthermore, it was distressing to realize that often these feelings are suppressed or ignored because these young women feel that their situation is unique, and they do not feel comfortable talking to other people about it. Also, I was surprised there were so few mechanisms or programs in place to assist with the coping of these situations.

Therefore, I am grateful we have been given the chance to properly address these problems. Additionally, we will be meeting with these girls to help raise their self-esteem and provide them with a comfortable place to discuss any situation they might encounter, which will be extremely beneficial.

**Nora Hatem:** I feel this was a great opportunity to design a program that will be beneficial to our young girls. After completing countless readings, the topics we have discussed gave me a closer look and reminded me what girls deal with on a day-to-day basis. Being part of this group and the advisor program allows me to have an input on the tough problems that face teenage girls today in school.

**Kim Rusnak:** Out of our group meetings, I gained an awareness of the amount of power and talent that my colleagues have. I am encouraged by their intense desire to positively alter the young women in our school, offering them a venue to seek greater skills and self-awareness. The strong women with whom I met shared interesting and important information regarding the causes of depression, abuse (by family members, boyfriends and themselves), the immense amount of stress encountered by teen females, etc...I found it particularly interesting the many parents of high school children want to be kept abreast of their child's activities and well being. We, unfortunately, often ignore parents thinking that they are uninvolved. We need to offer them skill enhancers as well.

Through our study, we decided upon an advisor/advisee setting. Calling upon a list of my female colleagues was very encouraging as they also expressed an interest in helping the young women of our school. I carried the ideas that had been planted in my brain from the study group to many places such as to my daughter's Summer Fun program where another mother suggested that we might have the girls scrapbook; that it would allow them a venue to explore topics and not feel threatened while doing so. The group took this idea and we manipulated it into one that could be used by any group facilitator by creating worksheets that deal with topics such as death and tolerance. I realized that we could gain perspective,

ideas, and support from all facets of our society. This is something I hope we can transfer to the young women of our group.

**Doreen Forrest:** Through participation in the Summer Study Group, I have gained invaluable insight into the problems and concerns of today's teen population. Although the same problems and concerns were evident during my teen years, some 30 years ago, they seem to have intensified now and have also begun at a much earlier age. Our research showed that schools play a much bigger role in the lives of students than before. Therefore, it was very important and timely for us to research this topic and devise ways of helping our female student population. I feel that the diversity of our study group enabled us to create a mentoring program with a variety of activities for our female students. I look forward to implementing the program in the fall.

**Linda Parrow:**

**Cindy Sodeur:** The women who participated in this study group were chosen for their professionalism, excellence and enthusiasm in the classroom, commitment to growth, and insight. Most of us have known each other for at least several years; some of us are friends outside of work. However, we have never before come together to work in this type of capacity. In the school system we are encouraged to communicate and collaborate, but the time and incentive is rarely provided. Hence, we tend to work in a parallel and somewhat isolated structure, and the intersections in our professional work tend to be brief and reactive.

The study group brought us together in an entirely different structure. Sixteen hours may not seem like much, but for women who measure their collaborative opportunities in minutes, it was huge! What a luxury to be able to engage in discussion about philosophical issues, feminist issues, professional issues, adolescent issues! In many ways, the accomplishment of this group's goals seems secondary to the revitalizing experience of meeting my colleagues on this level. The respect and regard I had for these women coming into the study group has been magnified and refined. This can only enhance our effectiveness as educators, collaborators, and role models for our students.

### **How can we make the study group program better?**

For us, the study group grant requirements had the right combination of flexibility and structure. I don't have any suggestions for changes in that area. The "improvement" in the program would be to somehow make it more accessible to more people. I have tried to encourage other colleagues to apply for a Teacher Center grant, but to no avail. I think many people think the application and leadership processes are much more intimidating than they actually are. I would be happy to talk to people or groups about my two study group experiences, but as I've already noted, I don't seem to be inspiring any applications in my own district!