Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 12
Issue 3 *Fall 2003*

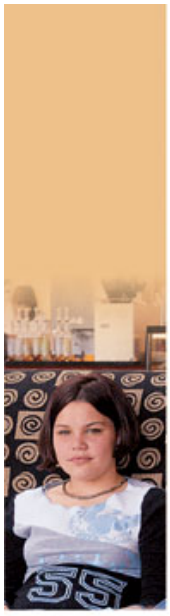
Article 6

Winter 2003

Promise Fulfilled

Sarah Hedgespeth '04
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Jennifer Christopher '03
Illinois Wesleyan University



Promise Fulfilled

Illinois Wesleyan volunteers are helping struggling middle-school students find academic success for the first time in their lives.

By Sarah Hedgespeth ’04,
with reporting by Jennifer Christopher ’03
Photos by Marc Featherly

“I can’t do this, there’s no way I can get a 100 on a test.”

Katie Rosensteele’s student at Bloomington Junior High School had learned she would have a quiz over the Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

With practiced patience, Rosensteele ’03 asked the girl, “Is this the only thing on this test?” The girl replied with a hesitant yes. “Have you ever gotten a 100 percent on a test?” “No,” the student answered.

“Then you have an opportunity to do something you’ve never done before,” Rosensteele told her.

Rosensteele’s excitement must have been contagious because soon the 12-year-old who had never felt prepared for a test in her life spent the better part of a week studying like mad.

The big Amendments quiz was on a Thursday. Rosensteele and her student spent their sessions together on Tuesday and Thursday reviewing the material, and Rosensteele noticed that her student was excited. She actually felt confident about a test, something Rosensteele had never seen in her before.

The next week, after Rosensteele arrived for their Tuesday session, she and the girl went together to ask her teacher about her quiz grade. She had gotten an A+.

“This is a student who gets mostly Fs and some Ds,” Rosensteele explains. “And for her, this 100 percent was amazing. I was almost more excited than she was.”

Coaches like Rosensteele have been inspiring struggling students at Bloomington Junior High School (BJHS) for more than two years now as part of the Promise and Potential Partnership, a mentoring program designed to meet concerns expressed by BJHS faculty about students they feared would slip through the cracks.

IWU Professor and Chair of Educational Studies Robin Leavitt joined forces with BJHS coordinator and Head of Student Services Mary Aplington, and faculty and administration from both Illinois Wesleyan and Bloomington Junior High. Together, they devised a program that would, through direct intervention provided by IWU student volunteers, give struggling BJHS students the extra help they need to succeed. After reading their proposal for the Promise and Potential Partnership, Bloomington-based State Farm Companies Foundation agreed to sponsor the program focused on understanding and meeting the needs of students whom others often label as “at-risk.”

“We don’t like to label the students that we work with as ‘at-risk,’ and that’s why we call our program Promise and Potential,” Leavitt explains. “While these students may be struggling in school, we strongly believe that they all have the promise and potential to succeed in school with the right interventions.”

Illinois Wesleyan has been placing teacher certification students at Bloomington Junior High as part of their teacher education program for years. According to Leavitt, the school was an ideal place to launch the Promise and Potential program because all children in Bloomington who attend public school attend the junior high, which means that “BJHS reflects the demographic diversity across this community,” she says. “Our students can have experience with diverse students in all the community’s schools, but in this one setting, they get it all. That’s very important to teacher education — understanding the diverse populations in public schools and the relationship between students’ backgrounds and their success in school.”

The Promise and Potential Partnership focuses on middle-school students, because “middle school is often considered a critical point in terms of whether students are going to make it or not,” Leavitt says. “It doesn’t happen in high school. It happens before then.”

During the 2002-03 school year, 56 IWU volunteers mentored 68 BJHS students. While many of the coaches are teacher education candidates, others are students who simply want to give something back to the community. All coaches are trained by Leavitt, Aplington, BJHS science

teacher Dennis Taylor, and a pair of IWU student coach leaders who previously participated as coaches in the program. Coach training includes learning to identify struggling students' needs and to address those needs in ways that build skills for success that will sustain BJHS students long past their participation in the program.

Coaches typically spend two 45-minute sessions with their individual students per week and also observe those student during classes in which they may be having trouble in order to get a better idea of their skills and participation level. During their sessions, coaches typically focus on homework and often lend a sympathetic ear as students confide personal problems. Those problems range from the typical dramas that affect all young teenagers to more serious dilemmas.

For example, Rosensteele recalls sitting down with one of her students to go over a homework assignment which the girl had failed to complete. The teen seemed upset, so Rosensteele asked if she'd like to go into the hallway so they could talk about it. The eighth grader later revealed that she had witnessed a domestic disturbance at a relative's house, had spent most of the previous evening caring for her infant cousin, and couldn't complete her homework. It was the first time the girl had really opened up to her coach, and it gave Rosensteele a much clearer picture of the kinds of obstacles some students in the program face on a daily basis.

Last year's Promise and Potential coach leader Jen Davis `03 jokes with one of her BJHS students. By keeping the mood light, coaches build lasting friendships with students.

Leavitt stresses to the coaches that they must consider their students in the context of their families. Coaches communicate with parents or guardians by writing them letters about the work they have done together and improvements made by their children over the course of their sessions.

According to Leavitt, this communication is especially important since parental involvement can be a strong predictor of a student's academic success. "One of the things we hope to do with these letters is to send parents a positive message about their students," Leavitt says. "Very often they get bad report cards, disciplinary phone calls, or truancy notices, and we want parents to hear from someone who knows their child and has seen the child's strengths and accomplishments."

Coaches' letters to parents about their children's accomplishments reflect measurable improvements in BJHS students' academic performance. During the pilot year, 2001-02, program assessment charted improvements in students' grades and attendance, in addition to other factors, such as classroom behavior.

The results of the assessment were overwhelmingly positive. During the coaching period, 50 percent of students in the program improved their grades. The number of students with failing grade-point averages was cut in half, and one-third of the students involved improved their school attendance. Even better news: according to BJHS teacher Dennis Taylor, the program continues to have an impact on many students even after their coaching sessions have ended. "To be honest, I thought that as soon as the coaches left, many of the kids would drop everything and not care. Some do, but generally most of them continue to try to do well," he says.

After two years as a formal partnership, the Promise and Potential program continues to make a difference — one that may have a national impact. With student co-leaders Sara Voelker '03 and Jen Davis '03, Leavitt presented a report on the program at the national meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago this past April. Since then she has received requests for more information from educators as far away as New Zealand who are interested in applying the model to their own student populations. Leavitt sees that model as particularly well suited for areas where coaches can be recruited from a liberal arts setting like Illinois Wesleyan's.

"I think other small, liberal arts schools could definitely do this in their communities," Leavitt says. "The Promise and Potential program demonstrates you don't have to be a major state or research institution to contribute to education in your community."

Leavitt adds, "This partnership is just one of many connections IWU has made with the local community under the leadership of the late President Minor Myers, jr., who was always seeking to connect with the local community in ways that made a difference in people's lives."

To ensure that it continues to make a difference in the community, the Promise and Potential Partnership will continue to undergo yearly evaluations to make adjustments and improvements wherever appropriate, according to Leavitt.

"What we do we want to do thoughtfully — we don't necessarily want to get big," she says, "but we do want to get it right."

* * *

Mike Clark's first day volunteering for the Promise and Potential program last spring was not looking all that promising. His student Julia (not her real name) had arrived for their session without any of her schoolbooks. When Clark '03 asked where the missing books were, she replied, "In my locker," with the deadpan sarcasm of a typical junior high student.

BJHS's Dennis Taylor, who is one of her teachers, recalls that Julia often came across as cold and untrusting before she began participating in the program. Her last coach, though, had opened Julia up quite a bit, and her subsequent relations with Taylor also improved as a result, he says. However, Clark quickly learned that, despite these previous inroads, Julia's trust and respect would not be easily won. After sending her back to retrieve her books, she returned again empty-handed.

Assisted by their coaches, program participants get a lesson on Internet research at IWU's Ames Library.

Clark knew he was being tested. With a calm demeanor and friendly smile, he accompanied Julia back to her locker. When they returned to the classroom, he was carrying her books for her, and she finally cracked a smile. As she read, he periodically tossed out a joke or words of encouragement. When she finished, Clark said, "Look at that, we're done!" and held his hand up for a high five. For a moment, Julia eyed his hand hesitantly, and just when it looked as if she wouldn't return the gesture, she put her hand up. The first of many steps had been taken, and it was definitely in the right direction.

Within such small interactions, Taylor believes, lies the larger success of the Promise and Potential Partnership.

"When people develop relationships and realize that someone cares about them and that they have the ability to care about others, it transfers to other things like schoolwork," he says. "First you have to have that relationship and bond. The most successful coaches and teachers find some way to build a working, friendly, comfortable, safe relationship with the kids."

The positive relationships built between coaches and students are the foundation for an equally important partnership between coaches and teachers, in which both parties learn from each other, according to Leavitt. Coaches engage in direct communication with BJHS teachers about their students, sharing insights that might help teachers to understand and respond to those students as they teach them. Leavitt also says coaches' one-on-one sessions with students free teachers to engage in other teaching tasks and attend to other students while assured that someone is working with students who need more individual attention.

"Teachers are overwhelmed with all the responsibilities they have," Leavitt says. "The primary thing an IWU student can do for teachers is to spend individual time with students. Think what it would mean for a teacher if he or she could spend one-on-one time with all of his or her students. One class of 30 students would be a full-time job, but they have five classes or more."

Despite their busy schedules, Leavitt says that the BJHS teachers involved with the program have gone out of their way to assist the coaches and to ensure the program runs smoothly on their end.

"They make this work, they really do," she says. "And they go the extra mile. The extra mile to meet with us and their school colleagues, to work with our students, to work with their students, and putting in the extra hours required to engage in a partnership. They're really dedicated. I can't say enough about how much I respect and admire these very hardworking teachers who know a lot about what they do."

* * *

One of the most difficult decisions that teachers have to make regarding the Promise and Potential Partnership is determining which students need this kind of help the most. Because there aren't enough coaches available to meet the number of struggling students, it's up to the teachers to decide who will benefit most from participation.

BJHS students are given the choice of opting out of the program if they do not want to participate, but few make that decision. Students can also nominate themselves for inclusion, and teachers take that self-selection into consideration when making their final recommendations.

Having a coach is now considered something of a status symbol at Bloomington Junior High, according to Taylor. "The students who don't have coaches are asking, 'When do I get a coach? How do I get a coach? Do you have a coach for me?'" he says. "Not only does that show that they have some interest in doing better in school, but also that the kids who are in the program hear them talk and realize that they have got an asset here, a resource that is valuable."

Still, even students with a strong desire to be in the program go through an inevitable period of adjustment. There are days when you feel their resentment and resistance, Voelker says. According to her, students may be reluctant at first to befriend their coaches. It often comes down to a matter of trust.

Davis says this period of adjustment is only natural, given the background of some of the children, who "can't count on someone to show up every day in their life, whether it's a parent, a guardian, whatever. Once you start building trust, you see the kids believe that you're coming, they know you're coming, that you listen to them," she says. "Sometimes, you make a deal with them to bring in a candy bar when they're doing well on something that took a lot of effort, and get to see their faces when you pull it out of your bag. They look like, 'Oh my gosh, they did do it. They came through on what they said.' That's really special to me. That's the whole point of it, I guess."

Forming a bond with students, coaches discover, means personalizing their relationship. They learn about their students — what they like to do, what are their hopes and aspirations. That knowledge helps break down the barriers, giving coaches a real chance to make a difference in their students' lives.

During her first year, Davis coached a boy whose passion was basketball. As soon as the junior high's basketball season was over, he felt lost. Basketball had given him something to look forward to, a reason to stay motivated, and something productive to do after school. Davis showed him that just because the season was over didn't mean he had to shut down. She found information about various basketball camps and summer leagues that he could join. He learned that there are other ways to be involved.

"I think that's our job," Davis says, "showing them that there are resources out there to help them, and they're not just stuck with the hand they're dealt."

It usually takes time for coaches to see the results of their sessions with students. According to Taylor, coaching can be a particularly frustrating task. Given the time constraints on their sessions, many coaches "may not see the impact they have on these kids. The impact they have may come even two or three years later," he says. However, most coaches come to realize that even the smallest victories add up eventually.

After participating in the program, many BJHS students have tasted these small successes — a B on a quiz they expected to flunk, the satisfaction of being called on in class and correctly answering a tough question, the relief of not having to explain another truancy notice to their parents — but Davis is quick to stress that the students themselves are responsible for their improvements.

"When I first started, I thought, 'I can change this person's life.' After I was in there, I saw that was not going to be the case at all. They end up changing their lives," Davis says.

Associate Professor of Sociology Georganne Rundblad speaks to program participants about their plans for the future during their visit to IWU.

Last April, participating BJHS students were invited to visit Illinois Wesleyan. They toured the campus, seeing where their coaches study and where they go to unwind. Some students even got the opportunity to sit in on a college class.

The visit revealed that these students have high aspirations of their own. When Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology Georganne Rundblad asked them what they'd like to be when they grow up, the group of BJHS students cited such career goals as becoming doctors, teachers, and nurses; most of them wanted to enter a field requiring a substantial amount of education. Some worried about their ability to achieve such lofty ambitions, but their coaches promised them that they have what it takes to make it.

As Kelly Riesselman '03 showed her student around Illinois Wesleyan's campus, the boy asked her "What if I don't make it to college?"

"You'll make it," she replied.

"But what happens if I don't?" he asked, voice full of uncertainty. "What happens if I can't graduate high school?"

"You will," Riesselman reassured him. "You'll study, and you'll work really hard. Then you'll make it. That's why we're doing this."

"I hope I can," he said. "I think I'd really like college."