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Calming Schools by Focusing on Well-Being of Troubled Students

By ANNA M. PHILLIPS

Mark Ossenheimer, principal of the Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation in the Bronx, threw out a name to add to the list of teenagers in trouble.



Ángel Franco/The New York Times

The Principal, Mark Ossenheimer, Left, with Teachers at Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation in the Bronx. A Group, Turnaround for Children, Assists the School.

Several teachers and a social worker seated around a table in the school's cramped administrative offices nodded in agreement. They had watched the student, who had a housebound parent who was seriously ill, sink into heavy depression. Another child seemed to be moving from apartment to apartment, showing up at school only sporadically. And then there was the one grappling with gender-identity issues. Soon the list had a dozen names of students who could shatter a classroom's composure or a school windowpane in a second.

Convening the meeting was **Turnaround for Children**, a nonprofit organization that the young-but-faltering school in an impoverished neighborhood near the Bronx Zoo had brought in this year to try to change things.

"This is the condition our organization was created to solve," said Dr. Pamela Cantor, Turnaround's founder and president. "A teacher who works in a community like this and thinks that these children can leave their issues at the door and come in and perform is dreaming."

In focusing on students' psychological and emotional well-being, in addition to academics, **Turnaround occupies a middle ground between the educators and politicians who believe schools should be more like community centers, and the education-reform movement, with its no-excuses mantra.** Over the past decade, the movement has argued that schools should concentrate on what high-quality, well-trained teachers can achieve in classrooms, rather than on the sociological challenges beyond their doors.

For schools in tough neighborhoods where many principals say they can barely see their teachers' work through the fog of students' extreme behavior, Turnaround offers a whole-child model that requires the hiring of social workers and the training of teachers in how to respond to outbursts in ways other than sending children to the principal's office.

The organization, founded in 1994 as the Children's Mental Health Alliance, has been working in New York City schools since 2002. It operates in 20 schools in the city and three in Washington at a cost of \$250,000 each, most of which is paid for by foundations. (The schools also pay for the social workers.)

Dr. Cantor said that she hoped to nearly double the number of schools and to expand to Massachusetts, New Jersey and Baltimore in the next two years, but that ultimately she wanted districts themselves to adopt the model.

In 2009, an independent study by the American Institutes for Research found that after three years with Turnaround, five Bronx middle schools were, over all, happier places. Each school reported fewer student suspensions and teacher absences, and four of the five placed fewer 911 calls.

The effect on standardized test scores is less clear. At the five schools in the 2009 study, an average of 50 percent of test-takers passed the state English exams in 2009, up from 29 percent in 2006. But when the state toughened its standards a year later, the Turnaround schools' scores plummeted along with the rest of the city's. Junior High School 118, which has been working with Turnaround for six years, is among the highest-scoring schools in the program, yet fewer than half of its students met the state's proficiency standard in English last year.

Patrick Kelly, principal of the Urban Science Academy -- the school was not among those in the study but has been working with Turnaround for five years -- described the improvement in the school's atmosphere as "dramatic."

"I could conceivably get sent five new kids next week who are dysfunctional," Mr. Kelly said, "but I would say that now, this past year, we just turned a big corner."

The typical Turnaround school in New York is one where 78 percent of students do not meet proficiency standards on state exams and 66 percent are behind in math. On average, nearly 90 percent of the students in these schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, 20 percent are English-language learners and 20 percent require special-education services. Nearly 94 percent of them are black or Latino.

Turnaround's approach is based on the premise that teaching can be made easier if schools confront the 5 percent of students who behave the worst. When they do not, Dr. Cantor said, those 5 percent often pull down the next 10 percent to 15 percent of troublesome students in an academic riptide.

The organization begins with meetings like the one at Mr. Ossenheimer's school, scheduled weekly, in which teachers, social workers and administrators detail individual cases. Some students are referred to therapists; with others, teachers try new strategies for curbing bad behavior.

Every teacher in a Turnaround school is required to undergo training in how to manage and prevent outbursts in ways that do not involve yelling or asking a student to leave the room. With more demands placed on teachers, and a shift in how their schools handle discipline, it is not uncommon for some teachers to flee a school during the first year of the program.

Turnaround has also begun to put more focus on academics. Its staff members observe lessons, suggest changes to curriculum and meet with teachers and administrators.

In New York City, federal grants are being used to bring Turnaround to more schools, including two new elementary schools in the Bronx, Public School 536 and Public School 531. The city also placed John Adams High -- a troubled school in Ozone Park, Queens, that is undergoing a federal process known as "restart" that makes it eligible for millions of dollars -- in the care of Turnaround and New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization that advises schools.

At a panel discussion in New York City last month, James Shelton, the federal Education Department's assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement, said programs like Turnaround were often overlooked as "so much kumbaya."

"The research for what Pam is doing is significant and growing," he said, "and for us to ignore that is not only at our peril, it's just stupid."