

Counselors Set Stage for Smooth Transitions

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Penelope de Mello e Souza

About 20 percent of the sixth- through eighth-graders who attend the Middle School of the Escola Americana do Rio de Janeiro come and go each year, which is not unusual for schools that serve a large number of families on overseas assignments. But the turnover rate makes it doubly important that such schools have an effective means of helping students and their families make a smooth transition to a different country and educational system.

At the Escola Americana do Rio de Janeiro, we base our orientation program on the school-family problem-solving model developed by Howard Weiss and Arthur Maslow at the Ackerman Institute for the Family in New York City. Although we have adapted the model for our population, the lessons are useful for any school seeking to create a positive climate for learning. The overall goal is to establish a collaborative process for identifying and solving problems, thus joining the two systems, family and school, that most influence a child's life.

Four to six weeks after a new student has completed the regular orientation session and started classes, we set up a meeting with the student, his or her parents, the adviser, and two counselors. The adviser presents reports from the teachers about the student's academic and social adjustment. One of the counselors generally starts the meeting by asking the student how he or she feels about the school. We also ask the student to respond to all suggestions because we have found that students will not "see the science teacher after school" or pursue any other recommendation if they don't agree with it.

Usually, these meetings help us solve small problems before they escalate to large ones. Some common themes emerge:

New students often are reluctant to speak up when something goes wrong.

- John, a sixth-grader in the fifth week of school, had received an incorrect locker combination, so he carried an unwieldy number of books in his backpack throughout the day.
- Roberto was being teased by some of the boys in his physical education class. He had discussed this at home but did not know whom to consult at the school. As a result, he didn't want to come to school each morning.
- Jenny did not complete her homework in English because her dictionary was still in transit. She was too shy to tell her teacher and, as a result, received a low grade on the assignment.
- George wanted to join the basketball team. Because he didn't know whom to contact, he missed an important opportunity to connect to the school and to his peers.

In such cases, the counselor usually can find a rapid solution by making a phone call or setting up an appointment with the right people.



Parents who are new to a school haven't had time to establish bonds with the faculty, so they are reluctant to report problems.

- Judy was struggling with her homework because the reading assignments were too difficult. Her mother was upset, almost angry, but she didn't know if the school conducted parent-teacher conferences or whether she could set up an appointment with the teacher. We showed her how.
- Peter's teacher had asked him to bring some kitchen utensils to class, not knowing that the family was still living in a hotel. The mother thought the teacher was being insensitive. When we informed the teacher of Peter's predicament, she happily gave a different assignment.
- Luiz went home after school and immediately fell asleep for hours. His mother took him to see a physician. We helped her understand that Luiz was reacting normally to the tiring process of listening to a new language for an entire day.
- When Priscilla's mother received a report about her low grades in English, she didn't know how to help her daughter. We asked the teacher to join the meeting and together we developed an intervention plan.
- Tom was not doing well in math. His mother informed us that he had skipped a semester in the third grade. We tested him, and the results indicated that he had missed learning some basic skills. We arranged special tutoring.
- Tomiko said the math program was too easy. After we set up a second meeting with her math teacher and the head of the math department, we were able to place Tomiko in a more challenging class.
- Jose was struggling in science. His mother said that he was spending two to three hours completing homework and still earning poor grades. As a student in the English as a Second Language program, he was supposed to audit the science course. However, no one had told Jose's teacher, so he expected Jose to complete the same assignments as the native speakers.

These orientation meetings have several advantages. They help us identify and resolve problems, develop a closer working relationship with the family, and show parents that the school is an institution that cares about their children. After seven years, we have found that these meetings usually produce positive changes in academic achievement and behavior. Much of the success stems from the shared responsibility among the students, their families, and the faculty — a partnership with almost unlimited possibilities for schools.

Penelope de Mello e Souza is the middle school counselor at the Escola Americana do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. She can be reached at soup@earj.com.br.

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