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Anti-truancy initiative brings peer group mentoring to Marta Valle

by Jessica Campbell

When Andy Rodriguez and Shanique Josephs told 15 Marta Valle High School freshmen last week that only half of all black and Hispanic students graduate from high school, the room grew quiet.

“That means half of you guys probably won’t graduate — according to statistics,” Josephs said. “How does that make you feel?”

Rodriguez and Josephs were very much trying to teach the freshmen in front of them, but they are not teachers. They are two of 24 Marta Valle seniors participating in Peer Group Connection, a mentoring program run by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training.



Marta Valle High School seniors and freshmen participating in Peer Group Connection last week

Used by more than 150 schools across the country, the program has so far been used in New York City only by elite private schools, such as Spence and Dalton. The program came to Marta Valle, the first city public school to adopt it, through Mayor Bloomberg’s year-old Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement. (Washington Irving High School will start using Peer Group Connection next semester.)

“We’ve been doing this program for so long in elite private schools so we love being able to mirror that experience for students in more high-need communities,” said Margo Ross, PCLT’s senior director of development.

While the range of schools have different needs — and adjust their mentoring curriculum accordingly — the essence of the model remains the same. PGC calls for select seniors to enroll in a full-year, credit-bearing course which meets daily and trains them to be peer leaders. The course is co-taught by two teachers who have gotten special training. Once a week the seniors visit freshmen advisories for an “outreach class” in which they lead activities and discussions about relevant topics such as graduation, goal-setting, and decision-making.

Seniors get credits towards graduation and a sense of responsibility. Freshmen get peer role models and help making the tough transition into high school — something that experts say is essential to keep them from dropping out.

“Every student, no matter where they are, needs a boost. They need a safety net,” Ross said. “Ninth grade is the most vulnerable year when it comes to dropping out, and if we can get them over that hump from ninth to 10th grade, they’re just in a different place in terms of being able to go the distance.”

A recent study conducted by Rutgers University found that schools using PCLT programs improved their graduation rates by 10 percentage points.

At Marta Valle, the theme of Thursday’s outreach session was “Showing Up.” The senior pairs matched up with their assigned freshmen advisories to discuss the impact of attendance on graduation rates — a relevant topic at Marta Valle, where the daily attendance rate (81 percent) and 4-year graduation rate (56 percent) both fall short of city averages.

The city’s attendance initiative, which piloted in 25 schools last year and expanded to 50 this year, has experimented with innovative ways to bring students into schools, including waking them up with automated calls from celebrities and assigning them mentors.

The city’s task force has also found “success mentors” to help schools adopt practices that have been successful elsewhere. John Feinblatt, a chief policy advisor to the mayor who oversees the initiative, said the task force had tested several different “success mentor” models: Some make use of existing school staff, some bring in external groups for support, and some, like PGC, use students.

“As we project what future years might look like, we want to come to a model that we believe in, that has good performance, and that has the ability for real scalability,” he said.

While it is too early to assess the results, he called PGC “an attractive model” because it targets the crucial ninth-grade year and also engages a substantial portion of the school community.

“There’s a benefit at both ends,” Feinblatt said. “It’s not only helping the ninth-graders, but it’s keeping the 12th-graders generally interested in school as well.”

Mimi Fortunato, Marta Valle’s principal, called the program “a gift.” In her second year leading the Lower East Side school, Fortunato is working to put Marta Valle’s former designations as “persistently dangerous” and a “School in Need of Improvement” far into the past.

She said PGC perfectly complements Marta Valle’s new advisory program, which meets for approximately 40 minutes three times per week. In preparing for PGC, Fortunato said that there was a “rigorous” application process for interested seniors. But she said the carefully chosen group was not just skimmed from the top.

“We didn’t just select students who were already leaders; we were looking for leadership capacity,” Fortunato said. “What we’re doing is trying to build leadership strategies.”

Ross, who visited the school last week with other PCLT support staff, said the school was already becoming a more positive place for students. Aside from the new advisory program, students are now served breakfast daily – Fortunato calls it “brain food” — and they are also being asked to participate in building their school community, even helping paint a chipper shade of green on the walls.

“It’s not a complete school reformation model,” Ross said of the mentoring program. “But as a component of a much larger approach, it’s an incredibly strong tool, and it’s a way of using the resources that you already have.”

After dropping the disheartening statistics, Josephs led the class in a game while Rodriguez periodically pulled small groups of freshmen out of the room. The goal was to show the groups how much they missed when they were gone. When students returned they offered fictional excuses for being absent, which included family problems, train delays, and “the dog ate my outfit so I had nothing to wear.” They also shared feelings of confusion after having missed a portion of the class. During the final reflection, Josephs and Rodriguez prodded the freshmen to connect the day’s lesson back to their general attendance habits in classes such as physical education and math that they might consider less fun.

“You might be thinking, ‘Oh we’re in ninth grade, we can do anything now and make it up later,’” Josephs said. “You miss a lot. A lot.”

Rodriguez chimed in to drill the point home: “There’s a quote that says, ‘Whatever you put in, is what you get out.’ If you put in a crappy effort — excuse my language — that’s what you’re going to get out of it.”