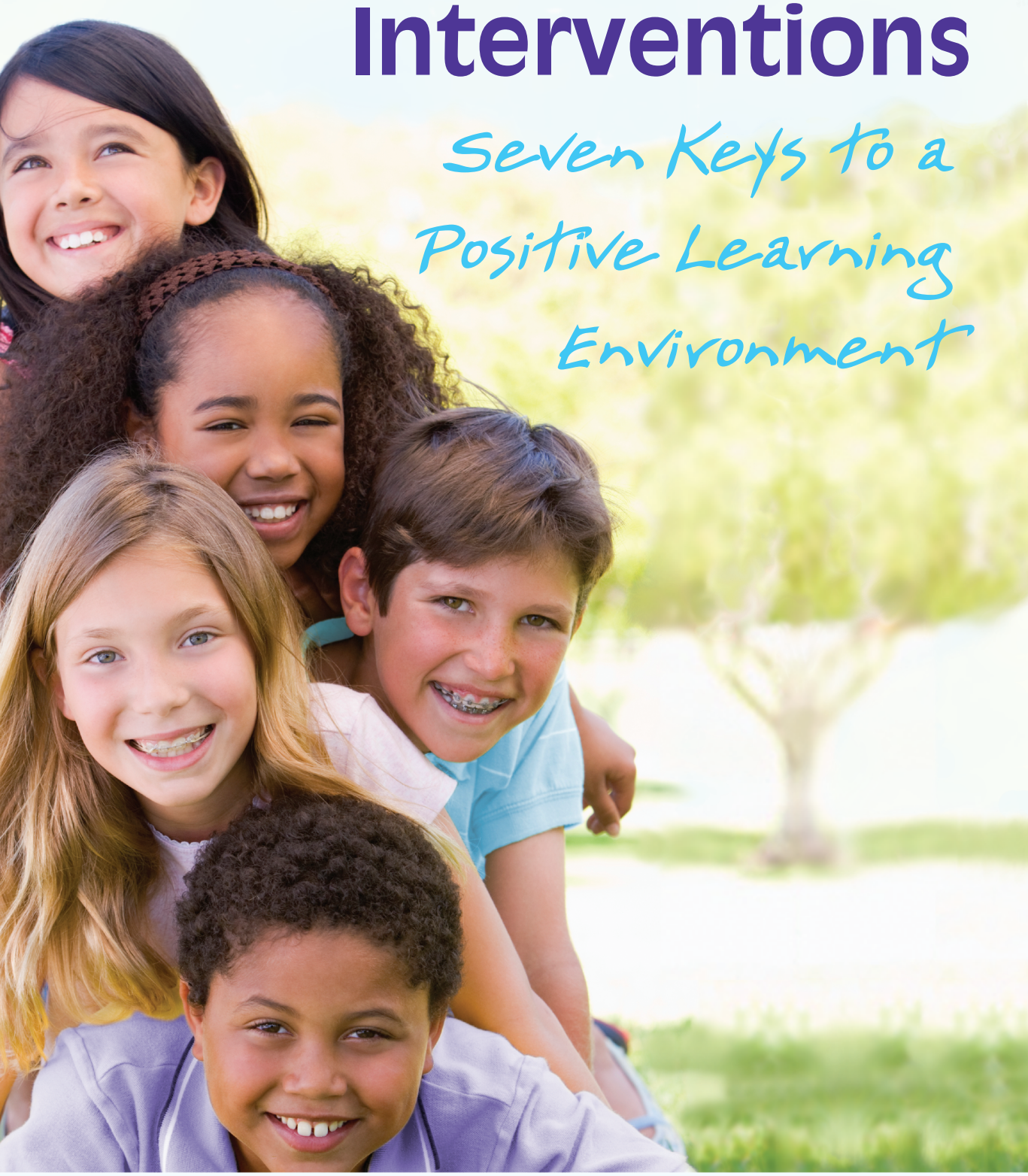
Pyramid of Behavior Interventions

Seven Keys to a Positive Learning Environment



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about the authors

Tom Hierck, MA, an experienced educator since 1983, served as assistant superintendent of School District No. 46 (Sunshine Coast) in Gibsons, British Columbia, and principal in the Kootenay Lake School District in British Columbia. He also served with the Ministry of Education. Tom is a compelling presenter, infusing his message of hope with strategies culled from the real world.

Tom is a contributing author to *The Teacher as Assessment Leader* and *The Principal as Assessment Leader*. He has presented to schools and districts across North America with a message of celebration for educators seeking to make a difference in the lives of students. Tom's dynamic presentations explore the importance of positive learning environments and the role of assessment to improve student learning. His belief that "every student is a success story waiting to be told" has led him to work with teachers and administrators to create positive school cultures and build effective relationships that facilitate learning for all students.

Tom was a recipient of the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medallion, presented by the Premier and Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, for being a recognized leader in the field of public education.

Tom earned his master's degree at Gonzaga and his bachelor's degree and teacher certification at the University of British Columbia.

To learn more about Tom's work, visit www.tomhierck.com, follow him on Twitter @umakadiff, or visit his blog (http://umakeadiff.blogspot.com).

Charlie Coleman, MEd, is principal of Cowichan Secondary School in Duncan, British Columbia, where he is leading the staff to build a results-oriented professional learning community (PLC). He has been a principal at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse communities. Charlie is former principal at Quamichan Middle School and Khowhemun Elementary School, and he has also been involved with the Ministry of Education School Improvement Project in a variety of middle and high school settings. He is a certified

staff developer who combines his experience and expertise with an engaging sense of humor in his workshops and presentations.

As former principal of Khowhemun Elementary School, Charlie brought students and staff through challenges familiar to many socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Four years after he became principal, the percentage of all Khowhemun students who met or exceeded expected scores in math and reading (based on the British Columbia Performance Standards) increased significantly. At Quamichan Middle School, Charlie's PLC team increased reading scores significantly (as measured by the District Reading Test) and significantly improved the transition rates for the vulnerable Aboriginal population.

Charlie's accomplishments earned him the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Outstanding Young Educator Award. He has also received Canada's Outstanding Principal Award from The Learning Partnership, and Khowhemun Elementary was named a Top 40 School in Canada by *Today's Parent Magazine*. He has published several articles in the United States and Canada and has served on numerous educational committees and teams.

A firm believer in servant leadership, Charlie uses his knowledge and energy to help other educators achieve great results. In addition, his experience working with urban and Native Canadian (Aboriginal) students translates into practical strategies for helping eliminate achievement gaps in diverse school communities.

He earned a master's degree in education administration and leadership studies and a bachelor's degree in secondary curriculum from the University of Victoria.

To learn about Charlie's work, visit him at www.heartofeducation.com.

Chris Weber, EdD, is a consultant and administrative coach for Chicago Public Schools and the Oakland (California) Unified School District. As principal of R. H. Dana Elementary School in the Capistrano Unified School District (CUSD) in California, Chris was the leader of a highly effective PLC. Together with his staff, he lifted the school to remarkable levels of success.

Designated Schoolwide Title I, with more than 60 percent of all students English learners and Latino and more than 75 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged, R.H. Dana consistently exceeded adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals. The school's gains over four years were among the top 1 percent in the state, and it was the first school in the decades-long history of the CUSD to win the State of California's Title I Academic Achievement Award. Under Chris's leadership, R. H. Dana earned the first California Distinguished School Award in the school's 42-year history. After the percentage of students meeting AYP in English and math tripled in four years, the school was named a National Blue Ribbon School. Chris credits these achievements to the daily practice of key principles: (1) focusing on student engagement, (2)

maximizing instructional time, (3) reallocating resources, and (4) developing systematic student support programs based on response to intervention (RTI).

Chris has experience teaching grades K–12 and has served as a site administrator for elementary and secondary schools. He was director of instruction for the Garden Grove Unified School District in California, which was the 2004 winner of the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education. Chris led the district's 47 K–6 schools in helping all groups of students achieve double-digit AYP gains in mathematics and English language arts.

Chris is a coauthor of *Pyramid Response to Intervention: RTI, Professional Learning Communities, and How to Respond When Kids Don't Learn*. He also coauthored "The Why Behind RTI," the feature article in the October 2010 issue of *Educational Leadership*.

A graduate of the United States Air Force Academy and a former U.S. Air Force pilot, he holds a master's degree from California State University, San Marcos, and a doctorate of education from the University of California (Irvine and Los Angeles).

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foreword

By Wayne Hulley

School improvement is a complex task. Ideally, it is an opportunity for educators to collaborate and grow professionally in the creation of schools that make a difference for all students. The reality, however, is that any school improvement process resulting in meaningful, lasting change is fraught with ambiguity and challenge. The improvement process in every school is unique, affected by demographics, existing culture, staff characteristics, and leadership. It is uneven and messy with many turns in the road and mountains to be climbed. The challenge resides in creating and sustaining a coordinated process for school improvement.

In this book, Tom, Charlie, and Chris have tried to simplify the complex. They believe that schools must create a positive learning environment in which both students and staff are inspired to do their best. To make this happen, they recommend a process with a focus on seven keys. Their research has shown that schools and classrooms that consistently bring this focus are able to have a significant impact on student learning and behavior. This book is built around common sense and the introduction of high-yield strategies, those things that we know help kids learn.

Many researchers have separated students' academic performance from their behavior. However, Tom, Charlie, and Chris believe it is possible, and preferable, for schools to work on both in a coordinated way. They have combined professional learning community (PLC) concepts with elements from positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) to create a system in which teachers work collaboratively to support both the learning and the behavioral needs of students—a system in which tremendous differences can occur. They share numerous examples from real schools that show the results that are possible when both types of student needs—learning and behavioral—are the focus.

Most teachers are already doing the best they can and are working hard to make a difference for students. To help these busy teachers, Tom, Charlie, and Chris have reduced the necessary elements for creating a school culture that supports both student learning and behavior to seven key components. They have discovered that these key components exist in schools and classrooms that are having a significant positive influence on students. The seven key components are about bringing a focus to a school and a classroom. They lead to the development of common expectations shared by all staff, targeted instruction in the areas needing improvement, and the creation of structures and strategies to provide appropriate support.

As someone who has struggled to make sense of school improvement for more than forty years, I found that this book not only highlights the key issues, but more importantly, it offers a sensible approach to confronting these issues. School improvement will never be easy, because it forces schools and teachers to change their behaviors. However, with constructive and proven strategies, school staff can make a positive difference. As Tom, Charlie, and Chris believe, the solution lies not in changing the students we have coming to our schools, but in changing our approach to working with them.

I highly recommend this book to those who care deeply about teaching and the future.

This We Believe

Education has changed. The job we are asked to do today is not the same job we were asked to do a decade ago. The focus has changed from *learning for some* to *learning for all*, and then to *learning for all, whatever it takes*. The stakes and expectations are higher than ever before. How can we reach such high expectations? Consider the traditional approach taken with an elementary student, Adam, who exhibits problem behaviors.

> Patricia, a third-grade teacher, is doing all she can to survive the "Year of Adam." Her disposition improves as the months pass, and she realizes that soon Adam will be passed on to fourth grade. John, the fourth-grade teacher, has heard all the negative feedback about Adam just prior to school closing for the break and now experiences the "Summer of Adam" as he counts down the days until the school year begins, losing sleep as the summer days slip away.
>
> Imagine, instead, if John had approached Adam before the summer break to greet him and let him know he would be his new teacher, providing some words of encouragement. Perhaps John even takes an interest in Adam and gathers some information about him. Adam likes the newest sports trading cards, so John gets a few packs to use during the school year. During the summer, John plans a "chance" encounter to let Adam know he is looking forward to the upcoming school year. On the opening day of school, all teachers have a number of items to hand out and review. John asks Adam to hand out some of the papers.

Some might argue that this example of how to motivate a student is too simple and naïve. However, we know what the traditional approach would produce. Remember, behavior occurs for one of two reasons: to get something or to avoid something. To change student behavior requires that we change our approach. There are countless opportunities to motivate students. And yet too often, we miss these opportunities.

The Best Kids

Charlie was sitting with a group of teachers during a lunch break one day, and the discussion quickly turned to confessing the sins of their students. In the confines

of the staff room, teachers will sometimes vent frustrations by competing for the "worst student" story. It's a dangerous game to play because by repeating the stories, we can start to believe that most of our kids are bad. In fact, the opposite is true. Most of our kids are good, and they all have potential. Listening to the teachers, Charlie was reminded of a comment Wayne Hulley made during a presentation. "Parents," he said, "are sending us the best kids they have." The impact of the statement hit Charlie hard then, and it was reaffirmed as the teachers talked. Education embodies learning, growth, and improvement. We must work with the kids who show up to our classes every day. Parents are not keeping the really good ones at home and seeing how we do with the weaker ones first. There are no throwaway kids or designated failures. There are just students at different stages of learning. Education is not a random event. Teachers must stand before their classes with a firm and rooted belief that *every* student can be successful.

Every student has the potential to be successful. We need to unlock that potential in our most challenging students and point them in the direction most likely to produce the greatest chance for success. This is a personal journey for each student and cannot be accomplished by taking a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Instead, as DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) describe, it must be a "whatever it takes" approach. There is too much at stake.

The Best Adults

The behavior and commitment of adult role models are critical to the success of any school improvement plan. Malcolm Gladwell (2009), in a summary of teacher effectiveness research, clearly showed that the difference between good teachers and poor teachers is vast. If we are to be successful in making a difference in the lives of kids, then we must model what we want to see. If we want our students and our school community to improve, change, grow, and learn, then *we* must be willing to change and improve. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) refer to this as *collective commitment*:

> When educators clarify and commit to certain shared values, they are engaged in the essential ABCs of school improvement—identifying the actions, behaviors, and commitments necessary to bring mission and vision to life. (p. 148)

How we conduct ourselves, the choices we make, and the behaviors we model will be reflected back by our students. Gladwell (2009) estimates that the difference in student learning between a good teacher and an average teacher is equal to a year's worth of learning in a single year of school. According to Gladwell (2009), "Your child is actually better off in a bad school with an excellent teacher than in an excellent school with a bad teacher" (p. 317).

If our goal is to have all students learn and grow, we must begin to make a difference at the most basic levels first. Student behavior is key. The research on effective schools (Hulley & Dier, 2008; Lezotte, 1997) points to the importance of safe,

orderly, and caring school environments. At the schoolwide level, there must be plans and systems in place to support a positive learning environment. Plans and systems are only as good as the people implementing them. Adult behavior must demonstrate commitment to the plan. At the classroom level, that safe environment starts with the teacher.

Brain-based research supports this notion that students learn very little academically if their social-emotional needs are not met first. It gets right back to Abraham Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of basic needs: we must feel safe and cared for before we can effectively concentrate on higher-level thinking. It does not matter how knowledgeable the teacher is about her subject area if she does not make an emotional connection with her students. It does not matter how well the teacher has planned his lesson if he has not created a safe, caring environment in his classroom. This point is emphasized by the high school senior who told us, "I want to get to know my teacher, and I want my teacher to know me."

Teacher Impact

Everyone seems to have at least one teacher that they remember fondly as having made a difference in their lives. Can you remember one? Stop for a moment and think about one of those high-impact teachers. What qualities did he or she possess? What did that teacher do to make a connection with you? How did that teacher make your learning meaningful? What impact did he or she have on your life?

When we ask this question at staff development sessions in any district, in any jurisdiction, the answers tend to cluster around several main themes. The themes most frequently cited are that the most memorable teacher:

- Cared about me as an individual
- Brought learning to life, made it real
- Took extra time to help me learn
- Was always fair, reasonable, and understanding
- Inspired me to do my best

Notice how these themes focus very little on the specialized knowledge of the teacher or the kind and number of tests and worksheets. Robyn Jackson (2009) notes, "Knowing your students means more than knowing their demographics or test scores" (p. 30). Memorable, high-impact teachers make a difference in the lives of students, one kid at a time.

Unfortunately, most adults can also think of at least one teacher who made their learning miserable. When we ask this question at workshops and seminars, common themes also emerge. In this category, the most prevalent themes are that the low-impact teacher:

- Did not know me or care about me
- Made the subject material dry and boring

- Was often unfair or arbitrary
- Yelled and screamed, put kids down, and belittled students
- Seemed more interested in the subject than the kids

We don't teach subjects, we teach kids! If the role of the teacher were to simply disseminate facts and mark assignments, it would be much more efficient doing nothing more than online correspondence. The advances in technology have rendered this dissemination of information a moot point. Those who reminisce for the good old days are thinking of life B.G.—before Google! Today's students have quicker and easier access to information than at any previous point in education. We are no longer the fonts of knowledge. Students can gather the knowledge in numerous ways and from a variety of sources. Our roles have shifted to helping students connect the knowledge into usable chunks of information that align with their passion and future pursuits. School is more than a fact-distribution center. Schools should be social places where students and staff learn together. The goal is to become a community of learners, where students develop socially and emotionally as well as academically. Teachers who do this very well or very poorly both leave a lasting legacy on many students.

Parents, teachers, support staff, and principals should be asking themselves these questions:

- In which category do I fall? Do I have high impact and inspire, or do I have low impact and demotivate my students?
- What am I doing to ensure that students get more positives and fewer negatives?
- Do I make a difference? How do I know?

Those of us who work in schools have a tremendous opportunity to impact the lives of so many kids. An elementary teacher over the course of her thirty-year career can make close personal connections with almost 1,000 kids in her care. A middle or high school teacher can come in direct contact with up to 200 or 300 kids per year, or upwards of 9,000 kids over a thirty-year career. We touch the lives of enough people to build whole villages or small towns. Collectively we build a nation. The real joy of this profession lies not in predicting the future, but in creating it.

The question is, what kinds of villages and towns are we building? How do we impact those students' lives? What do we model for them? What do we teach them? What life lessons do we leave them with? Referring to the following Haim Ginott (1976) quote, do we make the lives of those students miserable or joyous? What kind of community do we create?

> I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power

> to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized. (p. 13)

Community Building

It's easy to get sidetracked. There are so many demands on the individual teacher and principal. More requirements and expectations come down from politicians and departments of education. These get filtered through local school boards, superintendents, and directors of instruction and are then passed down again to those on the front lines. The adults in the building, who really just want to work with kids, are expected to add the new demands and expectations to already full and busy weeks, months, and years. This often distracts us from our core purpose, which is student learning.

Each one of these new demands has, at its heart, a serious intention to improve the school system for kids. However, such intentions often get lost in translation or buried in bureaucratic red tape. What begins as a good idea for kids and schools often becomes so onerous that it actually detracts from what educators do best—work with kids.

A case in point was an exercise one school district had to go through, an exercise in which an external review team visited schools across the district to give a report card of sorts.

> Each school had to have it's own School Planning Council (consisting of parents, teachers, and the principal), which was charged with the task of creating a "School Plan for Student Achievement," complete with measurable goals and a host of structures and strategies to support the plan. To be sure, this was very important stuff.
>
> As the parents, teachers, principal, and support staff struggled to complete the document, they got bogged down in details and jargon, data, and evidence. This is not to say that all of these things are not important—they are. They are especially important when the goal is to improve student learning. But it is easy to lose sight of the forest because of our attention on every tree.
>
> As the school team toiled over the details of the new plan, one of the parents on the School Planning Council reminded them of what this was all supposed to be about. She said, "It's simple. Safe, happy kids will learn. Our school plan needs to reflect that. It should be that simple."

That really is what it's all about. How we achieve that might look a little different in every school in every province or state. After you get past all the educational jargon and all the data crunching of test scores and letter grades, it comes down to creating a positive school environment.

Real-Estate Test

When discussing community building in staff development sessions, we often refer to the real-estate test. At some point in time, the house beside you will come up for sale. If the option were yours, who would you want to buy that house and become your neighbor? The reality is that the choice of buyer will come down to who meets (or beats) the list price. Think of some of the students who have been marginalized by the school system. Based on how the individual was treated as a student, will you be comfortable having him or her as your neighbor when he or she grows up to be an adult? Eventually, students become adults. Have you helped them to become the kind of people you want living on your street, or working at the garage and fixing your car, or cooking at the local restaurant and preparing your meal, or coming back to school and teaching *your* kids?

Success Is Individual

We want all kids to succeed. Success, however, is relative. How we measure success depends on how we view the situation. Whether we are talking about behavior or academics in school, success should be measured individually. As Alfie Kohn (2005) points out, "Kids who have an underlying sense of their own value are more likely to see failure as a temporary set-back, a problem to be solved" (p. 20). In an era of accountability, it is easy to get forced into a false sense of security from number crunching. Data are important, but simple, impersonal, standardized scores do not tell the whole story. We have to make meaning from government-initiated standardized tests in a way that makes sense for the students in our schools. If we are to be effective advocates for kids, we also have to have other, more personalized, individualized, meaningful data. Data are evidence of progress. We need personalized evidence to know and to show that we are making a difference for each individual child. For example, Horner, Sugai, and Todd (2001) suggest that if we look at behavior support for students, "information is needed about both individual students and the entire student body" (p. 20). To do that, we have to start by knowing where the student is now. Only then will we be able to celebrate successes when we can show that there has been improvement. This is true for both behavior and academics.

> In the final term of the year, a number of students in Mrs. Hart's and Mrs. Gold's grade 8 classes had stopped attending regularly and were in danger of not passing the term (and possibly the year). By the last two weeks of classes, the teachers were very worried that these six or seven students would not pass, as they were falling further and further behind in their learning with each day of school that they missed. In an effort to make sure that these students were able to show their learning (and pass grade 8), Mrs. Hart and Mrs. Gold put together a folder for each of these at-risk learners containing assignments that, while slightly adapted, would meet the major learning outcomes for the term. When these particular learners arrived at school, Mrs. Hart or Mrs. Gold offered them the chance to catch up on all

their learning and pass grade 8 in as much time as it took them to complete all of the major outcomes of the term (organized in an easy-to-understand way in the folders).

When the students understood what was being offered to them (a chance to finish grade 8 in less than two weeks), and accepted the responsibility of this deal (working through the folder of learning all day long, at the back of Mrs. Gold's classroom and forgoing all classroom activities and lessons), they were asked to call their parents to get permission. Students knew that when they were able to show that they had learned all of the major outcomes, they were officially finished with grade 8 and did not have to return to classes.

Because attendance was a major struggle for most of these learners, a few of them did not show up at school in those last two weeks, and they did not pass grade 8. Three of the students, though, happened to arrive at school on the Monday that Mrs. Hart and Mrs. Gold planned to begin this program. Armed with the folders, textbooks, calculators, paper, pencils, granola bars, and juice boxes, Mrs. Gold was able to keep them in her room without giving them any excuses to leave. After just one day of successfully completing a number of learning outcomes, all three students showed up three or four days in a row (an attendance run that none of them had met since early in Term 2), and were able to walk out the doors of the school, feeling successful, a full week earlier than their peers. One other student, Colton, did not have attendance problems, but was on an IEP for his learning disability, and took medication for attention deficit disorder.

As the end of the year drew closer and closer, Colton was having tremendous difficulty staying focused on his learning. Mrs. Hart and Mrs. Gold offered him the same deal as they had offered the other three learners, and Colton was able to finish all of his grade 8 learning in just two school days (and a weekend, as he took some work home with him). He, too, walked out of school a few days before his peers, feeling successful, and, in his own words, "Responsible, like it's my own choice to do this."

Goal Setting

Every school is different, and every student unique, but most of us in schools have a similar long-term goal. Parents and educators want students to graduate and become successful, contributing members of society.

We have a clear understanding of our long-term goal; the challenge is the short-term goals that will lead to our desired long-term reality. Building small successes along the way and celebrating them often will contribute to our long-term success. Celebrations are great community-creators and culture-builders. As Bolman and Deal (2002) state, celebration and ceremony "are antidotes to boredom, cynicism,