

**Camp Good Days and Special Times
Rochester City School District High School
Leadership and Transitional Program:
Participant Observation from a Volunteer's
Perspective**

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Greg Drake
Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology
585-475-2432
Gmd3165@rit.edu

John Klofas
Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology
585-475-2432
jmkgcj@rit.edu

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Introduction

In August 2010, Camp Good Days and Special Times hosted the first Rochester City School District High School Leadership and Transitional Program, henceforth referred to as the RCSD Program. With mounting problems regarding rates of high school drop out, poor academic performance, rates of collegiate enrollment below the national average, and violence associated with high school youth, the RCSD Program was implemented to reach sixth graders at a vital and vulnerable time in their youth.

Best Practices & Previous Research

A broad body of research indicates that transition into high school can have tremendous ill effects on students. Students often become uninterested in school, struggle to manage their time adequately between numerous curricular and extra-curricular activities, attend classes less often, and feel an increased need for peer friendships (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991; Wheelock, 1993; Reyes, Gillock, & Kobus, 1994; Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond, & Walker, 1996).

Haney (nd) argues that these problems are more prevalent among African-American students, particularly young boys. Furthermore, Haney states that the consequences for a failed transition into high school, failure to graduate from high school, are higher for young African-American boys as they are more likely to be incarcerated in the future.

Research indicates that students are more likely to succeed in high school when they are involved in a transition program (Haney, nd). Specific to high school transition programs, they are more likely to be successful if they are (1) extensive and multi-faceted, (2) involve a summer program with information about the new school, and (3) provide wide social support for students (Mac Iver, 1990; Hertzog and Morgan, 1999; Mizelle, 1995).

Methodology & Program Overview

The RCSD Program was designed to capture two students from each of the forty Rochester City School District schools that teach seventh graders, but because of the logistical issues involved with planning any week long summer program, 39 students were able to attend the program. Specifically, 13 boy and 26 girls attended the program. The RCSD Program was designed to prepare students for the rigors of high school, develop their leadership and teamwork skills, encourage pro-social behavior, and then to cultivate their desire to participate in post-secondary education.

Consistent with best practices for high school transitional programs, the RCSD Program was developed to include a wide variety of transition items. The program began Monday, August 16 and ran until Thursday, August 19, involving a balance of teacher lead presentations, team building activities, guest lectures, and recreational activities. The students were also required to record and reflect upon their thoughts regarding the activities of the program in a personal journal provided to them.

The program coordinators consisted of five administrators and teachers from the Rochester City School District, all of which had extensive background working with urban youth and had grown up in an urban setting. Also involved were volunteer counselors from the Upstate New York Region and a group of fulltime and summertime staff that coordinate various programs at the Camp Good Days and Special Times Keuka Lake Facility.

Volunteers and program coordinators arrived at the camp Monday morning to meet and go over the program. Students arrived at noon and were separated into five groups, for both the purpose of administering the program and for sleeping arrangements. The girls were separated into three cabins, and the boys were separated into two. Each group/cabin was assigned a RCSD coordinator and a group of volunteers for program implementation and supervision.

Over the four day period of the program, all 39 students and their counselors partook in all meals, a handful of 'all camp' activities (such as a pool party and campfire), and three guest speaker presentations. At all other times during the program, the students were broken into their individual cabins for activities and teacher presentations.

Participant Observation

As a volunteer counselor for the program, my primary responsibilities were to supervise and interact with the students in the second boys' group, referred to as 'cabin two'. However, due to an illness to the primary summer-staff person assigned to cabin two and my history and knowledge of the Keuka Lake Facility and the fulltime and summer-staff working there (I had worked there the previous two summers with many of the same staff), my responsibilities evolved into helping manage all of cabin two. This included making sure cabin two was on time for program events and meals, that the students were supervised at all times, and getting supplies for students who had forgotten them at home. While I was still able to participate in every activity engaged in by cabin two, these extra responsibilities detracted from my ability to adequately capture several dynamics of the program, specifically the interactions of the other four cabins in the program. Because of this, my observations are primarily of those seven male students in cabin two.

Day 1

An error in scheduling lead me to miss the first half of the Day 1. I arrived just in time to watch the program coordinators give a book bag filled with school supplies to the students, including a notebook which would serve as their journal for the week. The students were told that they were to use the journals to reflect upon the activities that they engaged in, specifically in regards to their transition into high school.

I was informed by the program coordinators and various summertime staff that earlier in the day, before my arrival, the students and volunteers had received identification cards, taken swim proficiency tests, and participated in various icebreaker games to become acquainted with each other. One activity that was described to me in detail asked students to create a collage of their lives. One student impressed upon the group when she displayed a picture of her parents, one Puerto Rican and the other African American, and discussed how she was proud of her diverse heritage.

Shortly after my arrival the camp shared a meal. Meals during the week most often engaged the five cabins in competitions to see who would eat first. The competition was often which cabin could be loudest when called upon. However, later in the week eating first became a sort of merit reward, given to cabins or the cabin of an individual student that showed extra effort during an activity previous in the day.

The first day finished with a campfire and 'tuck-ins'. The campfire established the first real recreational activity, designed to reward the students for their active participation in activities throughout the day. Group songs, skits, and guitar play highlighted the campfire. Afterwards, the students and counselors engaged in the Camp Good Days tradition of 'tuck-ins'. A tuck-in consist of the boys' and girls' cabins lining up opposite to each other and offering a hug, handshake, or a high-five to close out the formal day. Often times, as with this program, many youth are apprehensive to the notion of interacting with the opposite sex, but towards the end of the week some youth are caught applying perfumes and cologne prior to a tuck-in.

Where tuck-ins marked the formal end of each day, the students' participation in the program didn't truly end until each of them fell asleep each night. Not being able to speak for the other four cabins, the boys in cabin two used the 30-45 minutes after tuck-ins to further acquaint themselves with each other, form an affinity toward their mutual belonging in cabin two, ascribing nicknames to one another, and discussing which girls the boys thought were cute.

Day 2

The second day of the program started bright and early at 6:45 when all but one of the boys in cabin two wished to participate in optional fishing and morning swim activities at the camp's waterfront. Fishing is an activity that can test a person's patience, particularly so with young people. I was impressed over the few days at camp never to hear a student outwardly complain about how slow the fishing was. This was a particularly unique event for the students as many of them had never fished before, let alone caught a fish. It was an enjoyable experience to be there with the students when they caught their first fish.

After breakfast the cabins broke down into a boys group and a girls group to play an egg tossing game. Beyond the recreational value, this activity was used to demonstrate teamwork and reliance on others with the students. In this activity a student and their partner stand across from each other and toss an egg back and forth. After a completed toss, on student takes a step back, increasing the distance of the throw. The real value in this activity is to understand that you *need* your partner. You need them to toss an accurate egg and to use soft hands to catch your throw. More importantly, just as you adjust to help your partner with their bad throw, you need your partner to adjust when you make a mistake. Groups that fight and blame each other for common mistakes typically struggle, making this activity a strong allegory for life in general. Just as I was impressed with the boys in cabin two with their patience during fishing, I was also impressed that they took responsibility for their miscues during the game, rarely blaming their partner.

Before lunch came a low-elements activity at the ropes course. This was again broken down into two groups, a boys group and a girls group. Again participating with the boys group, I was unable to observe the girls' groups in this activity.

The first of two low-elements activities for the day was called 'the poison peanut butter pit'. Alliteration aside, this activity is designed to force the boys to communicate and work together, while teaching them to cope with the frustration resulting from other members of the group that refuse to work together. The premise of the activity is simple: The ground of the 'pit' is bad, so if touched that student has to start over. The objective is to get all of the students from the ground outside of the pit to a 3' by 4' platform in the middle of the pit by using a hanging rope. This activity is about finding the strengths and weaknesses of a group's members and then using them to your advantage. For example, as the activity started many of the athletic boys wanted to swing across first in what appeared to be a show of their masculinity to the other boys. After a few of the boys swung across, the group began to realize that they had left the less athletic boys across the way, without much of a chance to swing across without help. The second challenge the group found was that as the heavier boys swung across they would knock off people who had already crossed. The group then decided to place one of the heavier boys, a self-conscious individual whom the group originally seemed to view as a burden, in the back of the platform to act as a sort of foundation for the group. A rock designed to balance against the force of those swinging across the pit. Generally speaking, the boys struggled to communicate and work together in this activity. Even towards the end, some boys failed to assist other boys as they swung across.

The second activity was called the Port Hole. In this activity, a large tire was secured about 5 feet in the air so that a student could clime through the hole of the tire horizontally. The objective was for the boys to all travel from one side of the tire to the other. To begin, a similar dynamic to the Peanut Butter Pit emerged as the athletic boys attempted to clime through unassisted. As this activity was more strenuous then the last, only one individual made it through before the group stopped to strategize. Though imperfect in the role, one individual stepped up to fill the leadership void in the group. This student was the first person that I noticed asking the other boys to slow down and think about how to accomplish the goal. Unlike the Pit the boys finally seemed to accept that they might have to be helped through. The same heavy set individual who struggled with the Pit was apprehensive about attempting the Port Hole as well. With some coaxing he decided to be assisted through the tire, a personal victory for him as he was able to overcome his own self consciousness, at least for that moment.

The first guest speaker of the week was Elaine Spaul, director of The Center for Youth in Rochester, who spoke before lunch on the second day. Elaine generally talked about the work that the Center for Youth does, describing the resources available there. The message behind the presentation was two-fold: firstly, youth are not alone, and secondly, if youth believe in themselves they can do anything. Sitting with the boys from cabin two during the speaker, I was able to observe them during the presentation. It appeared as though the boys didn't receive the talk with much seriousness. Some of the boys whispered, others put their head on the table or stared out into the lake. Few, if any, listened to the piece in its entirety.

After lunch the group again divided by gender. The boys group moved to the dining hall for a demonstration involving a bottle of coke and a jug of oil. This was one of, if not, the most powerful activities the boys participated in during their stay at camp. The boys were told that in high school, as in life, there are positive and negative influences. The coordinators took a bottle of coke and poured it into a glass on the table.

This, they told the boys, represents the good within an individual. The coordinators then held up a jug of vegetable oil. They informed the boys that this represented all of the negative influences in life, 'toxins' as they called it. One of the coordinators then described a story of his youth, where he was picked on for being overweight. He then poured a small amount of oil into the glass of coke and the boys watched it rise to the top. Another coordinator then discussed his youth and his friendship with his cousin. The coordinator stated that he wasn't the perfect youth, but during his adolescence there was a fork in his life, a decision that he had to make. He stated that he took the path toward positive influences, away from a life of fear and violence. Finally he said that his cousin, whose path diverged from his own at that same fork, had been killed later in his youth. For one of the rare times during any presentation or activity, there was utter silence. He then raised the oil and poured it into the glass and said, "Toxins", as the boys watched it rise to the top.

The coordinators then described the importance of the oil, toxins that push down into the good in each of us, but are unable to fully permeate within us. The coordinators then requested that the boys share times when they had been exposed to negative influences. The boys described times when they were teased, picked on, and had lost family members. The boys were given the bottle of oil to pour into the glass, representing the negativity in their lives.

The coordinators explained that, though the toxins in their lives can at times feel overwhelming, they can be overcome. The boys were then asked to share times when they were told something positive. They responded with stories of influential teachers and grandparents, each time being given the bottle of coke to pour into the glass, slowly pushing the oil towards the lip of the glass. As the oil reached the top, one of the coordinators stopped the boys and told them the story of his youth. He described his youth as troubled, never being a great student and never really applying himself. Later in his youth he made a bad decision and disappointed his father. It was at this time that he saw his father cry for the first time, and it broke his heart. After the incident, the coordinator said that he made a secret promise to himself, that he would make his father cry again, but not for thoughts of "I raised you better than this." The coordinator said that he then enrolled in night classes and spent the next 12 years working through school. He told the boys that he saw his father cry again when he received his diploma. Finally, he took the coke bottle and poured in into the glass. The boys watched as the oil spilled over, out of the glass. In closing the boys were left with a quote from the coordinators, "we all make mistakes and have negativities in our lives; it's about being able to push out the toxins." Again the boys were silent, and remained so for a few moments until they were lead to the next activity.

After the coke and oil demonstration three of the cabins, two boys' and one of the girls' cabins, reconvened outside for two group activities. These were the only two team building activities that were structured to have boys and girls working together. The first of the activities involved a group of five students standing on a tablecloth. The goal was to flip the table cloth without touching ground. This activity, like many of the others, was designed to facilitate team cooperation and communication. Few of the groups that I was able to observe argued during this activity. Most of the groups worked together and fought through the challenges of the activity until its completion.

The second activity pitted the boys and the girls against each other. The group was broken down into cabins and given six pieces of 2' by 3' carpet. The goal was for the entire cabin's students to cross a field by stepping on each of the carpets. However, only two feet could be on a carpet at any particular time and, if no one was holding onto a carpet the group would lose that carpet. If a person fell off of any of the carpets the entire team would have to start over. Additionally, none of the group members would be able to verbally communicate with one another. This was one of the more interesting activities to watch. The boys' cabins, though instructed against it, treated the activity as though it were a race and rushed through it, seemingly leaving the girls' cabin behind. However, in a common day rendition of Aesop's classic fable *The Tortoise and the Hare*, both of the boys' cabins had members fall off a carpet before the end, leaving the girls' cabin to finish in a distant first. This illustrates the extent to which the competitively natured boys groups rushed the activity. The moral of the activity was to slow down and focus on what each group member need to do to accomplish the overall goal. This is true in life as well. Some things don't need to be accomplished with speed. Some things require focus and finesse.

The evening's two night time activities were an all-camp pool party and a rock wall climbing activity, across the street from each other. These activities were put together for the sheer purpose of recreation, rewarding the students for their participation during the day. As I took responsibility for keeping track of the seven boys in cabin two, I wasn't able to observe much at the pool party or the rock climbing. General social interaction and flirting, as is commonplace is most camp good days pool parties, were the two pieces I was able to see. I can say with some certainty that there was no shortage of fun had.

After the pool party was the week's second tuck-in and then bed time. One of the boys in cabin two, shortly before lights out when people had begun to settle down for the night, sat in his bunk and quietly said, "I hate living in the ghetto, I mean I love the ghetto, but..." There seemed to be an almost awkward silence as the other boys avoided the topic and then moved on to discuss girls they thought were cute. For me, this comment illustrates the conflict within many urban youth. The conflict between understand that a particular area is home, housing the culture and friendships that one loves and relates to, despite the existence of high rates of crime and violence and the presence of indicators of marginal quality of life compared to many other areas in the United States. In short, there exists a large contingent of youth in the City of Rochester who have a depth of understanding of what it is to *live*, from the most basic wholeness that is community to all of the pain and sorrow that is

Day 3

The third day was the last formal day of programming for the week because the following day the students only ate breakfast, cleaned up, said their goodbyes, and then left for Rochester. Like the previous day, the morning began with fishing and morning swimming. Breakfast followed and after that the groups were again broken down into a boys group and a girls group. The girls participated in a two-person skiing exercise, where pairs would attempt to walk across a field sharing a set of large skis. The boys groups played a game designed to facilitate communication and reliance on others. The game was a competition between cabin two and the boys from cabin one. Each cabin

would select a representative and then blindfold them. The goal was to for each team to guide their representative though a small field full of handballs, tell them where to pick up the balls and then where to throw them at the opposing team's representative. The communication component is easily observed when the game starts and everyone from both teams shouts directions at the representative. For the student who often likes to be independent, this game can be a real test of their team work ability. Those representatives that succeeded at the game were the ones who could manage their group's directions, create a simple set of agreed upon instructions, and trust that their team would guide them through.

The second guest speaker of the week, Monroe County District Attorney Mike Green, spoke to the students in the mid-morning. Mr. Green discussed the challenges he faced in his youth as he advanced through academics. Mr. Green also spoke about his own transition into high school and, though he faced adversity, how he was able to attend and graduate from college and law school, the latter with honors. However, many of the boys in cabin two seemed put-off by Mr. Green's perceived law enforcement involvement and put their heads down during the talk. In talking with the boys after the presentation, the majority of them reported that they didn't really listen to what Mr. Green had to say, presumably because of his law enforcement association.

The morning finished off with an optional high-ropes course activity. This was an activity where all of the students could choose to climb up into a ropes course and walk a catwalk, traverse an elevated rope net, or swing across hanging hooped ropes. The ropes course was supervised and operated by a certified belay team. Many of the children had never climbed a ropes course before and, as I was assisting the ropes team with managing the harnesses setup, I was able to observe many of the students as they climbed. Drawing from the memory of my own first climb, it can be an exhilarating and terrifying experience, especially for youth that are afraid of heights. However, overcoming those fears and finishing a climb can be one of the most empowering moments in a young person's life.

At the same time as the high-ropes, those students who choose not to climb, or who had climbed already, were able to play basketball. These students were given the unique opportunity of playing HORSE with District Attorney Green who had stayed at camp to interact with the students for a few minutes. I felt that this mitigated a portion of the stigma of being associated with law enforcement some of the students directed toward Mr. Green. However, only a handful of students were able to experience that.

The last guest speaker spoke to the students during lunch. James Sheppard, director of the Office of Public Integrity for the City of Rochester, discussed his transition into high school. Mr. Sheppard stated that he overcame the persistence of bullies during this transition to graduate high school, become a police officer, a Deputy Police Chief, and then the Director of the Office of Public Integrity. While the boys in cabin two seemed still to be put-off by Mr. Sheppard's law enforcement past, the boys were more attentive than for previous presentations. Mr. Sheppard's presentation style, randomly calling on the students to answer his rhetorical questions, also forced the boys to pay more attention than they otherwise would have.

The majority of the afternoon was taken up with a water-front recreational activity. The students were able to participate in boat rides, swimming, and a water trampoline. Before dinner the boys were taken to the dining hall and directed to record

their last journal entries and were less than pleased to do so. Generally speaking, the boys didn't seem to find much value in reflecting on the activities they had participated in while at camp.

After dinner, the students were given the opportunity to put one of their counselors or coordinators into a dunk tank, much to the delight of the students. Upon finishing the dunk tank activity, the camp watched a 'drive-in movie'. The movie was shown in a large activity building on the property. This area was large enough for the students to bring pillows and blankets to lie down with as they watched the movie. The movie itself, Gifted Hands, portrayed the story of Benjamin Carson, an African American youth born into poverty and raised by his illiterate, caring mother. The movie follows his trials through life to become one of the best neurosurgeons in the world. Though an inspirational movie for the students to watch, the situation in which it was shown was not conducive to teaching the students. The combination of a night time movie after a long day of physical exertion and a pillow to lay one's head on resulted in a large number of the students falling asleep during the showing.

Day 4

The fourth day of the program didn't involve any group activities or games. The students simply cleaned and packed. Everyone was given the opportunity to sleep in as there was no fishing or swimming activities before breakfast. After breakfast the students helped the summer-staff clean up the cabins before their departure. The students said their goodbyes to various coordinators and counselors and, in a show of gratitude to their Camp Good Days hosts, presented gifts and thank you cards to Gary Mervis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Rochester City School District High School Leadership and Transitional Program seemed to be a benefit to the students involved in it. However, without tracking the progress of the students through high school it will be difficult to quantify the benefits. If nothing else the program helped expand, at least to some extent, the support networks of those children that created friendships with other students during the week. I was unable to directly see any of the students exchanging contact information though in other Camp Good Days youth programs I have experienced such exchanges. In addition to these exchanges, the annual Camp Good Days' Christmas party helps the youth keep in touch with each other and with the volunteers.

Student turn-out seemed to be an issue in the first application of this program, as less than half of the target number of students came to the program. In time that problem should correct itself in part, however, a mechanism designed to increase the turnout in the students ensures that the maximum number of students receive the program that the facility can adequately manage.

From the perspective that I carried through the week, it appeared that the students were able to build some level of leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. It is, however, difficult to say how long these developments will last without follow-up with the students. Some mechanism that allows for follow-up with the students several times throughout the year would prolong the affects of the program.

Outside of the coke vs. oil demonstration, few activities that the boys participated in were specific to the varying dynamics of the problems they may face while

transitioning into another school. For example, activities that focus on teaching the students about the power and affects of negative peer pressure, particularly from upperclassmen in a new school, would offer students real strategies for dealing with those issues. Additional activities with specific transition issues in mind would be a benefit to the program.

Specific to the second boys' cabin that I supervised, the speakers had trouble holding the attention of the students. This is in part because of the perceived law enforcement association two of the three speakers had, and in part because many of the students stated that they would have preferred to engage themselves in other activities during the speaker. It can be challenging for speakers to hold the attention of young people whom themselves do not feel that they relate to the speaker. Finding speakers that Rochester youth can relate to, perhaps by way of youth recommendations, would enhance the effect guest speakers had on the students.

In conclusion, additional transition programs in the future will be able to discover new team building and leadership development activities, transition activities, and speakers, while discovering which approaches have more significant affect on the students. Overall, the program has tremendous potential to help the transition of youth into high school.

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