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"Hospital" Treatment Helps Middle Students Succeed

By Trina Audley



"Binder "physician" Sue Tenerowicz reviews binder with Joaquin Moraga 8th grade student Gaby
Photo Trina Audley

The adjustment to middle school poses organizational challenges. Running between classes and keeping track of multiple assignments from different teachers can overwhelm 11 to 13 year olds.

"Adolescent brains are usually not developmentally able to meet the stringent organizational demands placed on them," confirms Beth Samuelson, founder of SOS Student Services in Walnut Creek. Samuelson regularly speaks about student organization and agrees that "whatever a child's academic ability, his or her organizational skills dictate achievement." While most middle schools teach organizational skills in the classroom, one local school is doing more.

Bruce Burns, Principal of Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JM), says with first hand proof, "An organized student is a more successful student." Last spring, Burns came upon a novel idea in another district that was working to improve student organization. Intrigued by the concept, he quickly found a parent volunteer to institute "The Binder Hospital" at JM.

Parent Julie Ewert launched the program with the help of school counselor Heidi Felt. The impact was quickly made obvious. "We started seeing students in April and in less than two months, we had measured success," reports Felt. By June, teachers reported improved homework and test scores for the students who had been "treated" with the Binder Management System (BMS) at the hospital.

Although excited by the results, Ewert points out that resources are limited. Hospital staff consists of only three trained volunteers. Appointments take place during lunch and funding comes through donations. Whereas all students are

eligible, appointments are prioritized for students with the most need first.

"Students are identified and referred to the hospital by a teacher," says Ewert.

The teacher referral slip provides the hospital with classroom observations.

Parent volunteer "physicians" then perform an "intake evaluation" with the student at the first appointment to pinpoint needs. At maybe another visit, backpacks and binders are culled carefully for unnecessary clutter. Sometimes a new binder or planner is provided to the student. Finally, new system instruction and practice ensue. "We schedule follow-up appointments and offer rewards to guide and ensure progress," says Ewert. "New habits are hard to get under your belt."

Teachers follow progress and provide feedback as well. "That makes it hard for a child to fall between the cracks," comments Felt. She likes the program for more than just its associated academic success. "Lack of organization can be a red flag for other struggles," says Felt. "It is a proven fact that students respond when they know that they are cared for by two adults and followed-up with two or more times."

It is likely many students could benefit from guided reorganization. Teachers at Joaquin Moraga must agree. "The program is booked out with referrals until January already," added Felt. Given the program's success, Principal Burns hopes that the Binder Management System materials can become standard school supply requirements for incoming 6th graders next fall.

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