

A High School Principal's Reaction to MSAT **From Tim McMullin, MSAT Chairman, New York**

We thought it would be valuable to share the thoughts of a New York State High School Principal who attended the three-day October 2004 MSAT program on the campus of the Masonic Care Community in Utica, NY. The author is Kathy Carr, principal at Moriah High School, and the article first appeared in *The Masonic Voice*, Stan Schumacher, Editor, and re-printed in *The Empire State Mason*, Spring 2005.

Here are Kathy's reflections upon completing the program on the MSAT program

“Although I have been part of several At-Risk committees as a school administrator, I never felt that we met with much success. At best, we were sporadically effective or perhaps just lucky. Seeing the invitation to attend training for a Student Assistance Program caught my interest immediately. An entire team of educators would be able to participate in a three-day training free of charge. While it is difficult to be out of the building for three days, I was confident the district would approve the request because the only cost incurred would be for substitute teachers. Our two guidance counselors, the middle level dean, the in-school suspension teacher, and the county probation officer joined me in Utica for the Masonic Model Student Assistance training.

During the three and a half hour drive, I thought about the many at-risk students I worked with every day: students from troubled homes, students with legal problems, students with drug and alcohol issues, students with academic failure, students who lacked social skills, students filled with anger and frustration. Our focus has always been on those kids because our team felt they were most at risk for dropping out of school. In the first five minutes of listening to Thom Stecher, the trainer, my view of “at-risk” students expanded and now includes students who are “over-achievers,” those students who put great pressure on themselves to be perfect, and those who are “different,” students who don't fit in. An engaging speaker, Thom spoke from the heart, sharing his own personal experiences to enlighten his audience on the subject of at-risk students.

Throughout the three days, we learned a great deal about high risk behaviors – suicide, depression, alcohol and drug addiction, enabling behaviors, effective communication skills, violence prevention, and life skills. In addition, we participated in a variety of team building exercises. One group activity involved all 66 of us arranging ourselves in a straight line according to birthday without speaking. Another project was for small groups to build the highest and strongest structure using only index cards and masking tape in only seven minutes. Group dynamics were analyzed at the end of each task in a constructive way, conducive to learning.

Each school team spent a great deal of time developing a student assistance plan. The plan would address student issues in four areas: academic, behavior, health, and attendance. One important point emphasized throughout the training is that the student's problem must be addressed rather than focussing on and blaming “The system,” the home situation, the alcoholic parent, poverty, or other issues outside the school's control. By

concentrating on the student, we would avoid the hand wringing and hopelessness caused by the vast problems and concerns outside of our control. However, by gathering specific, descriptive, observable and factual information from the student himself, the parents or guardians, teachers, principal, nurse and guidance counselor, an effective action plan could be developed to truly help the student.

The student assistance process begins with the initial referral. This generally comes from a concerned or frustrated teacher. A case manager is assigned and information is gathered. The case manager interviews the referring teacher, the student, and the parents. The case manager compiles all the information to present to the team. A plan is developed and implemented for a specific period of time. The case manager serves as a technical assistant to the teachers implementing the plan. The plan is evaluated and placed back on the agenda at the appropriate time.

The team begins developing the action plan by deciding on which of the four areas (academic, behavior, health, and attendance) to focus. The student's strengths are identified and a short term, measurable success is identified for that student is defined. Specific strategies and measures are developed and resources identified. Particular team members are assigned certain tasks and the time (generally two weeks) for the plan is determined. When the team reconvenes, the plan is evaluated and revised as necessary.

Perhaps most useful was the inclusion of ample forms for the team to utilize or change to fit our individual needs. Separate forms were developed for us at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Permission was granted to freely use or modify all forms. In addition, guidance was provided to help each team develop its own student assistance program. The twenty recommended steps include: creating a mission statement, gaining support of the central office administration and board of education, appointing a leader, developing a meeting schedule, specifying where and when to meet, reviewing and revising policies, considering team wellness time, creating liaisons with business and the community, and identifying resources. A comprehensive bibliography was included in our manual. Since the program is based on research, this is particularly helpful and pertinent information.

Not only did we learn a great deal, but the trainers, Thom and his associate, Larry Newman, provided each school team with individual guidance and support. When our team mentioned needs on related topics (for example, mentor training) Thom offered to provide us with information. Within two weeks of our return from the training, a packet of information arrived at the school. That's impressive!

This training was both intensive and extensive. We left exhausted, yet filled with hope and enthusiasm. We have already held our organizational meeting, and by following the guidelines we completed all of our tasks in a timely manner. Our hope is to send a team from the elementary school for the three-day training followed by a whole district one-day training. I can honestly say that this training was the most helpful and useful of any that I have attended.

Without the MSAT Program, our school would have been deprived of a cohesive team approach utilizing the effective strategies to truly help every at-risk student. Because of this training, our team is focused, with specific objectives. In depth information, experiential learning, and individual assistance to develop a systematic process are the cornerstones of this extremely worthwhile training. I am confident that this experience will make a difference in the lives of our students and in our effectiveness as a team.”

Kathy Carr is the principal of Moriah High School. We thank her for sharing her experience and thoughts on the MSAT program.

For more information, or to register a school team, call Tim McMullin, MSAT Chairman, toll free, at 1 888 694 0511, or e-mail tmmcmullin@yahoo.com.