ORGANIZING INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT PRACTICES
in Secondary Schools

Program Managers

Québec

This project was funded by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS).

Content
Marie-Christine Boyer

Coordination
Charlaine Jean
Direction de l'adaptation scolaire, MELS

Collaboration
Carole Batailler
Direction de la recherche, MELS

Review committee
Serge Baillargeon, Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec
Sandra Beaulac, Direction des services éducatifs complémentaires et interventions en milieu défavorisé, MELS
Nathalie Chabot, Fédération des comités de parents du Québec
Marie Dupras**,** Direction des services aux communautés culturelles, MELS
Lise Ouellet, Direction des programmes, MELS
Hélène Paradis, Direction des programmes, MELS
Claire Piché, Direction générale des régions, MELS

Title of original document
L'organisation des pratiques d'intervention de l'accompagnement individualisé au secondaire: À l'intention des responsables de programme

English translation
Direction des services à la communauté anglophone – Services langagiers

Coordination of graphic design and publishing
Direction des communications

For additional information, contact:

Renseignements généraux
Direction des communications
Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
1035, rue De La Chevrotière, 28e étage
Québec (Québec) G1R 5A5
Telephone: 418-643-7095
Toll-free: 1-866-747-6626

This document is available on the MELS Web site:
www.mels.gouv.qc.ca

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ISBN 978-2-550-70620-5 (PDF)
ISBN 978-2-550-68463-3 (French, PDF)

Legal Deposit – Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2015

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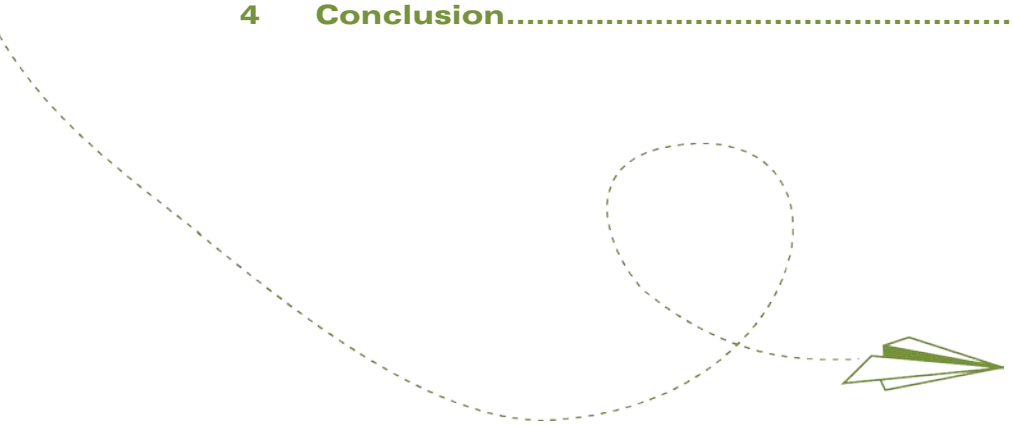

1 The role of individualized support program managers

Managers of individualized support programs plan, organize and run the programs in the school. They inform parents and involve them in current projects. They identify the students who should participate in the programs. They may also be responsible for recruiting resource teachers and making sure that the support program ties in with other school and community programs. These duties may be taken on by the school principal or vice-principal or, possibly, by a school board professional.

2 Organizational practices in educational support programs

There is little documentation about organizational practices in educational support programs. On the one hand, students are selected with a focus on prevention, and on the other hand, the school often selects resource teachers according to employment priority and collective agreements. However, some authors suggest that program managers should make sure that the students are paired with teachers who can listen, manage small groups and involve the students in problem-solving processes. These measures can involve adopting different criteria for eligibility and involvement in the program, defining content for initial training or monitoring resource teachers who provide support.

2.1 Mobilize and inform

According to one study, program managers ask too much of resource teachers, and this is a problem. Teachers who take on this duty for the first time must understand from the very start why they are being asked to provide educational support, and they must recognize the needs this practice is striving to meet. It is essential that they be informed of the time they will be expected to devote to this task, the amount of work involved and the training they must take. They must be able to recognize the benefits of this experience for the students and for themselves.

2.2 Define the needs

The implementation of an educational support program generates needs that must be managed properly. The following questions can shed some light on these needs:

- How should student and teacher schedules be organized?
- How much time should be allotted to training and to support?
- What conditions will be put in place to ensure consistency?
- What kind of training and follow-up will this program involve?

2.3 Set guidelines for intervention from the beginning

Researchers suggest that program managers should agree with resource teachers on whether or not they will work with the parents. Literature in the field of educational support programs does not clearly specify that this is the resource teacher's role. However, if the resource teacher is to work with the parents, some questions must be addressed:

- How will the resource teacher be informed of the student's academic progress?
- Will he or she be the main contact person for the parents?
- When and how will the parents be able to reach the resource teacher?
- How often and by what means should the resource teacher contact the parents?
- What should be communicated?
- Can the discussions with the parents be used during intervention with the student?

2.4 Harmonize the programs

Educational support programs are more effective when they are harmonized with other school and community programs. It is important to make sure the whole school community (departments, parents' groups, school teams) knows about the program in order to show that it complements existing programs or structures and in order to convince the members of the school community that this kind of program can support students as they develop the knowledge and competencies set out in their courses.

2.5 Support teachers during the program

Some researchers believe that initial training for resource teachers is not enough to ensure the programs are successful. Teachers need to be supported in their decisions throughout the process. They also need guidance on how to begin the relationship, deal with conflict, support the students and set certain limits. Thus it is important that training or follow-up be available while the teachers are providing support.

3 Organizational practices in mentoring

A mentoring relationship is a one-on-one relationship in which a volunteer provides support to a student with the aim of responding to the student's developmental needs. The mentor can be a teacher, an older student or a volunteer from the school or the community. In mentoring programs, organizational practices involve recruiting students and mentors, pairing mentors and mentees, managing relations with parents, and harmonizing the mentoring program with other programs.

3.1 Recruiting students

✓ Whether or not to define criteria for eligibility

Managers of mentoring programs must be careful to identify at-risk students who could most benefit from mentoring. Some mentoring programs specify their eligibility criteria: the student must come from a disadvantaged area or from a single-parent or unstable family; in addition, teachers or other school staff must have noticed that the student is having academic or social difficulties. Other programs do not specify any criteria for eligibility. They subscribe to a universal prevention philosophy that lets families decide whether the student needs a mentor.

Recruitment

The Mentor Foundation is an American organization that supports the development of school and community mentoring programs. According to the Foundation, recruitment should be in harmony with the services of the individualized support program. It recognizes the need to help families and students to understand what mentoring is and what they can expect from it. With many programs, families are given a clear idea of how often mentors and students are expected to meet. This practice brings positive results and improves the quality of the mentorship.

✓ Understanding which students will most benefit from mentoring

A number of studies have been carried out to find the effects of mentoring on students with different characteristics. Thus, students who receive insufficient support from those around them would benefit the most from school mentoring. They would develop their social behaviour, make more of an effort in class, feel more competent in their studies and perform better in school than students who are not mentored.

Mentoring programs do not seem to benefit the truly vulnerable students, those who have an unstable home life or who have difficult relationships with their peers or teachers. Nor will mentoring programs benefit students who already receive a good deal of support from those around them.

3.2 Recruiting mentors

The means used to recruit and select mentors can have an impact on the scope of the mentoring. A number of winning factors must be taken into consideration.

✓ Experience

Studies show that mentors with professional experience in the fields of counselling, mentoring or tutoring feel more effective during interventions and establish more positive relationships with their students.

✓ Human qualities

The mentor's age and gender should not be determining factors. However, in practice, managers of exceptional mentoring programs make sure that volunteers are prepared to commit to a personalized relationship, have time to devote to the young people and have certain personal qualities: they are sensitive, good listeners and flexible.

✓ Commitment

Some program managers have volunteers fill out a service offer and sign a contract in which they commit to meeting once a week for at least a year. They will also interview candidates, check their personal and professional integrity, and look at their judicial record. Others inform volunteers of the benefits, practices and challenges of mentoring.

3.3 Matching mentors with students

The way in which students and mentors are matched up can affect the quality of the support provided. Ideally, the first individualized support session should be closely monitored by an instructor. Matching should also respect the aims of the mentoring program.

✓ Should students choose their mentors?

The mentor's objective is to create a positive natural alliance with the student, but it can be difficult to reach when the student feels the school has imposed a mentor on him or her. On the other hand, allowing a student to choose a mentor involves complex logistics and human resources, and is simply not possible in all schools. Because of this, it is important to try to match students with mentors based on natural selection processes.

✓ Should matching be based on shared interests?

Matching students and mentors based on shared personal, academic or professional interests contributes to the quality of the relationship they will develop. Matching based on gender and ethnic group can be useful when the mentorship pursues clearly cultural objectives.

✓ Should matching occur more than once during the school year?

Some school mentoring programs will match students and mentors more than once during the school year. There are many reasons for this:

- A relationship ends unexpectedly, owing to conflicts between the mentor and the student.
- The school does not have enough resources to allow a particular teacher to devote time to the relationship for an entire school year.
- A volunteer or a teacher becomes unmotivated or is no longer available.

One study has clearly shown the negative consequences of such a practice. Students who have not had the same mentor throughout the school year or who have had one for only part of the year receive none of the benefits of mentoring in their school performance and their presence in class compared with those who have had the same mentor for at least 24 weeks. However, poorer academic results were recorded for those who were matched with a second mentor during the school year, after their relationship with the previous mentor ended. These findings show that managers of support programs would do well to be careful when selecting mentors, to invest in quality initial training, to match mentors and mentees wisely and to supervise them, in order to avoid making multiple matches for at-risk students.

The Mentor Foundation and certain researchers recommend different promising practices in order to prevent students from experiencing the negative effects of a terminated relationship:

- close supervision of the relationship
- an interview at the start of the relationship in order to evaluate the student's situation
- the chance for some students to continue their relationship after the school year has ended
- special activities to mark transitions and successes the student experiences
- the use of relational contracts and a written policy to specify the terms of the relationship and the end of the commitment

3.4 Managing relationships with parents

The way in which relationships with students' parents are managed can have an impact on the quality of the mentoring. Mentoring programs that involve the parents have more noticeable effects on the development of at-risk students. They encourage a number of practices to involve parents in the mentoring process. Some involve parents before the matching and others, during the mentoring.

✓ Provide information first

Before matching a student with a mentor, parents must be informed of the following:

- the goals of the program
- the mentor's role (how this role is different from and complementary to that of the parents)
- the reasons why the school has suggested their child participate in the program
- the mentor’s profile
- program rules and policies
- support and safety measures set out in the program
- the typical phases of a mentoring relationship
- the parents' role and responsibilities

✓ Keep in touch

Personalized follow-up is recommended to keep in touch with parents. It can be by telephone, through information sheets or using program guides.

✓ Encourage involvement

In order to keep the parents involved during the mentoring process, the following practices are recommended:

- ask the parents what they think about their child's participation in the matching process
- communicate with them often and in different ways (e-mail, Web site)
- provide services when they show that they require them
- organize social activities with the families and program personnel
- recognize the parents' involvement often through thank-you notes and letters
- invite the parents to become involved as volunteers

3.5 Harmonizing the programs with other services

Research shows that managing a mentoring program involves making connections with the other services available to the student. If the program manager clearly defines mentoring as a complementary service in addition to other services (tutoring in a school subject, counselling, psychological consultation), and if, in fact, the students see it that way, it will have a greater impact on them. Some studies show that students who have had access to a combination of services, such as mentoring and tutoring, get more out of the experience than those who were only mentored.

4 Conclusion

According to the research, program managers should give careful consideration to certain aspects of individualized support practices. These include: the selection of students, the eligibility criteria that will help them recruit personnel and the degree of involvement expected of the latter, the content of the initial training and follow-up while support is being provided. The research also highlights the importance of managing relations with the parents and the impact of the quality of that relationship. Lastly, it is important to effectively harmonize educational support with other programs and to distribute information about the support programs to the whole school community.

In the case of mentoring programs, managers should clarify the mentor's role, the needs mentoring seeks to fulfill and how mentoring will complement the other support measures available in the school and the community.

Reference

Larose, Simon. *Les pratiques éducationnelles exemplaires en matière d'accompagnement individualisé au secondaire: Une analyse commentée des recherches des vingt dernières années.* Québec City: Université Laval, Groupe de recherche sur l'inadaptation psychosociale chez l'enfant (GRIP), 2011.

The full research report is available in French at the following address:

www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/accompagnement.

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