

Project OMEGA: A Winning Approach for At-risk Teens

In our traditional, affluent suburban high school with a largely college-bound student body and a tracked curriculum, our at-risk students too often became trapped in the remedial classes. That began to change in 1991 when Project OMEGA was born in the heart of English teacher Jeff Levin. Concerned about the intimidated and frustrated demeanor the students in his Basic classes demonstrated, he became convinced that their lack of self-esteem prevented their taking active responsibility for their own success. Jeff envisioned a program for underachievers that would be cooperative rather than competitive, focusing on building self-esteem through goal-setting and teaching students effective learning strategies.

Soon OMEGA grew into a team effort to build a "school-within-a-school" for these students, to rethink and redesign the way these students interacted with staff, with the curriculum, and with each other. None of the underlying concepts are new or revolutionary; OMEGA won the State Farm Innovators in Education Award for the way it combined them in a restructured process designed to help at-risk students realize their full potential. Thanks to the reflective practitioners who staff the program, OMEGA continues to grow and change, altering and adding components as needed.

OMEGA is an acronym that stands for "Opportunity, Motivation, Esteem, Goals, Achievement"; follow-up studies of its alumni validate its title!

Our Mission

The Project OMEGA mission is printed and distributed to all students,

parents, and prospective participants:

1. To guide students to become more aware of their own creative abilities.
2. To enable students to be actively responsible for their own success.
3. To promote all aspects of students' wellness—including physical, social, and emotional wellness.

The program is founded on the belief that the type of learners OMEGA targets will benefit from this learning environment, that the positive coordinated emphasis on achievement and self-esteem will help to keep these students interested in learning and in realizing success at Glenbard West. The active involvement of staff and parents encourages those results.

The goal of Project OMEGA is that, by the end of their freshman year, students will be prepared to enroll in as many regular level courses as possible. Students will have acquired learning strategies and positive attitudes about themselves as learners — both of which will become the foundation of their future successes.

Student Population

The student population includes 30 students selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- recommendation of their eighth grade teachers and/or counselors because of their special potential for success which they have not yet realized in areas such as school attendance, self-esteem development, academic achievement positive peer relationships, and healthy attitudes about learning and schooling;
- performance in reading that is at least two or more years below grade level.

by
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and
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Traditionally, students like these would have entered our Basic track for academic content classes and remained there. OMEGA works to change this.

Program Design

Project OMEGA has a team of content area teachers along with a Reading Specialist/Coordinator, Marsha Blackwell, and a counselor; we plan together to meet the needs of all of the students. Selected students enroll in OMEGA classes instead of regular Basic classes, and the OMEGA teachers plan parallel and related instruction. Classes offered include English, math, science, and world geography. Thanks to this coordination, students no longer must study content material in isolation. Teachers collaborate to make the curriculum learner appropriate, model enthusiasm and commitment, state learning objectives at the outset, add variety and active learning strategies, induce curiosity, encourage academic risk taking, and plan for success.

In addition to their OMEGA content classes, all OMEGA students participate in a full period Seminar each day to explore the following:

- learning-to-learn study strategies that enable students to be more efficient, effective learners;
- a communications workshop with Lisa Seavers that includes desktop publishing their own newsletter and a



photo courtesy of Ellen Jo Ljung, Glenbard West High School

adolescent relationships, and so on. We also hold quarterly assemblies to honor student achievement with specific awards; parents are invited. In May the annual banquet, held off-campus, celebrates the accomplishments of all OMEGA students. The team honors two students

with special plaques, one for high achievement and one for greatest improvement.

Although schedules may vary somewhat, the ideal OMEGA schedule this year frees up the midday for the community to gather as a whole in the Study Strategies and Goal Setting Seminar. Periods two and three are for world geography and English; after Seminar and lunch, students take math and science. The first and last periods of the day are reserved for electives.

Problem-Based Learning: Our Newest Innovation

Last fall Ellen Ljung, a member of the Illinois Network of Problem-Based Learning Educators, led the OMEGA team through training in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) design and implementation in a day long retreat. Determined to help students acquire and use higher level thinking skills and meet learner outcomes, the group designed the following problem:

How can we redesign and utilize the Venture/Jewel properties at North Avenue and Glen Ellyn Road in such a way that we can celebrate cultural diversity, build community cooperation, insure safety, develop an economically self-sustaining structure, and provide fun recreational opportunities that are appealing to its users?

Students met the problem through a letter from a fictional chairman of a local "Community Relations Committee." They defined the problem and

identified issues to explore on their quest for a solution, using mind maps and a Know/Need-to-Know brainstorming approach. These groups included "Physical Layout," "Culture Club," "Economics and Sponsorship," "Safety and Security," and "Media." These researchers made contacts with local officials, realtors, business people, etc. Then they encountered a "thinking log," another letter which reshaped the problem (as so often happens in real life). After regrouping, students continued their research, including site visits and a panel presentation by village officials whom students questioned.

Sharing their findings from group research, students then proposed and evaluated various solutions, finally selecting the most promising proposal. They presented this proposal to a task force composed of village officials and other community members. The task force responded very positively to students' involvement in a critical-thinking, real-life learning experience. During the spring semester, the team will repeat a simulated trial during a Criminal Justice unit, revisiting elements of the PBL process.

The OMEGA Community: Students, Parents, and Staff

Participation in Project OMEGA requires the commitment of parents as well as students. Parents are involved from the very beginning as they, along with their students, decide to participate. They then sign a contract promising to:

- not tolerate absences and tardiness.
- discover their child's learning style.
- be goal-oriented.
- find their child's special gifts.
- help their child learn from mistakes.
- stress the importance of homework.

The OMEGA staff maintains regular contact with parents, and holds meetings and celebratory gatherings of staff, parents, and students. This partnership results in improved, supportive relationships among students, parents, and teachers and in significant academic and personal/ social develop-

reading workshop;

- personal/social development issues;
- coping, processing, and social interaction skills.

In Seminar students and staff also participate in special projects, build motivation, and emphasize goal setting and wellness habits.

Gilda Ross, the OMEGA counselor, coordinates the team's efforts to help students. Her roles include:

- advocate for students with other staff members; intermediate step before dean contact;
- organizer of "Clowns Against Drugs," training OMEGA students to participate in presentations at local elementary schools;
- coordinator of speakers for parent meetings;
- contact person to speak to parents about their students' academic progress on a regular basis;
- coordinator of the use of school support staff (social worker, psychologist, and their interns) who create groups to build effective and appropriate skills for social interaction as well as support groups for students whose parents are divorcing. (Note: These groups are open to general population, offering OMEGA students the opportunity to integrate into a larger community.)

Monthly parent meetings offer speakers who address such issues as substance abuse, positive parent/

ment for students.

In addition to the participating students, parents, and staff, a cadre of other students has become a support network for OMEGA students. These "associates" come in during Seminar to work with enrolled students as peer tutors. Not only do they assist students with their homework, but they serve as mentors and role models. Since many OMEGA students carry the baggage of past failures, the positive attitude and enthusiasm of these peer tutors offer an alternative vision of school.

Evaluation

Project OMEGA combines traditional and nontraditional methods of assessment to evaluate student progress. The process includes four general components: a traditional grade based on tests, quizzes, homework, and daily work; a portfolio grade to showcase students' best work; an OMEGA grade based on attendance, cooperation, organization, goal setting, self-assessment, group dynamics, and behavior; and a cooperative learning/ group work grade. We strive for a balance between the program's supportive aspects and its academic areas. The aim is to pursue a holistic approach by emphasizing process as well as product.

The success of the program itself is evaluated regularly by anecdotal notations and comments from the students, their parents, and their teachers. The success of students participating in Project OMEGA in the 1992-1993 and 1993-1994 school years has been tracked by the district to see how these students have fared in the regular program.

For the Class of 1996, it is exciting to note that OMEGA alumni fared well in English their junior year. Two thirds of those enrolled in Regular Junior English received a grade of C or better, and all of them passed the course. Fifty percent of those enrolled in American Studies, an alternative option integrating American Literature and American History in a two-hour/ two-credit course, received a grade of C or better. Thirty-

two percent of the alumni enrolled in American Studies did fail; most of those students, however, lacked the academic support system offered by OMEGA during the transition. All of our students passed their math classes, and all of those enrolled in Regular US History passed as well. The four students who took Chemistry passed.

About one third of our students remained in Basic classes for English and Social Studies. All of those students passed English, two thirds with a C or better; almost eighty percent passed US History. We are awaiting final analysis of statistics for the class of 1995. These statistics confirm that academic support from our Learning Strategies Center is highly correlated with student success.

Hopes for the Future

We are already working on increasing the number of peer tutors. We also hope to add an additional layer, a mentoring program in which OMEGA alumni help current OMEGA students, becoming models for success while gaining further affirmation themselves. In addition, we're exploring a partnership with retired community members who might serve as additional mentors and tutors. The powerful extension of our community during PBL, when civic leaders and local businessmen became involved in the program, is a feature we would like to expand. Since there is a high correlation between LSC support and future academic success, we hope to expand the LSC component. An alumni reunion is also in the works; we believe that such a gathering would celebrate the community of learners and support the successes of individuals.

Project OMEGA represents a significant innovation at Glenbard West High School. The school-within-a-school approach to at-risk students, giving them the tools and skills they need to succeed, and the partnership among the team members (including students and parents) has resulted in greater success and a more positive school experience for many students.

Interested individuals are invited to write or call to learn more about Project OMEGA. Visits are encouraged as well.

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Project OMEGA was the winner of the State Farm Innovators in Education Award in January,

1996. The Innovators in Education Award is the regional complement to State Farm's national Good Neighbor Award. The program was developed by State Farm Insurance in cooperation with Illinois ASCD to recognize elementary, middle level, and secondary teachers for teamwork in teaching, involvement in their profession, innovation, and leadership. The award includes a monetary contribution for continued development of the project, public recognition and opportunities for publication and presentation of the project. IASCD directs and coordinates the nomination and selection process. For further information, contact:

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