



Working Together to Keep Children in School

Roveriza L. Flores

Direct Beneficiary

DEPED - Continuous Improvement program

I have been a teacher for six years, and I have spent all these years at the Betty Go-Belmonte Elementary School (BGBES) teaching the third grade.

In 2013, Jinkee L. Molina, a sixth grade teacher, led a team of teachers in crafting and implementing an intensified remedial reading program. She applied the 10-step process of the Continuous Improvement Program (CI) which she learned from a training organized by PAHRODF.

Now, using the CI, we teachers meet before the start of every new school year to assess the previous year. In May 2014, the teachers identified attendance as a major problem in BGBES. I was chosen to lead a team that would solve this problem. We called our mission Project ACE (Attend Class Every day).

We gathered and analysed data and found that 43 percent of first and third graders were absent from school from June to August 2014, with majority reporting health problems as the cause for their absence. Some absentees also shared having no money for food, which prevented them from coming to school as well. We also found out that there was a problem with teachers' methods in checking attendance. There was no standard procedure and attendance was not properly recorded because teachers would forget to note down names or would not hear students reply when being called on the roll.

Before, when students were absent, we knew they were not in class but did not really know why—much less do anything to make sure they come in next time. We kept the records and released it at the end of the grading period and that was that. We did not even know that teachers contributed to the problem by recording erroneously.

That is when I started understanding the problem differently. There were reasons behind the absences that we did not know, and I realised that by knowing these reasons in detail, we would be better able to come up with practical solutions. At Project ACE, we often repeat the quote, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," and we have tried to live by that quote.

First, we addressed the problem on erroneous recording. We standardised the process of checking attendance by requiring teachers to 1) use a seat plan, 2) have a hard copy of the attendance list, 3) log the hardcopies daily in a computer (which my team checks weekly for

compliance), 4) fill out attendance status forms which track student absences, and 5) make an attendance report card for the first and third graders.

Second, we devised a health inspection checklist. The teachers had to check their students twice a week to monitor their health. We collected and analysed medical certificates and excuse letters to see what problems we could address in school. We made health awareness a priority and invited a doctor and a dentist to talk to parents and students about hygiene and healthy practices. We enrolled the kids without money for food in the school's feeding program.

Some teachers complained about the additional paperwork and were resistant, but I was excited about the changes and had to motivate other teachers to see beyond the initial adjustments. It is not enough to treat teaching only as a means to earn a living, because what we do must go beyond that if we want to help a child reach his potential.

Project ACE was in full force by September. When a student was absent, we would send the parents a letter and invite them to come to school for a conference. When the parent did not come, we would do home visits. Teachers were no longer afraid to do home visits because it was now part of the project and a team went along for support.

Teachers saw how their students lived and got to really know the root causes of a child's attendance problem. There was a child who started skipping school because his guardian had left him, and another child whose parents were in hiding and had left him was unable to come to school because he did not know how to get there. Knowing these realities in their students' lives, teachers began to care more. Because the teachers cared, initially hostile parents started caring as well. They became more proactive in making sure their child was attending school and performing better.

By December 2014, the absentee rate was down to 16 percent. The percentage is not at 0 because there are other factors which are beyond our control as teachers. However, this problem solving process has showed me that if we do control the things that we can, we not only change statistics but actually make a real difference in people's lives.

Roveriza L. Flores is a third grade teacher and adviser at BGBES. She is also the adviser of the school organisation Youth for Environment in School.