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Final Project: Sustainable Technology Project

The Setting:

I teach high school Social Studies and middle school Science in an Alternative Education program in an urban school. Being an Alternative Education teacher, I deal with the overwhelming task of helping at-risk kids in an extremely unique environment. Besides trying to find ways to deal with their behavior problems and sporadic attendance, we also struggle as a school to fill in the gaps of their academic history. For example, it is not uncommon to have a high school student struggling with basic math skills and constructing simple sentences. Their behaviors have often prevented them from learning the material the first time around, creating a monumental task for the staff in my building. Not only do these students need more practice in basic skills, they also need better ways to manage and organize their school work, and catch up on assignments when they finally return to class, so they do not keep repeating their past mistakes. The main goal of the Alternative Ed program is to teach students how to take control of their behaviors and responsibility of their actions in order to get their academic career back on track. We teach students the skills they lack and the skills they need to be successful in any classroom and in the long run, the workplace. Most importantly, we try and teach students that their actions (or lack thereof) are what determine their success.

The Problem:

There are many difficulties that come with the territory in an Alternative Ed program. With so many students absent and a large number of courses to administer, it can be difficult to make sure all students who are absent are given the work that they missed. In fact, some days, nearly twenty minutes can be spent getting work out to students who were absent. At the same time, if I am always spoon feeding my students, I put the responsibility on me (and the monkey on my back instead of theirs) and the students do not learn to take their education into their own hands. Thus, I would like to use this project to find a way to make missing work accessible to students and their parents, so that the responsibility (and monkey) is back on my students, freeing up time for me to focus on more important issues in my classroom.

In the past, when I taught general ed, I have made worksheets available in a designated folder in the classroom. Students returning from an absence could go to the folder and grab out the work that they missed. I tried this in my Alternative Ed classroom, but I ran into two major problems with that system. First of all, students would often lose their original copy of the work and would go back to the folder and take another copy. It would not be long before all of the copies were gone and not all of the students were able to get their first copy. I would then have to make time to find the master copy and get to a copier to create more copies. The second problem I ran into was that parents would complain that they did not know how much work their child was missing each time that they were absent. This argument, while valid in certain cases, often gets misused and in actuality teaches the students, whether intentionally or not, that the responsibility is mine and not the students. If I became ill, I would not return to work or class and expect everything to be handed to me. I want to engrain that same work ethic into my students.

The Solution:

My original idea was to create a class webpage since my district does not provide a way for us to do that through the school website. I looked at several free webpage sites including www.weebly.com and Google sites. I quickly learned however that these websites were all blocked in the district computer labs. I put in a request to have one of the websites unblocked for me, but I have yet to get a response from the technology department. As a result, I decided to create a wiki on www.wikispaces.com. The account and wiki were free and I can add and edit the page daily. On my wiki I can not only list the assignments from each day, I can also upload files for students to download. If there is a worksheet or handout that they missed I can upload it directly to the wiki and the student then is responsible to print it out. Documents that I do not have a digital copy of can easily be scanned and made into a PDF file to share on the wiki.

There are several benefits to using the wiki to post daily assignments for my students. First of all, my students and their parents will be able to access the assignments from anywhere. If students are unable to get what they need and print off any handouts in the computer lab, they would also be able to access it at home. If they do not have a computer or internet at home, I give them information on using computers at the local public library. Second, I can now make it my students' responsibility to get any and all work that they missed from an absence. They will no longer be waiting for me to get the work to them and there will no longer be an issue of running out of copies. As William Oncken and Donald Wass would argue, I have gotten rid of the monkey off my back and placed it back with my subordinates. At the same time, parents will be able to access the list of assignments and see exactly how much work their student missed. The responsibility again is on the student to complete the work instead of on me to provide it. Finally, using a wiki in my classroom will allow me to introduce what a wiki is to my students and perhaps in the future, create assignments and projects that use the wiki.

Cost and Funding

I work in a district that is currently in deficit. I also know how hard it is to be awarded a grant, as I have written grants in the past and not been awarded any grant money. Therefore it was important to me to find a free resource for this problem. The use of the wiki, in this case, Wikispaces, is completely free unless I would like an upgraded account with more options. All I needed was a valid email address. Even my students can create accounts on Wikispaces or they can view the wiki as a guest, without an account. Teaching my students how to use the wiki would be fast and easy. I estimate it would only take a few minutes out of a class period to explain how to navigate through the page. I will probably spend more time reminding students to actually use the site for their missing work than I will need to spend explaining how to use it. Should I decide to share this with my colleagues, I could easily train them at in an in-house training. The only cost would be my own personal time.

Implementation Path

Students waiting for me to hand them work after an absence or to make additional copies not only derails their motivation to get the work done, it also takes my attention away from instruction and behavior problems in the classroom. Student absences already set students behind in instruction and adding in the wait for the assignments only compounds the problem. Having students' waiting on me signals to them that it is my responsibility to get them to do the missing work and does not go along with the program goals to teach students to be more in charge of their education and make positive changes in their habits. My vision is to increase

students' responsibility in making up their missing work and decrease their dependency on me to accomplish that through the use of the wiki. It is also my goal to make all class work easily accessible to both parents and students and eliminate any barriers to student success.

To accomplish this I need to be able to create the wiki and teach students to use the wiki. I will also need to spend time teaching and reiterating to students how to access the work they missed. Over the coming weeks I will probably spend a considerable amount of time reminding students that the wiki will be the new place to go to for their missing work. I will probably have to remind students daily that it is their job to check the wiki for the work and that I will not be handing it to them. To help students remember the wiki, I will create a larger display on one of the bulletin boards in the classroom. I will also create a memo/newsletter to send to parents to explain the wiki, how to use it, and why they should also be checking it. Finally, I will also use positive behavior support and reward students who successfully use the wiki. Those students will set a positive example for others as to why they should use the wiki and how easy it really is. Finally, I will know that the project is successful when all students are using the wiki to get their missing work and I no longer need to remind students where to access the work.