

TROYCENTER

An Alternative School



A Policy of Persistent Love

How these students are defying a 'culture of rejection.'

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A Policy of Persistent Love

‘Something inside of me could not accept *that rejection was a given*. In my heart I knew — I could see it in the eyes of even the most defiant — that each of them was born with the capacity to succeed and to learn.’

“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”
(Theodore Roosevelt)

by NICOLE TRIER

From the start, I felt an overwhelming sense that despite my best efforts children were drowning in the education system and I could not help them. There was no programming to throw at them, nothing in which to invest or develop, no magic wand that would reach them. I became determined to change that.

Just out of college, working as an intern with the county Juvenile Probation Department, I was struck by this realization: Regardless of what buzzword program was in play that month, regardless of the shape of cookie cutter being applied, nothing matched the needs of all children. There would always be the one who didn’t quite fit within the lines, who needed something different.

The realization is not mine alone. It is why turnover in youth-serving fields can be high. It is the point where many teachers and related professionals become resigned that the children who most need their help cannot be helped. They become cynical or move on to a different field.

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Leaha Meinika (anomaly photography)

defiant — that each of them was born with the capacity to succeed and to learn. I began to understand that just because there was no master key to unlock each child’s potential, there was a key to each child. So my heart would not give up on those children for whom other programs weren’t working. I stubbornly held on to the idea that it was the education system’s job — my job — to keep searching for the key to each child, even and especially when it was the most difficult to find.

The story of TROY Center is the story of that refusal of the heart. It holds that children deserve to have someone in their corner who doesn’t give up on them. Many of us take that someone for granted, but I wanted to build a place for young men and women who had never experienced that persistent kind of love and, most sadly, were about to abandon hope of ever finding it.

The Magic of Persistence

TROY is the acronym for “Teaching and Reaching Our Youth.” That is what we do. Most people think they have a good picture of what that involves, of what a classroom looks like (we all went to school, after all). But step inside almost any school and you will see why that is a halcyon dream. The nuclear family has become rare in large segments of Indiana society. Students today, like it or not, come to school from a very mixed bag and with a lot of baggage.

Our school’s response to this socio-economic challenge developed slowly over the years. It is a customized and evolving educational design for today’s student population. We call it “Persistent Love,” this critical and age-old job of teaching and reaching youth. The design promises that it is possible to convince the most rejected young persons



Nicole Trier is the executive director and founder of TROY Center, an alternative school for sixth- through 12th-grade students. Trier, who holds a master’s degree in clinical

mental-health counseling. Her school has helped more than 800 students over the past 17 years accomplish educational and personal goals. A version of this article will appear in the spring 2016 issue of the quarterly Indiana Policy Review, accessible at www.inpolicy.org.

that they can be loved, that there is a place for them in the world — somewhere, some day. It requires that the staff be willing to meet the students wherever they happen to be in their lives, no matter how far away from the scheduled pedagogy and posted rules of a classroom.

And — miraculously, you might say — we see the change in them. It comes in a moment, in a day, in a month, or over the course of the four-year immersion in a curriculum leading to a high school diploma. Persistence is the technique that brings about this change. We persistently show up, we persistently care, not just about what happens within our walls but about who these students are and about what their lives look like at the moment.

I know students who spend only weeks or even hours here but are changed (an example of which is offered later in this essay involving a skeptical public-school principal). And yet, some of our students, many of them, initially push us away. That is why other schools and other teachers say these young people are difficult. They test whatever system is put in front of them. In this, however, they are no different in kind than other teenagers. There is a difference only in degree — and in how much family support is available at a given time. To apply the Theodore Roosevelt quote, they don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. They want to see what it will take for us to give up, walk away or turn on them.

What a Family 'Looks Like'

Only we don't; we won't. "Whatever it takes" is a motto here, and it applies as long as the student is willing to work in the program. There are bad days; we have blowups; we come back the next day for a fresh start and another try at making it work.

Right here, let me insert a caveat. I don't want this to sound as if it were a routine matter of following a set of steps. For in resuscitating the socially drowned, the rule is that there is no rule. An individual student's resistance can be intense and extensive. The outcome is never a sure thing. We are working with adolescent human beings and all that entails, particularly with a tendency to tune out and drop out to one degree or another, at one time or another.

Even so, most of our students come to believe that what we say is true, or at least possible; that is, they can be loved and they can find a place. Acceptance of that promise can make a difference that lasts forever, because at that point they experience what a family "looks like," — that precious knowledge many of us take for granted. More than that, even

if it is not immediately attainable, they understand what success means, they know the personal value of being a productive citizen of a community, of being part of something larger than yourself.

There is another motto: "Once you're part of the TROY family, you're part of us for life." By that we mean that every student who comes through our school changes the school. Each student with a unique story and with a unique need makes a forever impact on the way we do things. And it works both ways: No student leaves our school untouched by the relationships that are built here, relationships built during hard times together and coming out on the other side.

Again, that kind of experience stays with you for the long haul. Our students and graduates express it in different ways:

Emily — "TROY has made me realize there's good people in this world. They let me vent to them and they help me with my problems. It isn't a home, it's a family, and it helps me cope with a lot. All of the staff members take it personal if one of us has a problem. Most people don't understand the point of TROY. If they did, they would know why we love it."

Ashley — "When I started coming to the TROY Center right away I was welcomed and I realized that there are people who care about you and only want the best for you. The TROY Center wasn't even like a school to me; it was like a second home. All of the staff out here are like family to me, I can honestly talk to any of them about anything."

Lindsay — "Before TROY I was going nowhere. Now I am graduating a year early, going to college and becoming a nurse. I can honestly say that TROY Center saved my life. I wouldn't be the girl I am or where I am without it. The staff has been through a lot of stuff with me — from drugs to getting kicked out of my mom's house. They have never turned their backs on me. They taught me what a real family looks like."

Christian — "Being in TROY has helped me see that even when life seems to be at a dead end there is always somewhere you can turn to — a way to better yourself. It has helped me when I was at my lowest and helped me turn my life around with the help of the amazing staff here. It always feels like a second home and somewhere I'm safe."

Forget 'Root Causes'

The students' comments make clear that education is only one of the basic needs that our school seeks to meet. Our staff is trained to ask why

certain educational or behavior goals are not met, not merely whether they are met.

This is not the familiar and largely futile grand search for “root causes” of socio-economic troubles. It is more practical and immediate. It addresses the administration’s realization that any student who arrives tired, hungry or in crisis has critical needs that must be met before we can expect him or her to concentrate and learn in a classroom. By understanding the situations that our students face outside of school we can better meet them where they are, we can walk alongside them in the space where real learning can happen.

It is easy for students to become disenchanted with a learning system that seems to put obstacles in their path. These obstacles may be common learning and support aids but ones to which many of our students do not have access, i.e., technology, or a few dollars to participate in a field trip, or simply a parental signature on a weekly reading log. Many of our families do not — or cannot — worry about such things. They may not even know where they’re going to sleep or eat that night, or how to get the water turned back on so the children aren’t removed from the home. The student may be staying with someone at the time who cannot or will not dependably sign a reading log.

Again, the school does not presume to replace parents. Rather, it stands beside them. In almost every circumstance, the family members are doing the best they can do. They love their children and just need to be empowered in certain ways and at certain times. What parent of an adolescent hasn’t felt that way?

And yet, when an education system doesn’t acknowledge serious difficulties at home, students give up. If they don’t feel there is a trustworthy adult available to them — right or wrong, at the moment or forever — they conclude they are on their own. Classroom learning will not be a high priority, or perhaps even a possibility.

‘I Need to Talk’

Our students are reminded regularly that whatever is going on in their lives, school is a safe place to talk about it. Whatever the need, students are taught that it is okay to ask for our support; they can count on the staff to hear their real-life, real-time problems before diving into history or algebra.

So as the vans arrive each morning and students walk into school, we often are met with the imperative, “I need to talk.” On a regular basis we learn from those talks that a student is hungry (some

haven’t eaten since lunch at school the previous day) . . . or there may have been a fight in the home the night before . . . or the student or someone else in the home was forced to leave . . . or maybe they simply woke up late and didn’t eat breakfast . . . or maybe they are feeling frazzled . . . or maybe they would just like to talk to someone and feel grounded before starting the day . . . or whatever.

As you might guess, once you start asking students “why,” you will need an extraordinary support system. In addition to meeting state academic standards, we help students in these specific ways:

- Provide a caseworker who meets with each student once a week individually in addition to weekly social-skills classes.
- Schedule meetings with parents and guardians once a week.
- Provide a licensed school counselor to guide students beyond graduation.
- Offer a program that allows students to care for their child while continuing a high school education.
- Organize transportation. By picking up students and bringing them to school we can increase attendance by as much as 60 percent.
- Our nutrition program guarantees a healthy meal each day. We do not take this responsibility lightly. The staff works to improve the quality of the lunches, including fresh fruit, vegetables and healthful options.

Such individual attention and hands-on organizational structure is costly and is under constant review here. We have five sources of funding — tuition, state vouchers, donations, grants and client schools. We find that our budgets do not run higher than those of other schools. That is because we have the ability to quickly shift priorities, reorder budget categories and apply item-by-item fundraising through volunteers, special donations and grants — in other words, we remain flexible.

It is important to note that there are innovative reforms on the horizon that would apply to schools such as ours. One would allow individual students to carry customized funding with them to the school building of their choice. This is different than the voucher program in that the funding is weighted according to educational need. That is, schools specializing in graduating students with speech, counseling, remedial, physical and other special needs could find the necessary additional staff.

In any case, it is the obvious and continuing challenge for those of us who administer schools that when we identify children who “need to talk”

that there be someone trained and ready to talk with them.

Some students arrive at TROY never having been asked those “why” questions — why they are late, why they come in a bad mood, why they cried on the bus. These students reasonably conclude that either people don’t care why or they have made wrong assumptions. Eventually, the student stops caring too — about his or her performance at school or even about what others think of him.

Trauma Informed Care, a program from the Department of Child Services (DCS), helps address this dropout mentality by providing special training to schools and other agencies. It particularly fits what we do at TROY. The first DCS trainer I heard speak encouraged everyone in school buildings — administrators, teachers, the office secretary, etc. — to ask those “why” questions whenever they found a troubled student in front of them.

An example is a chronically late student given detentions for being late. How different the situation if a school secretary, say, would take a moment to learn that the student was caring for younger siblings because the parents were intoxicated and overslept, or because the student had to care for the baby until a single mom got home from third shift.

So we listen before we presume. We try to understand the students’ perspective so that we can help them to see life from other, perhaps more constructive, perspectives. When something isn’t working, when a student’s progress stalls or test scores aren’t improving, when negative behaviors increase or escalate, we step back and ask what we’re doing. We ask whether we have built a relationship so the student knows that we care. Only then do we address classroom performance and behavior.

A Seventh Chance

TROY, as any school, has policies and procedures in place for safety and compliance with various regulations. Yes, we have rules, but our chief protocol is that situations will arise that don’t fit our chief protocol. We believe that teachers and staff, experts in their fields, need the freedom as professionals to do their jobs. They are free to modify curriculum, behavior management, incentives and policies as necessary to serve the individual student.

So individualization is not only allowed but encouraged — sometimes required. Nor do we expect the staff to be “fair” if that means treating everyone exactly the same or ensuring consistency in all situations. There is no cookie cutter at TROY. Yet, our teachers do not make such decisions

unilaterally. We have administrative teams in place that can modify, bend, change or create rules and options to meet the needs of individual students. This willingness to be flexible demonstrates to the student in the most powerful way that the staff believes in him or her regardless of budgets or rules, without conditions.

For instance, Bill Webber, a math teacher here, likes to say that everyone deserves a second chance. I would make that a third, fourth, fifth, sixth chance or more. Every day is a new opportunity to make things right. With our student population, even experienced teachers must rethink their classroom method. To paraphrase Webber: It isn’t our job to make the student care; it’s our job to make the student know that we care.

Webber taught in a public school classroom for 30 years before joining us. After two weeks here, he realized that he needed to rethink everything he’d known about teaching. These students weren’t going to adapt to his way of teaching, he was going to have to adapt to their way of learning. Learning can flourish with such an approach. Webber will tell you that ever since that realization, he has loved his job more than he ever knew he could love teaching. These students care about him just as much as he cares about each of them.

Using common sense is more important and more effective than adhering to policy written without a specific situation in mind. Students know that instinctively. We had to learn it.

The (Scary) Cat and the Hat

All of this is easier said than done. For example, it takes a concerted effort to realize how differently a struggling child, one without a trusted adult to explain or set context, can misread even common cultural markers and idioms. It is not pessimism, it is not mental illness — it is reality for them.

Students experience the curriculum, the literature and the subject matter in different ways, some of them because the lens through which they see, hear and learn things has been changed through trauma, violence, neglect or instability. For them, danger is something that is real and ever present. This manifests itself in the classroom on a daily basis.

Take for example Theodor Geisel’s “The Cat in the Hat.” While most would describe this as a classic children’s story about imagination and fun, one of our students described it as “creepy and scary.” For her, the story represented someone unwelcome entering the home of children who were supposed to be in a safe place. This intruder fails to listen to

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the children, putting them at risk, and refuses to stop when they voice concern about their safety.

If this had been your real-life experience, you too might find such a book unsettling. What feels fun to many children, feels threatening to these children.

Again, they experience daily interactions with a heightened sense of alert and without trusting those around them. And even when children and teenagers aren't always able to verbalize immediately what is bothering them, they are comforted in knowing that someone wanted to know. *Their world really does look different.*

It should not be surprising, then, that in a classroom full of students, perspectives will vary. We have students raised without trauma by two parents in the same home in the same town. In the same classroom, we have students who might not know one or either parent, who have experienced death and loss, sexual abuse, violence, neglect and abandonment. As educators and curricula developers, we can no longer assume that all students experience classroom materials and content in the same way.

Conclusion

Teachers throughout Indiana are aware that larger percentages of students are coming from broken and overwhelmed homes. There is consensus that we have no choice but to find more effective ways of teaching them and reaching them.

We cannot wait for the nuclear family, as critical as it may be, to reform. TROY Center now has considerable experience working with students whom others have described as troublesome. It can be hoped that what we have learned might be useful to share widely in a seminar or a formal presentation. Our experience might be particularly valuable in both its focus and duration.

TROY students, to be sure, have heart-wrenching stories. Our strategy, though, would be recognizable to any experienced, empathetic teacher: 1) Pay attention to “why”; 2) care about the student as an individual; 3) help break down or work around obstacles; 4) learn how they see the world differently; and 5) adapt teaching styles to the way students learn rather than require them to adapt to how teachers teach — throw away the cookie cutter.

We of course would like to see all youth in our community receive a fulfilling education. We would like to see all young lives changed for the better, and the community strengthened as a result. TROY, though, is perhaps the last chance for some students who have failed in a traditional school.

We feel a special obligation to see those particular students develop to become productive adults in our community.

To summarize, our school boasts a student body on which the education system has given up — “bad actors” in faculty parlance, individuals identified by authorities as heading down the wrong path.

Some of our students have been expelled or suspended from other schools or have endured incarceration for juvenile offenses. In short, they are accustomed to slipping through the cracks, of being rejected. We have made ourselves experts at keeping that from happening.

Our approach, therefore, is different from other educational institutions. This was illustrated at a recent visit to our office by a principal of one of our client schools in the county, a respected educator. He dropped off a student for registration, and as is our routine he spent some time accompanying his charge through the introductory process.

At the end of his visit, he said some things that meant a lot to me, that validated something we see every day and a promise I made early in this essay. To his surprise, the principal had been impressed with our approach to the recalcitrant young man he had in tow. And in so many words, he acknowledged that we had found a different, more successful way of working with such students.

This experienced principal could see that the mere realization by the student that he would be heard, that people were going to ask “why,” had begun to make a change — and in only a few hours.

The school cannot get a better compliment. Our students, taught by teachers who know them as individuals, get quality academic training at their own pace while receiving support in counseling, life-skill development, parent involvement, transportation and nutrition programs. They visibly change before our eyes — that seeming “magic” of persistence mentioned early on.

Organizationally we have guarded our flexibility and resourcefulness — to a degree impossible for some public schools. And as a result, we have served more than 800 youth in northeast Indiana since our founding in 1997.

Our graduates have attended college, entered the nursing profession, worked in church ministries, enlisted in the military, operated their own businesses and raised families. Indeed, some of them look back at the trouble that brought them here as a stroke of good luck.

Resources: A ‘Culture of Rejection’

It begins with a question: What if everything the experts told us about teaching and disciplining troubled youth was flat-out wrong? It is a question that an education researcher, Ed Deci, asks in a series of papers for the University of Rochester: “Teachers who try to control students’ behavior rather than helping them control it themselves undermine the very elements that are essential for motivation: autonomy, a sense of competence, and a capacity to relate to others.”

And a developmental psychologist, Carol Dweck, demonstrated in research for Stanford University that even rewards (gold stars and the like) can erode such a student’s motivation and performance by shifting the focus to what the teacher thinks rather than the intrinsic rewards of learning — the *raison d’être* of every good teacher.

Dr. Maryann O. Keating notes that a family’s socioeconomic status has become more important than test scores in predicting which eighth graders will graduate from college. And less than half of American children have spent their childhood in even the loosest definition of an intact family.

Think about that.

Dr. Pat Fagan of the Family Research Council warns that this amounts to “a culture of rejection.” He argues that this culture “burdens communities with higher levels of poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, domestic abuse, child neglect, delinquency, crime and crime victimization, drug abuse, academic failure and school dropout, and unmarried teen pregnancy and childbearing.”

Finally, a study this year from the Brookings Institution, “Opportunity, Responsibility and Security,” warns that economists and employers are increasingly concerned about a dearth of “soft skills” in the American labor market. These skills are defined by Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), *i.e.*, the ability to follow directions, to take feedback from supervisors, to cooperate with co-workers and



Bill Webber and his TROY students. (anamoly photography)

focus on tasks and complete them on time.

“The key to teaching SEL in school is to rebuild the trusting ties to competent adults that students should bring from home (but increasingly do not),” the authors conclude.

Only then can behavior improve and academic learning begin, they warn. This is a key to understanding why schools like TROY Center work.

— Shelby Lamm, project editor

A Reading List

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FAQs

WHAT IS TROY CENTER?

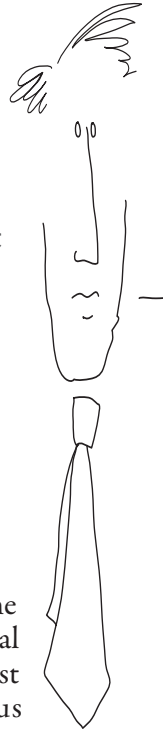
TROY is an acronym for Teaching and Reaching Our Youth. It is an accredited, independent, non-profit school for grades 6-12. As larger percentages of students are coming from broken homes and a culture of poverty, welfare dependency, neglect, abuse and delinquency, TROY is perhaps the last chance for students who have failed to thrive in a traditional school.

Throughout its 17 years of operation, the school has developed a customized educational design that provides students in northeast Indiana quality academic training, plus support in counseling, life-skills development, parent involvement, transportation and nutrition programs. TROY is an innovative, alternative school, serving over 800 youth in northeast Indiana since its founding in 1997, so instead of dropping out or becoming a burden on social welfare systems, our students have gone on to attend college, entered the workforce, started businesses, joined the military and raised families.

WHAT MAKES TROY DIFFERENT?

Those familiar with the teachers and staff believe the school has discovered a key to effectively educating not only troubled children, but all children.

Using methods that are as individual as the students, the experienced teachers and counselors at TROY have become expert at reaching those children accustomed to slipping through the cracks. The socio-economic obstacles that impede education are largely ignored elsewhere. The school promises that it is possible to convince the most rejected young persons that they can be loved, that there is a place for them in the world — somewhere, someday.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR MY COMMUNITY?

*"Keep searching for the key to each child, even and especially when it is the most difficult to find."
(Nicole Trier)*

Business owners tell us that the great demand today is for workers with so-called "soft" skills.

These skills are what they teach at TROY along with the expected academics necessary for an accredited high school degree.

Soft skills, defined for the labor force, include: an aptitude for communication, getting along with fellow workers, accepting supervision or criticism, staying on task and completing jobs on time. We learn such skills from trusted adults, sometimes parents but not necessarily. TROY helps young people help themselves.

WHAT IS NEEDED NOW?

Each year more children are coming to TROY with basic needs such as hunger, safety and security. Those needs must be met before learning can begin.

Licensed, experienced teachers (at a 1:7 staff-to-student ratio), academic programs and operating expenses are funded by student tuition and state grants. In addition, financial support from community grants and individuals ensures scholarships and the continuation of counseling, social-skills, health, nutrition and wellness programs that TROY provides — programs that change young lives for the better and strengthen our communities as a result.