

New Beginnings: A School Where Failure Is Not an Option

Leatherneck - Quantico

Subjects: Students; Learning disabilities; School districts; Learning; Behavior modification

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Date: May 2011

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An old man walked up a shore littered with thousands of starfish, beached and dying after a storm. A young man was picking them up and flinging them back into the ocean.

"Why do you bother?" the old man scoffed. "You're not saving enough to make a difference."

The young man picked up another starfish and sent it spinning back to the water. "Made a difference to that one," he said.

That short story, adapted from "The Star Thrower" by Loren Eiseley, epitomizes the idea on which New Beginnings, a Collier County alternative school in Naples, Fla., is based. The students who attend the school often have been left to flounder on their own, sometimes ignored by negligent parents, sometimes the victims of a difficult school situation or an unrelenting learning disability. While schools cannot reach every student, it is the belief at New Beginnings that saving students, one at a time, is worth the effort.

New Beginnings is an alternative public school. The mission statement for the school is "to reduce daily disruptions in the public schools by giving students who have not succeeded in a traditional setting the opportunity to learn in a highly structured environment."

New Beginnings admits students in grades 3 through 8. These are children who have encountered difficulties in all aspects of their lives. Some are victims of violence, abuse and neglect. Others have ADD, ADHD or other learning disabilities. Some are bullies, while others have stepped on the wrong side of the law. Issues with weapons, assaults, drugs and theft are not uncommon.

How does New Beginnings turn these kids around? The school uses a positive reinforcement behavior modification program, with a Marine component. It is a place for 64 elementary and middle school children, predominantly males, to change their behaviors. These kids who failed in their home schools are thriving after being given a second chance. The program is 90 percent carrot and 10 percent stick.

"These are not bad kids. They are kids who have done bad things. They have learned through their life experiences. We have to teach them and show them something better," said Eric Peltz, the lead teacher at New Beginnings and a certified behavior analyst.

Retired Major General Edward Usher, Marine Corps Association president and CEO, who visited the school in March, said he expected a boot camp atmosphere, but that notion was quickly dispelled. He first heard about the school after Lieutenant General Ronald Coleman, USMC (Ret) visited two years ago. LtGen Coleman urged Maj Gen Usher to visit to gain a better understanding of the program and how it was based on the Marine Corps model.

"I expected a regimented environment, one which emphasized discipline over education. Instead I found a well-developed balance between structure, discipline and education. When students leave, they have a better sense of respect for themselves because they have a higher standard," said MajGen Usher.

Students are sent to New Beginnings after being removed from their home schools. Peltz, called "Captain" by the students and staff in deference to his leadership position, conducts an entrance interview. During this time, the student is enrolled, given a uniform consisting of camouflage trouser, red T-shirt, black boots and belt, and put through two days of rigorous physical training as well as indoctrination regarding the rules of the school.

The boys have what is usually the closest haircut they have ever experienced. All jewelry, nail polish, makeup and any other embellishments on students are eliminated. In other words, everything that defined them in their old life is removed.

"This is a critical component in the process," said Peltz. "We have to strip them of everything that they were in order to begin to build them a new foundation."

The parents, meanwhile, must commit to follow the requirements as outlined for their child. For instance, if the student is unruly at home as well as school, Peltz requires daily phone calls from the parent informing him of the student's behavior outside of school hours. The students are held accountable in all areas of their lives, not just during the school day.

Often the parents of a student being sent to NB are angry and fearful. They usually don't want the child to be sent to an alternative school, be it out of embarrassment for themselves or for the child. It is a cathartic moment when the student is required to say "I love you" and "Fm sorry" to the parent, and this is usually the beginning of a change all around. When the child and the family start to function better, everyone is willing to admit that admission to the program was the first step in a positive direction.

A big part of the success of the New Beginnings program is "the Gunny." Gunnery Sergeant George Darner, USMC (Ret) has been with New Beginnings for 13 years. He is the type of gunny that every Marine remembers. Students occasionally may feel that they hate him, but it doesn't take them long to realize he is trying to mold them into decent human beings. Before long, that hate turns to respect, and eventually almost every student comes to love him.

He's the one who exercises the recalcitrant student until he is ready to drop, who rolls him in the sand pit and who supervises him during lunch detention. He also is the shoulder to cry on. He is the one whose chest sticks out as far as the student's when a promotion is achieved, a dog tag is given out, or a cover is placed on a student's head.

The Marine Corps model is a key component in the success of New Beginnings. The program is set up so that students earn points each day. Good behavior is rewarded, and after about four weeks, a student is eligible for the first promotion. Students rise through the ranks and proudly achieve their chevrons, dog tags, ability to blouse their pants, and so on, much like any Marine would do. With each promotion comes a sense of achievement and accomplishment, something that many of these kids have never known. Building on the foundation of honor, courage and commitment, students learn leadership skills as well as the importance of character.

Academics are strong at New Beginnings. Students follow a rigorous curriculum that parallels that of the regular school. Students must perform at all levels, and they must take the standardized, statewide Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), which shows exactly where they are when compared to others their own age.

"We continue to help these kids achieve academic success. Many have tried to hide their academic difficulties with their misbehavior. It is a downward spiral until they come here," said Dr. Cynthia Janssen, the assistant principal of alternative schools. "We have to turn that around."

New Beginnings has an 80 percent success rate. Peltz closely monitors those students who are sent back to their home schools. Follow-up conversations with principals, parents and guidance counselors are common. Occasionally, students return for a "tune-up" during which GySgt Darner and Peltz remind them why they were sent to NB in the first place, and why they were sent back to the home school. The student is usually quick to comply once the tune-up is complete.

MajGen Usher said, "I am amazed by the dedication of these individuals. Every single person who works at New Beginnings is there because they want to be. This is surely part of the reason for the program's success."

In the classroom, where seats are limited to 16 students, the teacher is the "Queen of the classroom." (Yes, currently, every classroom teacher is a female.) They are there to teach, period.

A tutor, called "Sergeant," is present in each class and handles all the discipline. The tutors take care of keeping track of points, which can be earned or lost. If a student is uncooperative or needs a bit of cooling off, the student will be asked to stand on the footprints outside of the classroom. Further escalation leads to time in isolation; a talk with the Captain or with Kate Peterson, the school counselor; or "class in the grass." The latter occurs when a student is placed at a desk in the middle of the school's athletic field for the day (or for several days).

It is warm much of the time in Florida, and a few hours of solitude in the sunshine often is enough to turn an attitude around. Students earn class in the grass for a variety of reasons, including bus infractions, trouble with the law and bullying. Being a general "knucklehead," as the Gunny would say, also will earn a seat on the field.

The alternative schools program has existed for 15 years in Collier County, and Principal William Spano has been at the helm throughout. "Often alternative schools are a dumping ground for kids and teachers who are not making it elsewhere. Quite the opposite is true at New Beginnings. Employees have left other jobs, even taking a cut in pay, to work at the school."

"We love being able to help these students turn their lives around," said math teacher Mary Gust.

Another important chapter in the New Beginnings success story is the Marine Corps League of Naples, E.T. Brisson, Det. #063. Many of the League members are active mentors at the school. About 20 MCL members work weekly with one or more students. Many of the students have never had a stable adult in their lives. These men and women make a huge difference.

The mentors are faithful, showing up every single week, and the students learn that an adult can be trusted to keep a promise. The mentors might talk about a book they have read, shoot hoops outside, or help with schoolwork. It's not what they do; it's the idea that an adult is taking an interest. It is a privilege for a student to have a mentor, and students are eager for that weekly visit.

Peltz tells the mentors: "Many of our students have never had an adult in their lives who didn't have an agenda or who didn't want something from them."

For MCL member Tom Macintosh and his wife, Elaine, their time as mentors has been an eye-opening experience. "I've learned a lesson at New Beginnings," said Tom. "Just because a kid can't make it in the normal school system doesn't mean he is a rotten egg or a dummy. Both of the boys I mentor are extraordinarily intelligent and immensely talented. These kids have no one in their corner. They just need someone to believe in them."

Bob and Clare Kearns are another husband-wife mentor team. Clare enjoys working with the girls. "When Clare comes in, the girls light up," said Bob, the liaison between the MCL and New Beginnings. The Kearns have been New Beginnings mentors for seven years. They stay in touch with many of their former students. Bob Kearns said he has served as a guide for many at New Beginnings, and his mentoring role has continued even as former students enter college.

"We can have a significant impact on these struggling children and change their lives for the better," he said.

The MCL helps out in other ways too. Members provide transportation for special events, donate items for weekly drawings for kids with high point totals and host a monthly luncheon at which one or two high-ranking students are honored guests. Also, they are generous with cash donations to help with needs at the school. Most recently, when they learned that the school had to replace the camouflage uniforms, the MCL members gave a generous donation to help with this expensive transition. "The League is a key component in the success of New Beginnings, and we are very grateful for their support," said Peltz.

Part of the New Beginnings program traditionally has been a four-day trip to Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C. This trip is supported in part by the local MCL detachment. The intent of the trip, according to Peltz, is multifaceted. "We want to teach leadership, improve self-esteem and instill discipline."

For most of the students, the trip to Parris Island is the first time they have left Florida. For many, it's the first time out of Naples. It is a chance to see the world as a larger place.

"Opportunities presented at the depot cannot be replicated anywhere else on earth," Peltz said. "Students are forced to face their fears. Their thug-like persona is stripped away; they get to think, feel and act like a regular child. This is when we see the emotions of homesickness and fear. Trust is established and reinforced with the New Beginnings staff as well as with each other.

"For some, the food is the best they have ever had. For some, just getting three meals a day is a special opportunity.

"The Parris Island trip culminates with a visit to the 50-foot tower," Peltz continued. "All students must go down the tower. By the time we board the bus to return home, they are all walking taller and feeling prouder in the knowledge that they have done something few others ever have."

Also following the Marine Corps model, promotion ceremonies are an important part of the program's success. Students who are eligible for a promotion must have an interview with the Captain and the Gunny. Students are grilled on everything from the basic school rules for the early promotions, to more intangible topics, like character building. Students stand on those same yellow

footprints in front of the Captain's desk that they stood on during their entrance interview. This time, however, they are happy to be standing there showing off their knowledge as they earn a higher rank. The students rank from private first class through to first lieutenant - and all promotions are earned.

Monthly promotion ceremonies are held outside, with dignitaries from around the district, MCL members and parents attending as honored guests. The colors are raised, a drill team marches, the color guard is present, and "The Star-Spangled Banner" is sung. After deserving students are promoted, the ceremony is always closed with "The Marines' Hymn." These ceremonies are moving for all concerned, and they give students a chance to receive attention for the right reasons.

Now that MajGen Usher has seen NB up close, he fully is aware of the potential. "This is a world-class program that should be replicated across the country," he said on the last day of his visit. "The community of Collier County should be commended for supporting a program like this. It can serve as a model for other school districts."

According to Dr. Janssen, the district wants more seats and more classes at New Beginnings. During MajGen Usher's visit, several former students were invited to visit and talk about their experiences at the school. All agreed that New Beginnings had a positive impact on their lives.

"I could write a book about what New Beginnings did for me. I entered as a boy and left as a young adult. It changed my character and gave me a different perspective on how to live my life. I learned right from wrong, and became a better person all around. I never knew what respect was. Now, it feels good to say "yes, sir," and "yes, ma'am." I am happy to give my respect to others, and it feels good to get it back," said 18-year-old Makinton Dorleant, a former student.

For two years in a row, Dorleant has been selected to speak to incoming football players at his high school. "I tell them to start strong and finish strong. I tell them, don't slack, whether it's in the classroom or on the field."

He has been following his own advice: Dorleant will be attending the University of Maryland on a four-year football scholarship in September.

Former students are not the only ones who praise this program. The parent of a recent program graduate wrote a note to Peltz shortly after MajGen Usher's visit.

It read, in part: "Thank you for giving my son the opportunity to speak before the General today. As we left New Beginnings, he told me how 'Wowed' he was by being there. I asked what that meant to him, and he said he was impressed with how everyone had done so well, and he was proud of himself for being one of those people lucky enough to be invited there for the ceremony.

"He said he doesn't want to rewind. His demeanor and attitude when leaving New Beginnings is always so positive, as if it ignites him again to be what he has been shown he can be. I thank you again and always for being there for my family. I only wish, somehow, I could find a way to put into words the gratitude I have for what you and your staff have done to change not only our family's life, but so many others."

Throughout the unpretentious facility that houses New Beginnings, there are starfish: a starfish on every teacher's desk, a picture of a starfish on the secretary's mouse pad, starfish on the wall in the foyer with graduates' names on them. Clearly, every student does matter at this unique school.

Asked to describe his program, Principal Spano said, "There is a miracle happening in Collier County, Florida, and it is called New Beginnings."

Sidebar

"Alpha" Squad (elementary students) at New Beginnings alternative school in Naples, Fla., sings "The Marines' Hymn" at a recent promotion ceremony.

Marine Corps League members congratulate a New Beginnings 6th-grade student upon his promotion to gunnery sergeant.

Sidebar

Former New Beginnings student Nakilya Wright reunites with her mentor, Clare Kearns, for the first time since graduating from New Beginnings.

Sidebar

MajGen Ed Usher encourages the Alpha Squad to think and act with honor, courage and commitment. New Beginnings staff members-ffrom left) lead teacher Eric Peltz, Gayle Worden, Dr. Cynthia Janssen, and classroom teacher and most recent Golden Apple winner Kim Sweat-stand in the rear. (Photo by Jack Connelly)

Sidebar

Dr. Cynthia Janssen (Assistant Principal, New Beginnings) and MajGen Ed Usher, USMC (Ret) commend a 5th-grade student for courage shown while he signed for deaf guests at a promotion ceremony.

Sidebar

Timing Helps Where Motivation and Drive Exist

New Beginnings began in 1993 when a Florida- supported Safe School Fund made funds available for alternative schools programs. The timing was right: the Collier County school administration was eager to weed out students who were disrupting classes and making trouble. Initially, they tried a program for high school students, but that was unsuccessful. The program was revised to serve elementary and middle school students, and that is how it operates today.

Three years ago, a second New Beginnings was started in another part of Collier County to serve the area known as Immokalee, about 25 miles from Naples. Last year, out of all the alternative schools in the state of Florida, only 10 were recognized for showing extraordinary gains on the statewide standardized tests. New Beginnings Naples and New Beginnings Immokalee were among those 10. To find out more, contact Eric Peltz, (239) 377-1070, address: New Beginnings, 3710 Estey Ave., Naples, FL 34104.

-Susan Belding

Sidebar

Marine Corps League member Bob Kearns jokes with a student as he assists him during a mentoring session. Kearns is the liaison between NB and the MCL.

A 4th-grade student willingly exercises after missing a spelling question while working with his MCL mentor. (Photo by Jack Connelly)

Sidebar

GySgt George Darner, USMC (Ret) is greeted by former students (from left) Nakilya Wright, Broughan Jones and Makinton Dorleant during his recent visit while on medical leave from New Beginnings for a series of chemotherapy treatments.

AuthorAffiliation

Editor's note: Susan Belding is the reading teacher at New Beginnings. She says that her job at the school is an honor and a gift.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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