

## School-based MRT— Signs of Success in a Rural Louisiana High School

By Dr. Bill Swann, LCSW, School Social Worker

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Professionals in elementary and secondary education in Louisiana are focused today on assuring that more and more students achieve the standards and benchmarks that are tested at key transition points in their academic careers. As a result, each classroom contact — indeed, each minute of the school day — holds increased importance for today’s students and teachers.

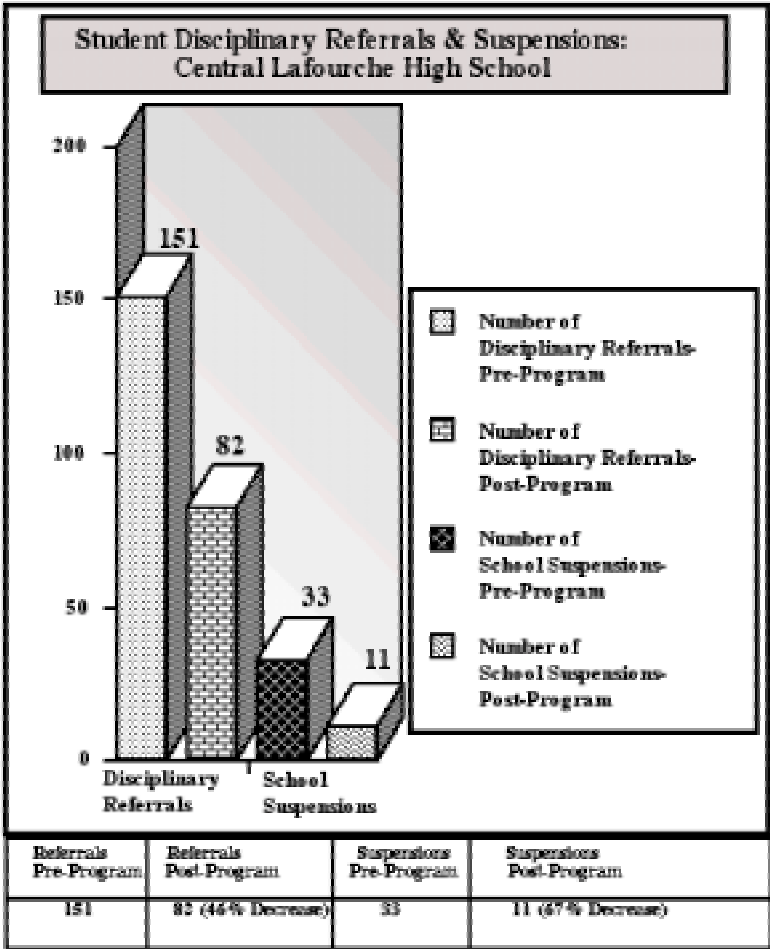
In such a context, **student discipline** registers as an essential element in every school’s effort to achieve effective academic reform and better promote students’ scholastic achievement.

One such school, Central Lafourche High School, located in the heart of Louisiana’s famed bayou country, this past December found itself struggling with a significant number of students referred to the office for disciplinary infractions. During the period beginning with the opening of school in August 2001 through December 2001, there were approximately 4000 disciplinary referrals among the 1515 students enrolled at Central Lafourche High.

“Time in the office with the disciplinarian,” said Principal Blaine Degruise, “ translates into valuable time lost in the educational process. That’s eventually going to have a negative influence on our students’ testing results. And everyone will lose if that’s the case.”

Seeking assistance from his District Supervisor, Mr. Degruise began thinking about possible ways to address the rise in discipline referrals that might encourage students to become more responsible for their own educational progress. Supervisor for Secondary Education, Leonard St. Pierre, engaged the help of two MRT Facilitators to implement a pilot program to test the effectiveness of the newly developed school-based MRT Program entitled, *Discovering Life and Liberty in the Pursuit of Happiness*. He hoped to find in that program a way to reduce the growing numbers of discipline problems that were interfering with students’ academic progress.

Ms. Dorothy Murray, Special Assistant to the Superintendent, and Dr. Bill Swann, School Social Worker, both employees of the Lafourche Parish School System and recently certified MRT Trainers, initially designed the pilot project. The school's administrators referred 19 students whose behaviors placed them at risk of expulsion or failure due to poor decision-making and/or high numbers of disciplinary infractions. Before being placed in a group, each student met for a minimum of 45 minutes with the co-facilitators for a screening interview to discuss the program's expectations and the student's concerns. The project lasted a total of 16 weeks including three weeks of interviews preceding the actual group sessions.



Students were assigned to two groups structured to meet once weekly for 55 minutes from mid-February 2002 through the close of school in May 2002. Murray and Swann together co-facilitated each group for a total of 13 weekly sessions with each group.

The format for the groups included brief check-ins conducted in round-robin fashion followed by formal presentations of the MRT Workbook material. By the conclusion of the 13-week pilot program, the groups had completed all of the required introductory chapters but only step one of the 12-step MRT® Freedom Ladder.

Preliminary results of the pre- and post-intervention data suggest that the MRT School-based program, even when significantly abbreviated, as it was in this pilot project, made possible some remarkable changes for the students involved (see Table 1).

These students realized a **46% reduction in the number of disciplinary referrals** over the program's duration as compared to the 17-week period prior to the pilot program. Of similar significance was the **67% reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions** for these students. Regular participants also realized a **33% drop in absenteeism** through the course of the intervention.

The area that did not show significant progress was the actual grade point averages of participants. The academic performance of participants actually fell 15% in comparison to pre-intervention data. Swann and Murray think that group participants might actually have shown some academic progress had scholastic remediation been employed in conjunction with the MRT Program.

In light of the fact that **the MRT Program was only minimally employed in this project**, these data legitimately suggest a highly favorable projection for future interventions that employ the total MRT package. School improvement strategies that include the school-based MRT Program show promise for reducing discipline-related problems and improving school attendance rates for participants. With improvement in these crucial areas, the academic performance rates of participants are likely to reflect positive changes as well.

Central Lafourche High School's Principal certainly agrees. He plans to include the school-based MRT Program as a regular part of

the Fall 2002 Curriculum at his high school on the bayou. “With results like these,” Mr. Degruise says, “We all stand to benefit from such an innovative program.” He promises to keep us informed of the results for the coming year.