Introduction

Arlington County is unique in the sense that it offers an Interlude Program for students who are seriously Emotionally Disturbed (SED). The Interlude Program is the most restrictive special education setting for SED students in Arlington Public Schools. Interlude students are usually involved in the Arlington County Juvenile System. Most have Probation Officers. One of the goals of my program is to work with the Juvenile System’s court appointed Probation Officers, to provide individualized programs that will help promote success, not only academically, but emotionally for these students.

What makes our program unique from other SPED programs, is the therapeutic component. The entire setting/structure of the class is designed to be as therapeutic as possible for the benefit of the students. Students receive therapy within the school setting two, to two and a half times per week. Therapy sessions are not only individualized, but a group setting is provided as well.

S.T.A.R.S. is a Summer Therapeutic And Recreational Session for seventh and eighth grade Interlude Students. The purpose of this pilot was to utilize enrichment activities to build self-esteem, in order that Interlude Students would be able to cope effectively with the frustrations associated with transitioning to Eighth Grade and High School Programs.

At Gunston Middle School, the majority of these students are minority or language minority students. The objective for this program would be achieved if participants in this pilot could make a successful transition to the next grade level with minimal transitional difficulties.

Background

I have been a special educator for thirteen years. During the last two years of my career, I have taught at Gunston Middle School in South Arlington, Virginia. I have been the teacher for the Interlude Program at Gunston Middle School. Overall, the Interlude population is minority students who from lower socio-economical backgrounds.

It has been my experience that the majority of my Interlude students have difficulty transitioning back to a structured school environment after long breaks and weekend, not to mention transitioning from one teacher to another.

I became quite concerned that the strides the students had made during the school year would diminish over the summer. Unfortunately, most Interlude students at Gunston are involved in local Hispanic or other minority gangs. The lack of structure and positive activities leaves these students quite susceptible to making poor choices during lengthy non-school periods.
Method

Throughout the school year, I had successfully implemented cooperative learning activities, as well as enrichment activities (through field trips/lessons) that were SOL-related to reach students. The question was, how do I extend my current program and curriculum through the summer? The idea was to create a summer program to foster the positive learning experiences of the school year. A big obstacle was how to get the students and parents to “buy” into a summer program? Funding and transportation were other issues that were a major concern.

I approached my supervisors at the Arlington Education Center about the funding. The premise was that the program would be set up to accommodate rising eighth and ninth grade Interlude students within the current Interlude Programs. The pilot would be run similar to the school’s yearly program. It would concentrate on the SOL and the IEP goals of each student. In addition, it would also incorporate a stronger therapeutic component to teach transitional skills through group lessons as well as individual therapy.

The next step was getting students to “buy” into the program. I discussed the possibility of the program with the six students who were in my class. I was intrigued to hear the topics they felt were of the utmost concern:

1. **Cost**: Most students felt their families did not have the money to pay for a summer school program. Therefore, they did not feel they would be able to participate in a program.
2. **Length of the Program**: Students reported they would not want to spend “a full day”. They felt that a half day program would hold their interest better. Students also expressed the desire to have the program start immediately after the school year ended. They indicated they would be less likely to “get into trouble.” Students wanted the program to run as close to the beginning of the next academic year as possible. They felt a program of this length would assist them in remaining in the “school” mode.
3. **Activities**: Students also expressed the desire that summer activities should be “challenging,” different from activities and lessons done throughout the school year. They also indicated that they wanted to “travel” to do some of these activities.

In interviewing parents, parental concerns were quite similar to student concerns:

1. **Cost**: Parents would be willing to send their children, but were quite concerned about the cost of the program. Most indicated they would be able to contribute some money toward the program, but desired that the program be without cost to them.
2. **Length of the Program**: Parents wanted to “keep children off the streets and out of trouble,” but did not want to “burn kids out on school.”
Based upon parents, students, and financial availability, the S.T.A.R.S. Program was conceived.

Throughout the school year, my students felt that it was important they be known as something other than the “Interlude class”. They felt that “Interlude” had a negative connotation. We, through the year, referred to ourselves as the “Super Stars”. Hence, naming our new summer program the S.T.A.R.S. (Summer Therapeutic And Recreational Session) Program.

Framework of the Program

The framework of the program was as follows:

- **Objective/Mission Statement:** Utilize enrichment activities to build self-esteem, so that students will be able to cope effectively with the frustrations associated with transitioning to Eighth Grade and High School Programs.
- **Staffing:** Therapist and Teacher.
- **Program Description:** S.T.A.R.S. (Summer Transitional and Recreational Session), a five week long program, for rising eighth and ninth grade Interlude Students. S.T.A.R.S. would be designed to provide group and individual therapy. Activities would build on cooperative learning and expand the leadership potential for each student in a small and comfortable environment. Participants would find the activities enjoyable, while meeting educational goals set by the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). Activities would cover SOL requirements for the areas of Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies.
- **Cost:** Program would be free to students currently enrolled in Arlington County Interlude Programs.
- **Activities:** Museums trips, horseback riding, rock climbing, varied cooperative learning lessons, group and individual therapy.
- **Measure of Success:** Students would make the transition to the 2000-2001 school year with minimal behavioral and academic difficulties. I would check with those parents and students who had transitioned to the High School in the fall.

Assessment of the Program

The main objective of the program, how to create a summer program to foster the positive learning experiences of the school year, was met. Out of the six participants in the pilot (four rising ninth graders and two rising eighth graders), four out of the six demonstrated minimal if no transitional difficulties during the onset of the following academic year.

One of the two students that did not have success during the course of this pilot dropped out only one and a half weeks into the program. The student felt that he was a minority within the program. This student came from a white upper middle class family. Most participants in the pilot were of Hispanic or African American decent.

The second student, although successful during the program, demonstrated difficulty once reaching his high school program. This student’s transitional difficulties were due to his placement in a juvenile half-way home,
Argus House. I feel that the S.T.A.R.S. Program could not have aided this student.

Of the participants that successfully completed this pilot, all indicated that they would want this program available the following summer.

The one component that was not effective in this pilot was the daily group and individual therapy. In restructuring the S.T.A.R.S. Program for the summer of 2001, this element of the program has been deleted.

Due to student interest and transitional success of the four students that completed S.T.A.R.S, the program will be returning for the summer of 2001. The program will be opened not just only to Interlude students but also to all Arlington Public School Students who have difficulty during transitional periods, and students who need additional assistance meeting SOL requirements. This summer the program will be opened to fifteen students for summer school credit (if it is needed). There will be four teachers working with the students.