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The Zenith Project: A Study of an Intensive Educational Intervention for Chronic Offenders

Thomas Trautman, Ed.D.
The American Education Corporation

James Davis, Ed.D.
Harris County Department of Education

Nicholas B. McDonald, Ph.D.
The American Education Corporation

Sean Cain, M.A.
Texas High School Redesign and Restructuring Project

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The Zenith Project is an alternative to suspension/expulsion programs for chronic and serious juvenile offenders in Houston, Texas. Its core function is described as a "behavioral laboratory where students are provided an opportunity to practice discrete behavioral skills that have a direct correlation to success in the classroom and their daily activities" (Davis & Cain, 2003). The students it serves are those whose removal from the standard educational environment is mandated because their behavior is specifically referenced in school district policies as requiring removal.

The Zenith Project is an intensive short-term (3 to 6 weeks) program designed to return students to a less restrictive educational setting in an accelerated fashion. The *A+nyWhere Learning System* (2005) is the sole academic program for students while they are in this program. The academic goal, for Zenith, is to prevent academic regression while students are enrolled in the program, while primary efforts are focused on attitude and behavioral change. Two key questions for this study are if the successful completion of the Zenith Project leads to increased academic performance in less restrictive educational environments and if that increased academic performance produces a significantly greater number of students who are passing rather than failing their academic courses.

Theoretical Foundation

The Zenith Project is based on a firm philosophical foundation that provides the ideas upon which the program is built. The inspiration for the philosophy comes from four key sources. These are the works of Ken Blanchard and Don Shula in *Everyone's a*

Coach (1995), *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell (2000), the work of Dworkin and Dworkin (1999), and the *Boys Town Educational Model* (2005).

The work of Anthony and Rosalind Dworkin provides a broad understanding of sociological factors that influence student performance. Their work is especially focused on the sociology of education and race/ethnic relations. Also influential is a broad understanding of the book *The Tipping Point*. This book provides a framework to evaluate and build strategies for change in individuals within a social context.

With the above publications as a framework for the program, the concepts in *Everyone's a Coach* become the guidelines for interactions by faculty. Shula and Blanchard provide concrete examples of highly successful interpersonal strategies. There are five key concepts:

- Conviction-Driven - For an organization or coach to be effective, goals must be driven by convictions.
- Overlearning - Effective coaches must pay attention to details. Success comes from over-preparation and ability to carry out skills automatically.
- Audible Ready - Every successful coach must be ready for unexpected events and circumstances. Therefore, a successful coach is ready to execute substitute plays and deal effectively with situations as they arise.
- Consistency - Successful coaches are consistent.
- Honesty-based - Successful coaches are straightforward in their dealings with people.

Finally, it is the Boy's Town Educational Model (BTEM) that provides the foundation for many of the key elements of the Zenith Project program. These include the following:

- Social Skills Curriculum - The BTEM identifies 16 basic skills that are important for effective adult relations and classroom and school activities. The Zenith Project draws heavily from these skills for its "Social Skill of the Day" intervention.
- Teacher Interaction - The BTEM relies on three essential teaching interventions: proactive teaching, corrective teaching, and crisis teaching.
- Administrative Intervention - There must be consistent and supportive response to serious discipline problems
- Motivation System - Finally, there is a system of positive motivation and empowerment.

These descriptions provide just a thumbnail of the Boy's Town Educational Model. More comprehensive descriptions are available from numerous websites (www.girlsandboystown.org) and Boy's and Girl's Town provides extensive continuing education opportunities for those interested in a comprehensive understanding of their model.

Program Design

The above foundations provide the framework that guided the development of the program at the Zenith Project. The program, as created and designed by Sean Cain and Jim Davis, is described in detail in their program directory. Each page describes an

essential component of the program. The components can be grouped into four categories.

Mission and Goals

The first components of the Zenith Project are its mission, philosophy, and theme. The mission states that the primary focus of Zenith is to "instill a positive attitude toward school that exemplifies honor, dignity, and respect for others."

Next is the philosophy of the program. The philosophy is grounded in the fact that there is a population of students who are not successful even with alternative school interventions. The Zenith Project provides that population of students with a behavioral laboratory where they are provided the opportunity to practice discreet behavioral skills that have a direct correlation to success in the classroom and their daily lives.

The overall theme presented to the students is an opportunity to develop a renewed focus on their future through education. Research indicates that students who have experienced limited success in school discuss and consider college much later in their lives than successful students (Dworkin & Dworkin, 1999). Zenith focuses on a college theme throughout the program. Banners, posters, and sports paraphernalia from various colleges and universities are prominently displayed in each classroom. The college theme is designed to increase awareness of, and to encourage life-long learning and expanded career opportunities. Self-esteem and social skills are taught in an environment of healthy competition through daily academic, behavioral and athletic activities all integrated with the collegiate theme. In all activities individual student performance impacts the larger group, and therefore, through practice and direct experience students discover that they must work together as a team to be successful.

Components to foster community and sense of belonging

Several components of the Zenith Project are designed specifically to create a sense of community and belonging. Ceremonies are designed to bring a sense of meaning and recognition. Ceremonies include rising of state, national, and school flags, reciting the pledges (United States and State of Texas), awarding individual recognition's, graduation announcements, team recognition, and reciting the Zenith motto. Another Zenith ceremony component is a "Wall of Fame" where pictures of recent graduates are prominently displayed. All of these ceremonies provide community recognition and belonging for students who have a history of marginal participation in school and frequently only receive recognition for negative social interaction.

In addition to the ceremonies named above is a dress code. The dress code consists of a uniform provided by the Zenith Project. It is an athletic uniform consisting of shorts, shirts, sweatpants, jacket, and hat, all of which have a Zenith Project logo. The purpose of the dress code is to create a sense of community and belonging, and to develop self-discipline and personal responsibility.

Instruction

Core to the Zenith Project is instruction that is provided to accomplish the goals of the program with each student. To this end, the role of each staff member is clearly defined. Faculty members are referred to as "coaches" rather than teachers. This articulates the connection between staff roles and the philosophies of Shula and Blanchard in *Everyone's a Coach*, and the *Boy's Town Education Model*. The title "coach" also assists students in developing a new understanding of how to work with school personnel. Each faculty member receives extensive training to understand his or

her role and proper instruction techniques. The specific roles of each member of the Zenith coaching staff are described at length in a program guide.

Social Skills

The next component of the Zenith Project instructional plan is social skills. The skills are designed to help students internalize appropriate behaviors and positive thinking and are identified in the *Boy's Town Education Model*. Continuous instruction in social skills is based on the theory that a skill is not internalized and retained until it is verbalized and practiced. Within the Zenith Project, there is a 15-day cycle in which a distinct social skill and thought-for-the-day is emphasized.

Academics are an important part of the Zenith Project because it is the academic environment in which the student participants have experienced difficulty. However, increasing academic performance as measured by standardized tests that is not the primary goal. Empowering and motivating students to be effective learners is the goal. To this end, all academic instruction is provided through the *A+dvanced Learning System* from the American Education Corporation. The online curriculum is aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and provides instructional activities in 91 state-required courses. Students work as two-person teams during the two academic sessions each day. As noted above, the primary goal is for the students to learn to be effective learners. With the intensive, short-term effort of the Zenith Project, the hope of the program is that students will maintain their learning, not regress, and quickly reintegrate into a less restrictive educational environment better equipped to be academically successful.

Making Choices

Key to the Zenith Project is the mindset that the program exists to teach good kids how to overcome bad choices, not to teach bad kids how to be good. To accomplish this, Zenith includes daily counseling and ropes course activities in the instructional program. Each student receives a minimum of 40 minutes of structured counseling each day that may include individual, group, and online counseling. Regular counseling prepares students to deal with the crucible of high expectations, stress, and constant supervision that are part of participating in the Zenith Project.

The ROPES program focuses on communication skills, interpersonal support, problem solving, trust building, and teamwork. A certified ROPES counselor facilitates a sequence of activities that begins with trust-building and safety instruction and leads into problem-solving challenges.

Service Learning

The final instructional component is service learning. Here, citizenship, self-discipline, responsibility, and a positive work ethic are taught with meaningful activities that invoke student pride. This is done through projects that enhance the school environment and directly benefit others. Activities include, but are not limited to, lawn care, landscape instillation and maintenance, and maintaining the cleanliness of the classrooms

Discipline Management System

While the instructional program is geared toward addressing attitude and cognitive aspects of behavior, a system is also in place for direct and overt instruction of student behaviors. There is a point system where students earn points for staying on task, exhibiting appropriate behaviors, and demonstrating exceptional performance. There are

clear and specific procedures for students who do not participate as well as responses for serious offenses. The system also includes a hierarchy of recognition for levels of achievement as students progress towards program completion.

Exit Requirements

Finally, the Zenith Project, from the initial orientation meeting, is focused on preparing the students to be successful in less restrictive educational settings. As such, considerable daily program focus is on student exit requirements. Students are taught program expectations and receive daily updates on their progress in meeting the requirements for "graduation" every day that they are enrolled in the program. This is a key instructional component as students are taught the strategies for and benefits of becoming increasingly goal-directed in their behavior.

Major Program Goals

As the Zenith Program is surveyed, there are multiple goals that are apparent in Cain and Davis' program design. One such goal is the correcting of behavior problems that caused students to be placed in to the program according to Texas statutes. Working to teach each student a pattern of behaviors that, when practiced, lead to student success in less restrictive educational settings, improved attendance, reduced problem behaviors, and reduced recidivism rates. This study's focus is on the single goal of student academic performance. While the program is focused on enabling students to become effective learners; the concern is not as great for actual progress or remediating deficits, thus academic goals are modest. The initial and primary Zenith Project academic goal is that students maintain their pre-enrollment level academic knowledge and skills while enrolled in the program.

This study was conducted after the first year of operation of the Zenith Project. The study was undertaken to determine the effectiveness of the program in achieving its secondary goal of improving post Zenith academic performance. There are two main research questions for this study. First, does student academic performance in four content areas of English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies improve following the successful completion of the Zenith Project? Second, subsequent to the successful completion of the Zenith Project, will a significantly greater number of students achieve a passing academic performance in each of the four content areas as compared to those students who fail to achieve a passing academic performance?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The Zenith Project is a program of the Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), which is located in Houston, Texas. The students enrolled in the program were primarily from the Aldine Independent School District. The sample population for this study included all students who enrolled in the Zenith Project during the 2003-2004 school year, completed the program, and returned to a less restrictive educational placement with at least six weeks remaining in the school year.

Sample Characteristics. A convenience sample of 26 students from the Harris County Department of Education was assessed during the school year of spring 2003 to spring 2004. There were approximately equal numbers of male (n=15 or 57.7%) and female (n=11 or 42.3%) students enrolled in the Zenith Project. These students were in the 6th (n = 2 or 7.7%), the 7th (n = 14 or 53.8%), or the 8th (n = 10 or 38.5%) grade. This sample was predominately students of Hispanic descent (n = 10 or 38.5

%) and African-American descent (n = 15 or 57.7%) with a single student with a Caucasian background representing only 3.8 % (n = 1) of the sample.

Variables

Independent variable: Participation in the Zenith Project. This alternative education program serves chronic and serious juvenile offenders in grades 6 through 12 utilizing a research-based curriculum. This program focuses on behavioral skill building that is designed to encourage life-long learning including college and expanded career opportunities. Individuals are taught social and academic skills via a competitive process that involves not only classroom education but has a strong emphasis on athletics. The program is designed to be an effective, cost efficient education solution for extreme at-risk students. During an average enrollment of just 26 days, students participate in a highly structured program that combines academics, athletics, counseling and community service in a small classroom setting with a low, student-to-teacher ratio. A student is eligible to leave the Zenith Project after attending a minimum of 18 school days, having completed a discipline management program, having no absences within the last five enrollment days, being currently in good academic standing, and having paid all outstanding monetary balances. The apparatus for this study was the "Zenith Project" as described above, and implemented according to the program description. Additionally, the *A+nyWhere Learning System* (<http://www.amered.com/index.php>) was used as the main academic intervention as described in the Zenith Project program guide.

A+LS is a comprehensive computer-assisted learning program. It provides pre-assessments to determine a student's prior knowledge before instruction begins and post-evaluations to determine what new learning can be objectively demonstrated. *A+LS*

provides individualized instruction with comprehensive lesson materials in over 120 course titles in the four key subject areas of Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. All lessons are based on a design for mastery learning. Each lesson is presented in a consistent manner with a pre-test, study guide, practice exercises, and a mastery test. Immediate feedback is provided through the learning processes and students are able to self-monitor their progress at their discretion.

Dependent variables. There were two types of dependent variables.

Average academic performance: Each student's average academic performance before and after his or her enrollment in the Zenith Project in each of the four content areas of Mathematics, English, Science, and Social Science was used as the dependent variable. These mean averages were calculated utilizing the student's unweighted individual test grades for the current school semester pre and post participation in the Zenith Project. Passing or Failing performance: The second dependent measure was a simple dichotomous classification of each student's performance as passing or failing (utilizing a 70% cutoff point derived from each student's test grades) pre and post Zenith Project participation for each of the same four academic content areas.

Design

A post-hoc convenience sample of student outcomes post-Zenith Program enrollment was analyzed in this paper. This design utilized a pre/post design assessing the change within four content areas: Mathematics, English, Science, and Social Science. Dependent t-tests were employed since no logical comparison group existed for this sample of participants. The dependent t-tests compared each

student's average academic performance before enrollment in the Zenith Project to the student's average academic performance following successful completion of the Zenith Project. The degrees of freedom vary for each test due to differing numbers of students who had same-semester school assessments for both the pre and post periods of Zenith Project participation. Note that there were no significant differences for either Gender or Ethnic heritage on any of the dependent variables so all analyses were collapsed over those two measures.

Procedure

All students enrolled in the Zenith Project are those that were not successful with other alternative school interventions, who agree to meet program requirements, and who have been referred to the project by their school district. All students are enrolled with the consent of their individual caregivers. Their caregivers must attend the initial orientation and intake session along with the student. Following the intake, students participate in a structured schedule Monday through Saturday that focuses not only on academics but also athletics, counseling, and service activities. Student progress is monitored and tracked by a system of earned points. Points are earned by successfully completing aspects of the Zenith Project (e.g., completion of the discipline management system) and avoiding negative behaviors (e.g., no discipline referrals). A minimum enrollment of 18 days in the Zenith Project is required in order to meet the basic exit requirements. Again, the average student enrollment in the Zenith Project is a mere 26 days.

RESULTS

Dependent t-tests. The dependent t-test results were highly significant for the four content areas indicating significant average academic improvement for Mathematics, $t(20) = -2.903$, $p = .009$ with a test score improvement of 5.59 points; English, $t(21) = -2.418$, $p = .025$ with a test score improvement of 5.39 points; Science, $t(17) = -3.937$, $p = .001$ with a test score improvement of 10.59 points; and Social Studies, $t(19) = -3.209$, $p = 0.005$ with a test score improvement of 7.83 points. Pre-test, post-test, and difference means with their standard deviations can be found in Table One.

Chi-Square. Pearson chi-squares were calculated comparing the number of students who exceeded the average academic cutoff scores of 70% (or greater) pre and post Zenith Project participation for each of the four content areas. Please see Graphs One to Four for a pass or fail distribution of the students by content area.

For Mathematics, the distribution change from pre and post-Zenith participation was not significant although the trend was in the correct direction. During the pre-Zenith Project participation, 9 students were passing and 15 students were failing. Post-Zenith Project participation produced 14 students who were passing and 7 students that were failing with that distribution being non-significant: $X^2(1) = 2.333$, $p = .111$.

For English there was no significant difference in the number of students failing or passing during the pre-Zenith Project participation: 8 students were passing and 16 were failing. Post-Zenith Project participation produced significantly greater numbers of students who were passing English than not ($X^2(1) = 17.19$, $p < .001$): 20 students were passing and 1 was failing.

For Science there was no significant difference in the number of students failing or passing during the pre-Zenith Project participation: 9 students were passing and 11 were failing. Post-Zenith Project participation produced significantly greater numbers of students who were passing Science than not ($X^2(1)$ = not calculable due to all students achieving a passing grade): 17 students were passing and 0 were failing.

For Social Science there was no significant difference in the number of students failing or passing during the pre-Zenith Project participation: 7 students were passing and 15 were failing. Post-Zenith Project participation produced significantly greater numbers of students who were passing Social Science than not ($X^2(1) = 5.0, p = .041$): 15 students were passing and 5 were failing.

DISCUSSION

These results strongly suggest that students successfully completing the Zenith Project not only improve upon their original level of academic performance, but that individual academic performance improves enough to produce significant increases in the number of passing students. Students' performance in each of the four content areas increased by an average of one half to one full letter grade while all four content areas showed significant increases in the number of passing versus failing students. Slightly greater achievements were obtained in the content areas of Science and Social Science as compared to the content areas of Mathematics and English. The reason for such apparent differences is not known, however these results might be explained by the concept of skill development and content acquisition. Mathematics and English skills depend upon the development of more complex skills. This can be considered as a process of skill development and requires a student to establish a broader base of capabilities before

acquiring new skills. It is speculated that this broad base requires a longer time with carefully sequential instruction as compared to more content dependent subjects such as science and social studies. Many times Social Science and Science are presented in discrete blocks of knowledge, such as learning about a specific historical period or studying a specific scientific topic, which may not be so obviously based in previous knowledge. While this may not be the underlying reason for the difference in improvement rates in this study, further investigations could be developed to study such potential differences.

While A+LS was the sole educational intervention, no direct measure of its actual impact of its effect was assessed in this study. This leaves unanswered the question of what exactly was the size of the effect that the A+LS had on the success rate of students who completed the Zenith program. In order to assess the degree to which A+LS contributes to the academic success of the Zenith students, additional studies are needed. These designs would include students randomly assigned to comparison groups that could vary the amount of A+LS exposure students receive or even utilize educational software in addition to A+LS. Other studies could be designed that would include the assessment of additional relevant dependent variables such as study skills, attitude toward school, attendance, and recidivism rates. Standardized instruments that assess changes in these variables would need to be explored and/or developed.

While the total N was low and there were no objective control or comparison groups, the repeated design did allow for a preliminary investigation to occur simultaneously with the initial implantation of the Zenith Project. The increases in the students' average performance, as measured by their actual school

test scores, lend confidence to the efficacy of the Zenith Project as a whole. With these encouraging results, scientific investigations into the other goals of the program appear to be warranted. Empirical designs complete with random assignment, greater number of participants, and valid comparison groups should be constructed in order to investigate the goals of improved attendance, a decrease in behavioral problems, and a reduction in the recidivism rate.

In order to investigate the Zenith Project's efficacy valid comparison groups will need to be developed. These groups can be drawn from other programs that are similar to the Zenith Project if such programs can be found and utilized. Ideally there would be a comparison group that does not receive the Zenith treatment, or any other treatment, so that the dependent variables assessed would cleanly reflect any differences. However, additional comparison groups should occur naturally, such as those based on gender or ethnic background, that could lead to insight on what types of children respond the best to programs such as the Zenith Project.

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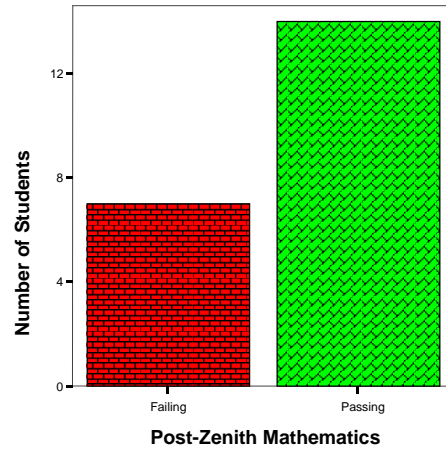
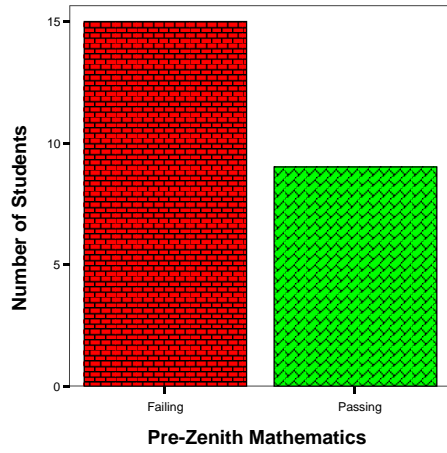
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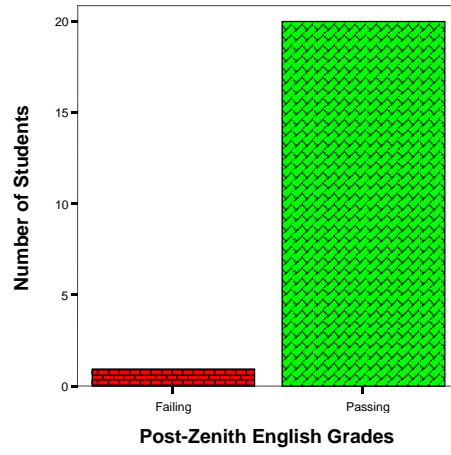
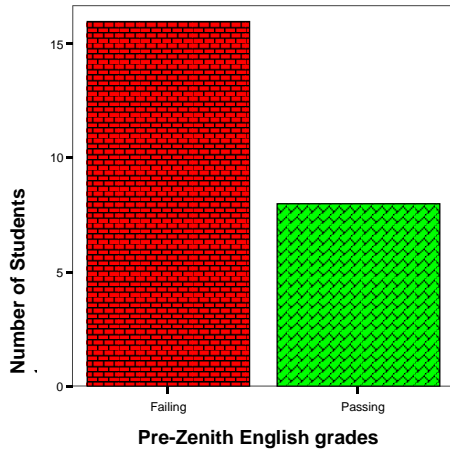
Table One: Pre, Post, and Difference Means and Standard Deviations by each Academic Content area.

	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Difference	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Mathematics	64.41	8.23	70.00	9.86	-5.59	8.83
English	68.99	9.07	74.38	8.30	-5.39	10.46
Science	67.26	8.94	77.85	5.33	-10.59	11.08
Social Science	66.13	7.71	73.97	9.78	-7.83	10.91

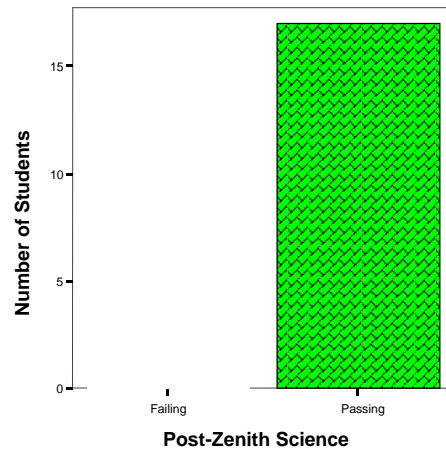
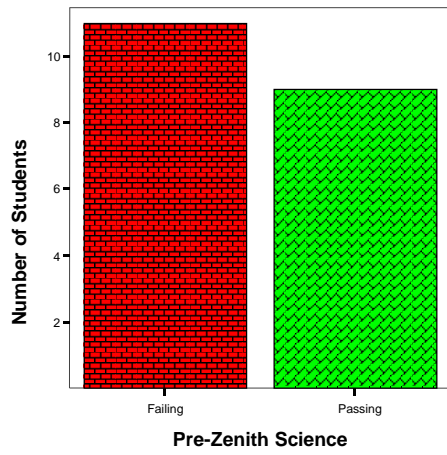
Graph One: The Pass or Fail distribution of the students in Mathematics.



Graph Two: The Pass or Fail distribution of the students in English.



Graph Three: The Pass or Fail distribution of the students in Science.



Graph Four: The Pass or Fail distribution of the students in Social Studies

