

After School Homework Helpers Club: The Game Plan

Background

Homework Helpers is a program for secondary school students at the EX3 Teen Center, a Boys & Girls Club for students aged 12 and up. Homework Helpers is basically one full hour where students are expected to work on assignments.

Two AmeriCorps tutors (myself included) and at least one high school volunteer tutor were present to answer any homework questions. The majority of students who come to Homework Helpers are in middle school, although all of the staff at the EX3 Teen Center are consistently aiming to increase participation from high school students.

The Goal of Homework Helpers

This program serves as a way to encourage productive and beneficial activities for EX3 students. Homework Helpers also provides tutoring and academic coaching in a supportive and positive environment that not all students have at home.

The Challenges

After a long day of being in classes, it can be a challenge to motivate students to sit for an hour and work on assignments. In order for Homework Helpers to be successful, realistic guidelines and expectations needed to be put in place.

In addition, Homework Helpers aims to make studying and/or productive after-school activities a rewarding experience. My ultimate task in reforming Homework Helpers was to create a program that challenged students, encouraged personal growth, and provided the resources students need to succeed academically.

The Approach and Awards System

The top priority at the EX3 Teen Center is to maintain a safe and positive environment for students. Instead of punishing EX3 members for not coming in for Homework Helpers, I implemented a consistent rewards system for the students who did come regularly.

At the end of each homework session, students would fill in a box next to their name on a chart. I would count the number of shaded boxes at the end of each day. When the total number of boxes on the chart reached 100, a celebration would be held for those who had actively participated in Homework Helpers at least once a week. Members would get to vote on what their celebration would be (pizza party, Disney movie day, etc).

Because these 100 hour celebrations occurred only once every few weeks, I would also use the homework chart to determine which students would get their names entered in a weekly raffle for prizes.

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Alternate Programming and Activities

To accommodate students who didn't always have homework, alternative activities were planned during study time. These included Teen Leadership Club on Tuesday, Art Club on Wednesday, and a Powerful Choices Club that promoted healthy eating and exercise habits on Thursday. These programs were run by one of the AmeriCorps tutors, while the other AmeriCorps member and high school volunteer tutor assisted those working on their homework.

In order to shade a box on the Homework Helpers chart, students attending Teen Leadership Club, Art Club, and Powerful Choices Club had to participate and be actively engaged.

At the beginning and end of each Homework Helpers session a brief warm-up activity would be run with the entire group. These consisted of everything from getting to know you bingo to quick improve games, and gave participants a productive way to let out some energy.

Student Response

It definitely took a while for students to buy in to the idea of completing homework for a full hour, but the number of high school participants in Homework Helpers went up from zero at the beginning of the academic year to approximately eight during second semester. While half of the high school participants didn't come every day, they did come in for help on major assignments, college applications, and studying for tests.

The 100 homework hour celebrations were very successful, although it did take some reinforcement and supervision to make sure only Homework Helpers students participated in them.

Changes for the Future

This rewards system for Homework Helpers didn't get established until students were already two months into the school year. As a result, it took a while for word to get out about 100 hour homework celebrations, and we weren't able to really increase our number of participants until the beginning of second semester.

Starting the rewards system earlier and promoting it more at local middle and high schools could have helped the program reach out to more students. Providing incentives, like extra weekly raffle tickets, to students who brought friends to Homework Helpers is also something I would be willing to try.