



## **Achieving Student-Centered Success on the High School Exit Exam: Five Components of an Effective Remediation Program**

High schools spend incredible amounts of time and resources toward preparing students for high school exit exams. A predicament arises when some students continue failing the exam and are in danger of not receiving a high school diploma. This article describes 5 components of an exit exam remediation program through which to equip and empower students who have failed the exit exam at least once to pass the English Language Arts section of an exit exam. An effective remediation program must not only prepare the students for the exam but also ensure the students master the standards of learning expected of high school graduates. Also, the components must be viewed in light of the unique educational and life needs of students who have failed an exit exam at least once. Therefore, the components are standards aligned with student-centered approaches to learning and assessment.

**T**he final bell rings. A 17-year-old from the Philippines, Anthony (pseudonym), saunters in. His head is shaved and he is wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt. He sits in a desk in the front row, slouches in his seat, and pulls the hood over his head. He takes out his notebook and a pencil and waits for instructions. He has been in my Exit Exam Intervention course for months. Like Anthony, a third of the students in the class are English language learners. He began the course frustrated because he has already failed the exit exam two times. Fortunately, he is passing all of his required courses, but this exit exam is the final and very ominous hurdle to graduation. During the past few months he has cleared up confusions about main ideas and themes, he has developed a more academic vocabulary, and he has learned how to organize his thoughts before writing an essay.

I call Anthony. He looks up, pulls down his hood, and slowly walks to my desk, wondering why he's in trouble. I pull out a report with his name on it. It's the results of the last exit exam! His heart races as he sits next to me. I smile, extend my hand, and energetically exclaim, "Congratulations! You passed the exam! You're going to graduate!"

Anthony's shoulders relax, his jaw drops, and he breathes a long sigh of

relief as he grabs his knees. He composes himself and mutters, “Thank you! My dad will be proud. Now I can go to college and become an interior designer.”

An interior designer! Who knew? I was stunned. Anthony never mentioned going to college, much less wanting to become an interior designer. He confided that he didn’t want to tell anyone because he was scared he wouldn’t graduate. He didn’t want to look foolish. Then I realized there are likely more unspoken dreams in the class. Anthony’s situation is not unique. What can be done to help students finally pass the exit exam and actively pursue their life goals?

High school exit exams, also known as graduation exams, are of great importance in this age of accountability. High schools invest incredible amounts of time and resources toward preparing students for the exams. There are pre-packaged curriculum guides, practice workbooks, study guides, and computer-based preparation materials, just to list a few. Yet, a predicament occurs when students do not pass the exam the first time. A more pressing concern arises when some students continue failing three or four more times and are in danger of not receiving a high school diploma. What can be done for students who, for various reasons, have difficulty passing the exam?

In this article I present recommendations for how to equip and empower students who have failed the exit exam at least once to pass the English Language Arts (ELA) section of the exit exam. It is the hope that these recommendations and shared experiences will spark thoughtful and honest consideration when developing an exit exam remediation program. Table 1 lists the components. Although these components may be commonplace in various educational programs, they must be viewed in light of the unique educational and life needs of students who have failed an exit exam at least once.

**Table 1**  
**Essential Components of an ELA Exit Exam Remediation Program**

1. Use standards-based approaches
2. Develop authentic real-world applications
3. Increase student engagement and confidence
4. Use authentic student-centered assessments
5. Provide opportunity to learn

Educators should consider current instructional practices before carrying out these recommendations. Are current practices and methods actually obstacles to student success on an exam? Identifying the obstacles and evaluating the current practices help develop an effective program that places the student at the center.

### **Does Practice Really Make Perfect?**

WestEd (2003), a nonprofit educational research agency, emphasizes that remediation is essential for those who fail the exit exam. However, too many exam-preparation programs confuse rote practice with remediation. Remedia-

tion does not equate with the continual practicing of the exam. The students who have failed the exam have already practiced it simply through the act of taking it. Moreover, these students were likely to have practiced beforehand in their English classes. Because of this, one may conclude that practicing multiple-choice test-taking strategies alone does not prove effective for these students. WestEd (2003) explains, "Yet when such classes employ 'skill-and-drill' or simply repeat methods that have not proven successful for these students in the past, no one profits" (p. 2). Therefore, remediation must include new methods focused on strengthening the skills and concepts in which the students are weak.

The goal of the classroom should not focus solely on the test and test-taking strategies. Lewbel and Hibbard (2001) argue that "the goal is not to teach students to pass tests but to teach them to apply deep conceptual understanding of content" (p. 18). In other words, students ought to master, at the very least, the minimum skills expected of high school graduates as well as prepare for the exam. This goal is the basis on which the five components of an effective ELA high school exit exam remediation program are built.

### **Component 1: Use Standards-Based Approaches**

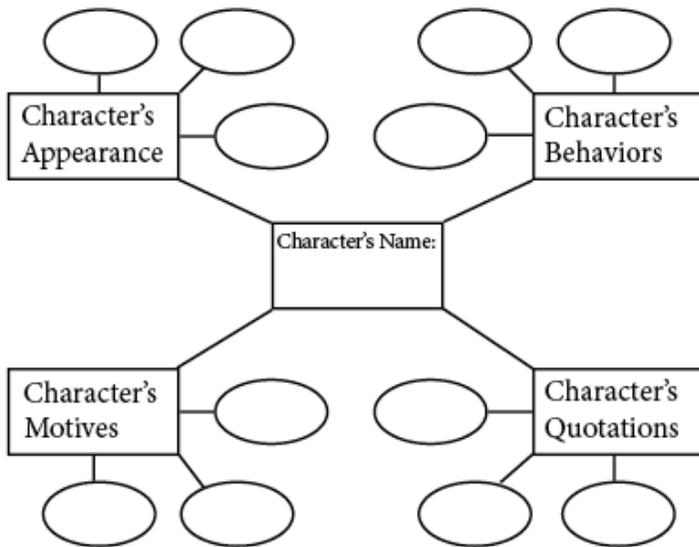
How can teachers assure that lessons are directly related to the learning standards? An approach to learning developed from state content standards and clear benchmarks is essential to the success of the students on high school exit exams (Nichols, 2003). That is, the curriculum and teaching strategies must focus on the standards that are represented in the exit exam. However, the use of textbooks, prepackaged lessons, and skill-and-drill does not work without true student engagement (Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001). This is not to say that any particular resource be excluded. On the contrary, high-quality resources that are standards aligned can be helpful in planning effective remediation courses.

The ultimate goal is not to teach multiple-choice test-taking strategies. The goal is to teach students to become independent critical thinkers and learners who have mastered the skills that are assessed on the exit exam. It is through this perspective of a student-centered skills-based approach that academic performance is improved. For instance, an exam may instruct students to identify the traits of characters in various texts. A California reading comprehension learning standard states that students will be able to "determine characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy" (California Department of Education [CDE], 2007, p. 223). In this case, I have provided direct instruction and resources that clearly show the definitions and concrete examples of character traits. Then, I often model how to analyze various texts for the purpose of identifying character traits. This ensures the students are clear on the standard and expectations.

Additionally, the learning materials should provide the opportunity for independent practice. In the character trait example, the students analyze a character in a text they are reading. They can list the traits of the character alongside textual evidence by using a graphic organizer, such as a T-chart, to write their answers (i.e., write a character trait on one side and textual evidence on the

other). They may also use a character analysis web (see Figure 1). This allows the students to identify and categorize information about a character. It also provides a quick means for the teacher to assess the students' understanding of the concepts and terminology. These activities give students the opportunity to actively practice the skill of analyzing a character before they encounter the multiple-choice questions on an exam.

**Figure 1**  
**Character Analysis Web**

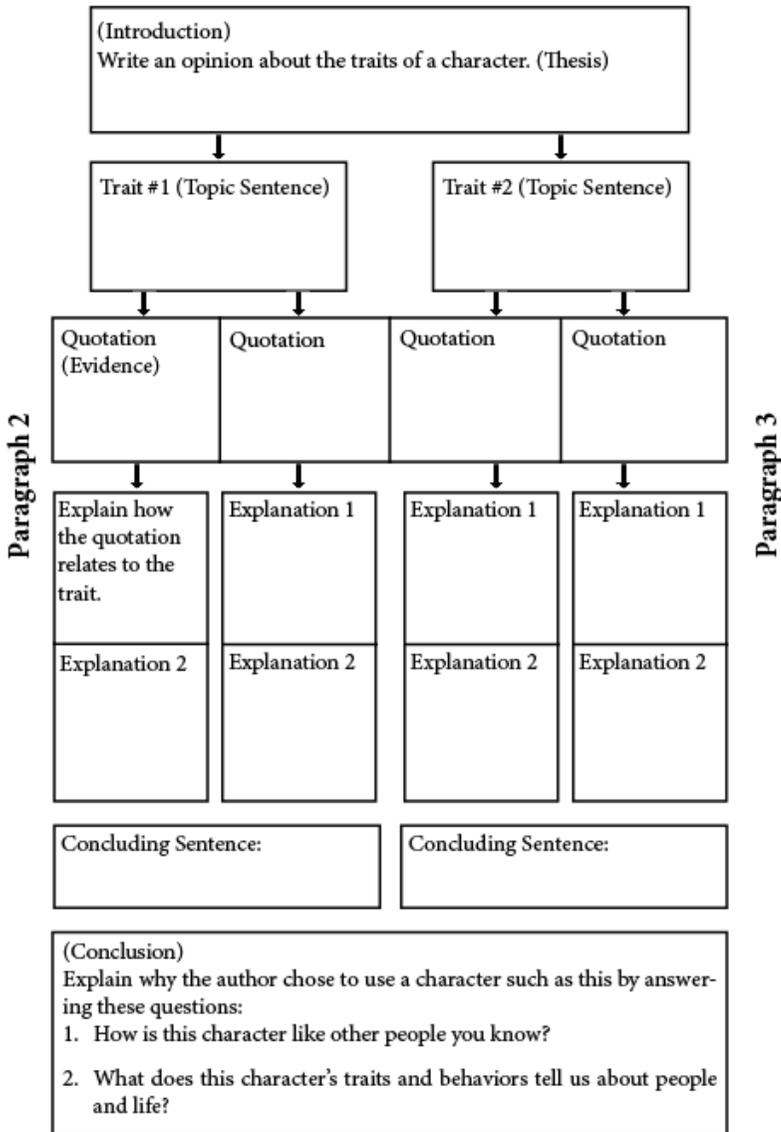


Next, the students organize the information in a format that will assist them in writing a character analysis essay. The learning standards related to the essay section of the exam require students to “support important ideas and viewpoints through accurate and detailed references to the text or to other works” and to “structure ideas and arguments in a sustained and logical fashion” (CDE, 2007, p. 226).

I developed a character analysis essay flow chart after collaborating with English teachers (see Figure 2). This chart follows the basic essay format required of 9th- and 10th-graders at the school site. The major focus is on the body paragraphs: topic sentences, supporting evidence from the text, supporting explanations following each piece of evidence, and concluding sentences. The team of teachers adapted this format from Jane Schaffer’s (1995) multiparagraph essay. However, the chart may be easily modified to align with other essay structures as appropriate.

Students are able to effectively structure and support their ideas in a clear manner with this chart. Some students have mentioned that they sketch this chart when organizing essays for other classes as well as for exams. One student, who is an English language learner and enrolled in an exit exam-preparation course, shared with me that the chart helped her write and organize ideas be-

**Figure 2**  
**Character Analysis Essay Flow Chart**



fore she forgot them. She and her English teacher showed me two of her recent essays in which her organization and flow of ideas resulted in longer and more detailed essays.

The use of standards-based materials should enhance student engagement. As a result, student performance and achievement on the skills found within the standards will improve. The next component, authentic applications, is es-

sential to the success of standards-based approaches because students need to purposefully use the required skills.

### **Component 2: Develop Authentic Real-World Applications**

How do teachers motivate apathetic or pessimistic students to actively participate? Lewbel and Hibbard (2001) explain that applying standards to the real world motivates students because they see relevance to learning. They further contend that real-world applications foster critical thinking and maintain student-centered instruction. So, standards can be adapted to be authentic applications and performance tasks. Case studies suggest the use of performance tasks better prepares students for exit exams (e.g., Grogan, 2001; Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001).

A simple way to incorporate authentic performance tasks is to link the exit exam skills to the students' other classes. This gives the students a reason, other than taking the exam, to learn and use the skills. I often encourage students to practice the exam skills with texts from their other classes. When possible, I incorporate these texts into the lessons. Another method, especially for students who are in the job market, is to show specific examples of how the skills are used within their current or potential career choices.

Authentic performance tasks use verbs “that represent critical thinking skills such as *sequence, infer, classify, predict, compare and contrast, evaluate, and judge*” (Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001, p. 18). Teachers should clearly point out that these verbs are often used in standardized exams. Students and teachers can identify these terms in released exam items and preparation textbooks. It is also beneficial to identify how the terms are used in the content-area classes that are required for graduation. Thus, it is crucial that students not only know the meanings of verbs such as these, but they must also know how to *act* them. I have found some reading strategies useful in guiding students to use the performance tasks. Table 2 lists the authentic performance-task verbs (Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001), some reading strategies that promote the use of each task, and a brief description of each strategy. The reading strategies are explained in more detail in *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Then Who?* (Billmeyer & Barton, 1998, pp. 68-89).

Without the knowledge of using these skills, the students will continue to miss exam items simply because they do not understand the instructions. Conversely, some students will gain the few elusive points needed to pass the exam by regularly applying the authentic performance skills that are found across the content areas. For this reason, I make it a point to include the authentic performance skills in conjunction with the reading strategies throughout all of the units and activities.

Students become more engaged when they see the same skills and terms repeated in their core classes. Consequently, they begin to experience more success in their other classes and exams. This takes their learning beyond “passing the exam” to “graduating from high school,” which is much more relevant to their current worldview.

**Table 2**  
**Authentic Performance Tasks and Reading Strategies**

<i>Performance tasks</i>	<i>Reading strategies</i>	<i>Brief descriptions</i>
sequence	Story Frame (p. 95)	A fill-in-the blank writing activity in which the academic terminology is available and the student fills in the specific information from the story
	Story Maps (pp. 97-101)	A graphic organizer with spaces for students to write the major parts of a story such as characters, events, conflicts, and setting
infer	Make inferences based on the information in story maps or semantics maps.	The teacher may guide students through a series of questions to help students make inferences.
classify	Semantic Mapping (pp. 82-84)	Use a chart or web to visually categorize words and concepts.
	Word Sorts (p. 89)	Students sort words according to characteristics and/or word families.
predict	Probable Passages (p. 93)	The students predict a story by writing a summary based on key terms from the story chosen by the teacher.
	Directed Reading/ Thinking Activity (p. 107-108)	The students develop predictions of text by reading the title, a few lines, and pictures in a text.
compare and contrast	Venn Diagram (pp. 102-103)	Venn diagrams are overlapping circles representing concepts or objects. Similarities are listed in the overlapping areas and differences in the nonoverlapping areas.
	Semantic Feature Analysis (pp. 79-81)	A grid is used in which characteristics of examples in a topic are analyzed for similarities and differences.
evaluate and judge	Proposition/Support Outlines (pp. 124-127)	Students identify an argument in a text and analyze the techniques used by the author to support it: facts, statistics, and examples.

*Note.* The authentic performance tasks are discussed in Lewbell and Hibbard (2001). The reading strategies are described in Billmeyer and Barton (1998).

### **Component 3: Increase Student Engagement and Confidence**

How can teachers help students increase their motivation and confidence in passing the exit exam? It is vital that students see and believe in the benefits of passing the exam. Bishop (1998) warns, "Some of the least well-prepared students will judge the effort required to achieve the standard too great and the benefits too small to warrant the effort. They give up on the idea of meeting the standard" (p. 2). Consequently, teachers must find ways to guide students to believe they will pass the exam.

One way to engage students and increase their confidence is to match students' needs with their personal interests and learning styles. Hartzler and Jones (2002) suggest this may be accomplished by providing a variety of options to students. Then, students will "stand a greater chance of finding an educational setting and approach that matches their individual needs, and becoming engaged learners" (p. 3).

For example, I augmented the class with a classroom library, Internet access, and regular trips to the school library. Students were able to choose reading material of personal interest from the libraries and texts from their other classes. At the same time, I was able to provide guidance about the type of material and learning activities that best met the requirements of the learning standards and the reading level of each student. This set the students up for success and increased their levels of confidence in meeting the standards.

Designing interdisciplinary units is another effective approach to encourage students to raise exam scores. This is due in part to the ability of the students to identify, apply, and use subject-area skills, concepts, and tasks across the content areas (Grogan, 2001; Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001). For this reason, teachers should use materials and information from a variety of disciplines structured around common themes through which students can make sense of the subjects (Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001). Themes such as exploration, conflict, and social justice are possible areas of study for the units.

I taught an Exit Exam Intervention course with students who were also enrolled in a U.S. Government class. They had assignments and projects that often required reports on historical figures. I noticed many students would cut and paste information from the Internet. In response, I designed a unit based on historical figures and their contributions to the US. The students categorized their information into subheadings such as accomplishments, character traits, conflicts, quotations, and motives. They used a web similar to that in Figure 1. Then, they analyzed the information and formed opinion statements (theses) about the people by using the Character Analysis Essay Flow Chart (see Figure 2). Finally, they were able to use their organized information to create thoughtful and analytical projects and essays.

This process increased their confidence to "synthesize the content from several sources or works by a single author dealing with a single issue; paraphrase the ideas and connect them to other sources and related topics to demonstrate comprehension" (CDE, 2007, p. 223). As a result, their U.S. Government class grades improved as did their literary analysis and essay scores on the exit exam.

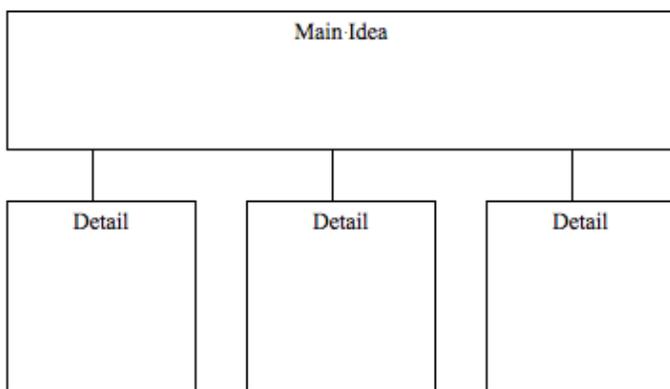
#### **Component 4: Use Authentic Student-Centered Assessments**

How often should the students be assessed? The answer, quite simply, is daily. This does not mean giving daily multiple-choice or essay tests. Tests and essays are only two of the many types of classroom assessments. McTighe and O'Connor (2005) encouraged teachers to use a variety of assessments that “enable students to apply their learning thoughtfully and flexibly, thereby demonstrating their understanding of the content standards” (p. 12). This will allow teachers to better assess the progress of each student and to effectively differentiate the instruction.

It is difficult to accurately identify the students' thought processes through multiple-choice exams only. So, teachers should use strategies that identify possible misconceptions and show how each of the students thinks (Herman & Baker, 2005). The strategies and text interactions previously discussed, such as the character analysis web and flow chart, may be used for these purposes.

Furthermore, formative assessments must align to the standards and provide ongoing, meaningful, and purposeful feedback to the students (Grogan, 2001; McTighe & O'Connor, 2005). In my intervention classes, I assigned graphic organizers with which the students analyzed texts similar to those in their other classes. For example, I made a chart of four boxes (see Figure 3). One box was labeled “Main Idea.” I placed three more boxes beneath the first and labeled them “Details.” The students read short passages and wrote the main idea and details of each passage in the boxes. I was able to scan their work and quickly assess their understanding of the concepts. I found, by assessing their graphic organizers, a majority of my students confused the concept of main idea with theme. Then, I was able to give immediate feedback, clarify the concepts, and reteach as necessary.

**Figure 3**  
**Text Analysis Chart**



Periodic multiple-choice assessments also play an important role. Baldwin, Readence, and Bean (2004) suggested the use of mirror assessments that reflect the format of the statewide exam to prepare students. I worked with a team of English teachers to generate standards-based diagnostic assessments that re-

flect the state's English language arts standards (Herman & Baker, 2005). Each diagnostic assessment includes multiple-choice items and an essay prompt that follow the format of the California High School Exit Exam (Baldwin et al., 2004). However, the team of teachers decided to make the assessments shorter than the actual exit exam because of the issue of time within a class period. They did keep the ratio of questions to each testing strand nearly the same as it is in the exit exam. The team used the Edusoft Assessment Management System (2006) to generate the assessments to make sure the test items were standards based and followed the same format as the exit-exam test items. The purpose of the diagnostic assessments is to help both the teachers and students understand the nature and format of the exam. Additionally, they serve as formative assessments to help the teachers and students develop effective test-taking strategies (Baldwin et al., 2004).

Finally, the team developed a student diagnostic score-analysis grid to promote the value of using data to inform learning (see Figure 4). The students color in the item numbers that were answered correctly. This gives them a visual representation of their strengths and weaknesses. Then, we added reflection questions to give the opportunity for students to self-reflect and develop an individual action plan.

The teacher is likely to identify areas of strength and weakness in the skills and thought processes of each student by using performance tasks and mirror assessments. Accordingly, teachers should assess often and use daily activities to inform instruction. This will help ensure the students get the foundational skills necessary for success both in class and on exit exams. Of course, the performance tasks and diagnostic assessments ought to be continually monitored and improved (Herman & Baker, 2005).

### **Component 5: Provide Opportunity to Learn**

How can schools provide an opportunity to learn when students' attendance rates are low? School attendance highly influences the effectiveness of an exam preparation program and the success of students on exit exams. Goldschmidt and Martinez-Fernandez (2004) share a startling statistic that highlights the grave importance of attendance as it relates to the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE):

The results ... indicate that there is a statistically significant effect for attendance. In fact, there is a 10 percentage point difference in the chances of passing the CAHSEE ... between high attending and low attending students. That is, among students in the same grade, students attending class more regularly have greater chances of passing the CAHSEE. (p. 14)

This school attendance issue poses the danger of becoming an academically destructive cycle for students, especially if they are academically behind. Nichols (2003) explains, "First, school absences become more frequent through the years for students who struggle academically. By the time failing students become juniors or seniors, they are often absent twice as frequently as several

**Figure 4**  
**CAHSEE Diagnostic Score Analysis**

<i>Strands</i>	<i>Item numbers</i>						<i>% correct</i>	
Word analysis	1			2			/2 = %	
Reading comprehension	3	4	5	6	7	8	/6 = %	
Literary response and analysis	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	/7 = %
Writing strategies	16		17	18	19	20		/5 = %
Written and oral language	21		22	23	24	25		/5 = %
Writing applications (Essay)	1		2		3		4	Pass (3/4) Fail (1/2)

REFLECTION:

My strong areas are:

My areas to improve are:

At this time I will probably PASS / FAIL the CAHSEE.

I will do the following to prepare for the CAHSEE:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

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years earlier” (p. 114). In other words, the absences of a low-performing student put the student further behind. Out of frustration, the student is likely to choose to miss more days and perpetuate the cycle.

I had the opportunity to visit the family of one of my students to discuss the family's perspectives on how teachers may help him succeed academically. The family members expressed insights relating to the student's motivation to attend classes. The student's name, Alvaro, has been changed to protect his confidentiality. He and his mother lived with his uncle's family in a suburban ranch house.

At the time of the interview, Alvaro was 15 years old and in the 10th grade. His reading level was below basic, according to his standardized test scores, and he did not pass the CAHSEE the first time. I was interested in how the interactions in his classes were affecting his academic achievement and attendance.

During the discussion, Alvaro encouraged teachers to "come towards me and ask questions a lot to see if I understand." He said that because he sits in the back, one teacher "tells you what to do then comes back and says hurry up and gets mad at you for doing nothing." Alvaro's aunt and his cousin, a graduate of the same school, added their perspectives on factors that may have influenced Alvaro's attendance and motivation. At this time, Alvaro was called outside to help his uncle mend a fence. Alvaro's cousin explained that some teachers weren't very patient and tried to rush through lessons while focusing on only the students who were doing well. His aunt emphasized the importance of allowing Alvaro time to process information and complete assignments.

Aunt: I know there are some teachers who want to help. But there are also teachers who don't. I know there are students who are afraid to go and ask. If he's pushed or rushed, he's not interested anymore. He's afraid to go.

Cousin: If you tell him something, teachers have to be careful what they tell him. Anything that hurts his feelings, he can't forget about it.

Aunt: Then he says, "I won't go anymore."

Cousin: Forget it. Yeah.

It is important to carefully and deliberately take into consideration the educational and lifestyle needs of each student, such as Alvaro, when planning programs. The attendance issue will become more of a negative issue without such careful planning. WestEd (2003) recommends, "When scheduling programs, districts and schools must consider students' family and employment responsibilities, which can make after-school or summer attendance difficult for many" (p. 2). For example, Alvaro had family responsibilities on the ranch such as mending fences. Other students may have after-school employment to help support their families.

Alvaro's family further suggested making classes less frightening and increasing the approachability of the teachers. The teachers can play a vital role in planning exit exam remediation programs by establishing relationships with the students. This may be done simply by speaking with and listening to the students and their families, as was done with Alvaro and his family. Through the relationships, teachers will be able to identify the students' lifestyle needs and share them with other teachers and administrators. This information will

prove essential in the planning process. It will also make courses less intimidating because students will feel a part of the planning process.

This takes us back to the availability of resources. Students can be given the opportunity to learn through a variety of choices. For instance, students who work after school may attend a remediation course that is offered before or during the school day. Older students who have already met the other graduation requirements may opt for a computer-based or self-paced program. My school has implemented an online program, Revolution CAHSEE Online Mentor (Revolution Prep, 2007), as an option. The point is that there are options available for almost any student circumstance. That is precisely why we should begin with the student and tailor standards-based remediation programs around their educational and life needs. We have to do our best to alleviate and prevent obstacles that keep students from passing the exit exam. We must set our students up for success.

### **Set Students Up for Success**

The recommendations for a high school ELA exit exam remediation program highlight the essential components of remediation toward the success of the learners. The goal of the program is to produce responsible and successful learners who will pass the high school exit exam. Therefore, an effective remediation program takes into account the importance of each student's educational needs as they relate to their real-world perspectives. The students' educational needs are thoughtfully and honestly considered when developing and choosing exit exam remediation resources. Moreover, obstacles to student success are identified and current practices evaluated in order to develop an effective program that encourages active participation in the learning process. The successful application of the five components hinges on the belief that a truly effective program is first and foremost student centered.

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