S.T.A.R. Description

Student Training in Accountability & Responsibility

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Background/Overview

As the name *Student Training in Advocacy & Responsibility* suggests*,* the goal of *STAR is* to inspire students to take responsibility for their personal, academic and professional futures. The beneficiaries of STAR are disadvantaged students who lack social and cultural capital in American society and who may be low income, undocumented, immigrant, academically at-risk, and/or victims of trauma. They may also qualify as Dreamers, live in poor, unsafe, and gang-infested neighborhoods, and/or lack networking resources. Their parents may not be able to speak English and/or have the resources to best advocate for their children. STAR aims to offer and expand opportunities for leadership development; involvement at the local, state and federal levels in order to achieve change in policies and institutions; self-advocacy; professional and vocational exploration; college aspiration and preparation; academic support; resilience development; community responsibility and giving back through community service; peer and child mentoring; and networking. STAR also aims to improve the self-esteem of its members, instill in them a love for learning, and grant them a sense of belonging and connection.

STAR was created ten years ago by Rosie Hidalgo, Policy Director of Casa de Esperanza and former Deputy Director for Policy at the US Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women. The program’s link to Justice High School is Spanish teacher Ms. Maria Palacios. Ms. Palacios provides her classroom for the meetings, identifies students who may be interested in joining STAR, and informs the coordinator on school calendar-related events and school resources. While currently STAR includes about 25 members, its goal is to expand its membership and visibility at Justice High School and the surrounding community via the good reputation and positive impact gained through community involvement; bi-weekly publications covering STAR’s community engagement; referrals by school counselors, faculty, administrators and other staff members; and school announcements. Students need to earn their right to participate in STAR’s cornerstone field trips through community service and involvement, rooted in their interests, passions and talents. The attached Community Service Agreement and STAR Topics Questions that members receive at the beginning of the school year illustrate the STAR program’s emphasis on contributing to the community. The members also answer the attached STAR Pre and Post Questions near the beginning and end of the school-year so the coordinator may discern the impact of belonging to the program and the changes required to make the program better address students’ needs.

STAR members meet every two weeks for fifty minutes after school. Every meeting begins with a five-minute relaxation exercise and the reading of an inspirational text followed by a check-in where all students give an update about their community service project. The topic of the week/month is then explored, often involving presentations by guest speakers. These presentations are followed by student dialogue and reflection. Members sit in a circle in order to build community, a sense of belonging and equality, and group cohesion. The circle format also encourages members to express their opinions and become more eloquent and self-confident, as every member is expected to speak in succession. Meeting rules emphasize confidentiality, active listening, respecting others’ points of view and speaking clearly and confidently. At most meetings the students receive a list of books relevant to the topic being discussed.

STAR aims to take advantage of all resources offered by Justice High School staff. It has a partnership with Edu-Futuro for student college preparation and leadership development. Students participate in Edu-Futuro’s fall, spring and summer Youth Leadership Programs. The coordinator collaborates with Fairfax County Public Schools’ Mentorworks, whose specialist trained the students during one of the December meetings about optimal ways to mentor and tutor children, preparing the members for service as mentors of HACAN’s Morning STAR children as well as other children from feeder elementary schools. HACAN (Hispanics Against Child Abuse & Neglect) is an organization founded in 1988 to support Latino parents and children; and Morning STAR is HACAN-sponsored children mentoring program which has been in place every Saturday for the last twenty years. Moreover, Northern Virginia Family Services will give presentations on gang prevention, sex trafficking, and healthy relationships. There will also be a strong relationship with Justice High School’s college counselor and AVID coordinator. STAR’s coordinator will share with the students all she knows about the topics of goal setting, growth mindset, leadership development, school engagement, peer pressure, thinking errors, self-confidence, resilience building, executive functioning, organizational skills, mental health and problem solving. Finally, STAR members’ parents will be included in the program’s efforts. Edu-Futuro’s Parent Support Specialist Maria Mateus will soon start bringing the parental portion of the program to the parents of STAR members. There will also be an end-of-the year family event to celebrate senior members’ graduation and to hear their accounts of the lessons they learned in high school.