

Reaching Hard to Reach Children Through Equine Assisted Learning

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Over the past six years, Columbia High School in the East Greenbush Central School District, has utilized Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) to address the needs of students with learning disabilities and students at risk of dropping out.

Looking for ways to re-engage students who lacked self-confidence and had difficulties understanding consequences and accountability, we introduced a new way to look at how kids could thrive.

Our Equine Learning Program serves our school's alternative learning programs (approximately 60 students). These students have demonstrated a combination of at-risk characteristics including academic failures, school discipline issues, family or community difficulties, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and legal issues. Our alternative programs operate as a school within a school and include their own support systems (guidance staff, class principal and small class sizes).

The challenge when working with at-risk students is getting them to understand how their behavior, attitude and communication style solicits acceptable or unacceptable responses in a non-confrontational way.

Educators within our alternate programs researched the benefits of Equine Assisted Learning and how it could assist our at-risk kids cope with the pressures of school while keeping them engaged in our community and on track to graduate.

The program required us to partner with a local horse farm that was experienced in therapy and learning programs. The staff at Columbia High School worked with our equine partner to establish program goals in-line with our alternate school:

- Build self esteem
- Build empathy
- Gain confidence and leadership skills
- Improve emotional self-regulation
- Overcome unpredictable challenges
- Develop team building skills

Equine Facilitated Learning is a creative and unique way to help youth create positive change. Horses are uniquely in tuned to their environment and to everyone in it. They are continually assessing leadership and communication skills in the people they encounter. The horses respond

honestly to the vibes given off by individuals and give handlers countless learning tools to utilize with students.

The Methods

In the classroom setting, students learned about the history of horse and human relationships, the impact of body language and non-verbal behaviors as well as safety concerns. Participation in this preparatory class is mandatory before visiting the farm. Upon arrival at the farm, students have an opportunity to introduce themselves to the facilitator and get a general feel for their surroundings. The instructor shows students how to control their breathing and how energy can help a horse in the arena become calm and quiet. The instructor reviews several safety measures with students before starting the activity. Students then engage in a series of activities with each other including the horses which promote self-awareness, boundaries, and the effective use of body language to facilitate nonverbal communication, self-control and empathy. Students are required to keep a written journal of how their experiences related to positive leadership qualities. The instructors also ask questions on how the newly attained skills can assist them in coping with school situations. I have been amazed at how some of our kids have taken to the Program. Many of the students who previously resisted all of our efforts to get involved in school activities, gained confidence, leadership skills, patience, and generally felt better about themselves after participating in this Program.

Our alternate programs at Columbia High School continues to experience great success by providing meaningful experiences allowing students to reach their full potential.

References

1. Horse Sense of the Carolinas School Programs (horsesenseote.com)
2. Equine Assisted Learning (www.upreachtrc.org)
3. Photographs courtesy of Tracy Buyce

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