



Building a High School Future-Teacher Support Program from the Ground Up

Julie Good, founder

**The Rocket Corps
Rockville, Maryland**



Published by The Hoenny Center; PO Box 9388; St. Louis, MO 63117
All rights reserved. For copies: teachers@hoennycenter.org

Building a High School Future-Teacher Support Program from the Ground Up

**Julie Good
Rockville, Maryland¹**

Educators really do want to see students succeed. We wring our hands and scratch our heads asking ourselves how we can help the reluctant, or even defiant, learner. How can we work miracles to ensure all students are successful, want to learn, graduate from high school, integrate a healthy work ethic and strive towards future successes? This is a tall order these days when according to the Maryland State Department of Education, African American boys drop out 80% more frequently than their white peers and Latino boys do so at a 70% rate. Over one million students drop out of high school each year.² The National Education Association's Twelve Point Plan³ to stem the tide of dropouts includes the recommendation that students must receive more individual attention. How can we do this?

One strategy that has been successful in a Montgomery County, Maryland high school is a program called the Rocket Corps, named after the school insignia. This program places high achieving students as peer tutoring interns in classrooms that have underachieving students—students teach students. Students can be, and are, powerful motivators for their peers. They exert a tremendous amount of influence and are often amazingly successful with at-risk and/or defiant students. The focus of this article will be to explain the motivations, the methods and perhaps the madness, behind the Rocket Corps program.

In 2001, the principal approached me to start a future teachers class; thus the birth of the Rocket Corps (RC). The original goal of the RC was to provide role models and tutors to support

the students who were not being successful, who simply needed some extra help or attention. The program sought to promote a safe school environment, introduce teaching as a profession, support initiatives to close the "Achievement Gap" and provide resources and assistance to students and teachers. There was no program in place. I had to figure out how to do this from scratch and the task was a daunting one. The intent here is to supply some ground rules and procedures to streamline the task of starting a program that replicates the RC. I want to simplify the procedures for readers who want to start viable programs that offer student support and mentoring in classrooms throughout the school.

Basic Facts: RC today

Make sure before you start a RC program, that your Administration and Guidance office are on board and supportive of this effort. It cannot be successful without their cooperation and belief that this is an important part of the school. They need to aggressively help you and work to make it part of the school culture.

The RC program was developed to fit into a seven period day plus a single lunch period for the whole school. RC is taught during the lunch period, once a week; each semester is about 18 weeks. RC is a ½ credit, elective, internship class. Community service credit is also awarded to each intern and students may take RC more than one period of the day.

The class is open only to juniors and seniors; the basic requirement is that the student has a 3.0 unweighted GPA and has successfully completed the core subjects. These requirements helped to secure competent students and keep the numbers manageable. We began the first year with sixteen students and RC has increased to nearly one hundred now in the eighth year.

How to Begin: The Curriculum

I began with the firm conviction that in order for students to help tutor and mentor their peers, they had to gain a basic knowledge of the field of education. I decided to create a curriculum steeped in education theory similar to an Introduction to Education class offered in college. I also strongly believed that students need to do something for their ½ credit to earn that "A" so it was not just a "gift" class that would attract unmotivated students. Thus, I rejected the textbooks as being too discouraging and created a folder with ten articles. The basic curriculum first covered "Learning Modalities and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences." Students took inventories to determine their best learning styles and discussed what motivated them and helped them to learn. In the weekly classes we covered subjects such as ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, single sex education, autism/Asperger's/Tourette's syndromes, charter schools and school choice after first reading an article designed to accompany the discussions. We spent several class lessons on poverty and its effect on education looking at SAT scores by income level, global, national and local poverty and poverty in the school systems in America.

Typical classroom session topics: Rocket Corps 1st semester

- Interning challenges
- Learning modalities
- Multiple Intelligences
- Learning style inventories
- ADD/ADHD
- Dyslexia
- Single sex education
- Autism
- Asperger's and Tourette's syndromes
- Charter schools/school choice
- SAT scores and income
- Local/national/global poverty and schooling

Students taking RC for the first time are called "First Timers"; continuing participation students are called "repeaters." First timers met once a week during our school's one lunch period and had weekly written homework based on a hand out that I provided. They were required to

write a summary of the article, a personal opinion or reaction, and how the concepts in the article applied to their internship class or education in general. First timers also kept a logbook listing the date, the homework for their class and what they did each day. The last portion of most meetings was devoted to discussing problems and issues in the class where they interned.

Placement: The Matching Challenge

What RC student will work best in what classroom? I developed an application for students that asked for their grade point average (both weighted and unweighted), their areas of interest, classes they had taken, and request for subject area to work in if they had a preference. I also required a transcript; it laid out a picture of the student's classes and performance over the years.

To decide on internship assignments, I secured a "master schedule" from the Administration for the upcoming semester. I then put into an Excel[®] chart the teachers of all lower-level classes such as ESOL, low and remedial level math, science and English. I also included some higher-level classes whose teachers asked for a RC intern. This was listed by period of the day and included their classroom numbers.

With my school's master class schedule, my Excel[®] chart and my student applications and transcripts, I started placing students by matching the best-qualified students with the most appropriate available classes. Students strong in math might be placed in the lower level geometry or algebra class. Students who have taken AP Spanish might go into the on-level Spanish 1 or Spanish 2 classes. Almost all RC students can work in an ESOL class and I considered this one of the "plum" placements. ESOL students are eager to accept help and

appreciate peer tutors. RC students who made A or B grades in physics or chemistry would often be placed in science classes. Then on the first day of the semester, I gave RC students their class internship assignments and told them to go introduce themselves, observe classroom procedures and start learning names. Our first meeting was held the first day of the semester and once a week thereafter.

Details: The Methods to My Madness

It's the million little things that came up that carried the weight of the program. I communicated with my interns frequently via e-mail. I made two grids, one by last name, and one by period of the day. It included each of the interns: ID number, e-mail address, their classroom assignment, the teacher's name and the room number. That gave me (and everyone else including the guidance department, the administration and the attendance office) easy reference to everyone's location during each period. Then I established a mailing list on my e-mail account. Articles from the newspaper, announcements and reminders were communicated this way. Rarely a day went by that I didn't send out an article, a website, an announcement, a Student Service Learning (SSL) opportunity, a scholarship opportunity or some other communication. I made sure students are checking their mail daily by randomly requiring a response. I sent a link to a site about a certain subject relating to dyslexia, for example, and instructed the students to respond to me with their name or with an opinion. This became a twenty-point assignment. Students without computers at home had access to computers at school, which solved the problem of lack of home technology. Homework was assigned weekly and I gave full credit if it's turned in—grades were based on satisfactory completion of the assignment

only. I did not have a problem following this approach and students took the assignments seriously. It built trust to show students that I respected their thoughts and trusted them to complete their work. Late work was accepted and I tried to make it difficult to get a low grade in my class. I read the papers and wrote comments and questions to consider all over them. Sometimes they got stickers on their papers just for fun. A sense of humor always helps to keep kids engaged.

I made myself available 24/7 to my students. They had my e-mail addresses and my phone numbers and were encouraged to call or e-mail me any time they wanted to. I even "friend" them on Facebook! Again, I never had a student abuse this privilege and I enjoyed the communications. They sent me "YouTube" clips and links to sites they found interesting. It became an online classroom. I tried to be a role model to them and made myself available for any problems, both school related or personal. This is an example I hoped they carried with them into the internship experience. Mentoring involves more than one period a day. Mentoring is an activity, a commitment, a job and a desire to help someone else.

Repeaters

Most students who began RC in their junior years never dropped the class. Thus, "Repeaters" or "Second Timers" studied the same type of curriculum but covered different subjects. Additionally, we only held formal meetings every other week. Second timers studied stereotypes, classism and racial issues in the schools. They looked at the value of taking AP classes and whether tracking starting in elementary school is a good method of teaching children. We strived to design our "perfect school" so that they could find new ideas to help "their"

students. While first timers had to write a short paper on the "No Child Left Behind Act," second timers had a short project to do, too. This ranged from reading an education-related book and writing a review to watching a movie or documentary about education and writing it up. "Third and Fourth Timers" proposed and completed projects that they presented to the group, as well as learned to write lesson plans.

Keeping all the plates spinning

While this may seem complicated, it really amounts to being organized. 1) Know which classes will accept students interns. 2) Know what classes your interns have taken to help facilitate placements. And, lastly, 3) know what topics you want to teach them in the field of education as part of their training. You may choose those areas that you think are important for them to know and those areas that interest you. You must be the motivator; they will do the rest.

Make sure you assign written reflections to help you see if they are accomplishing your goals for them. At the beginning of the class they answered questions such as, "Why are you taking this class?" and "What do you think is the most important things teachers do to engage students?" As we moved on, my reflection assignments included questions such as, "What is the biggest challenge for teachers?", "What is your opinion of teachers now that you have seen the other side?", "Would you recommend this class to a friend?", "What have you learned this

Typical classroom topics for advanced RC students

Second semester

- Interning challenges
- Stereotypes and schooling effects
- Classism
- Racial issues
- Tracking
- AP classes
- Design a "perfect school"
- No Child Left Behind
- Book/film reviews

Third and fourth semesters

- Interning challenges
- Special topics
- Student-proposed projects
- Lesson plan writing

semester?" and "Has this changed your attitude about teaching, peer mentoring and education in general?" Responses to these types of questions will guide any adjustments you think you should make in the curriculum.

Finally

Although the details of running RC consume most of my time, two other action priorities were important to ensure RC's success: recruiting and public relations.

Recruiting: Teaching this type of elective is unlike teaching any other high school class because I did not see my RC students on a daily basis. This meant that I had to recruit First-Timers every year. To find good prospective RC members, I talked with guidance counselors who are integral to the success of the program. They promoted this elective when working on schedules with students; and when there are scheduling problems at the beginning of each semester, they encouraged students who needed a "filler" class, or helped them make a schedule change to take RC. Having a good partnership with your guidance department is very important.

Several things appealed to these high-achieving students and enticed them to enroll in the program. First, it's an interesting class. Nowhere else in high school can they learn about the subjects we studied. Looking at the state of education today, learning about disabilities, examining poverty and facing the reality of stereotyping are subjects that have a natural appeal to high school students. The curriculum is "easy" (there is homework, but there are no tests). It's a perfect class for high achieving kids to take to learn real life, often provocative, material in a relaxed, open atmosphere. Because everything discussed in our meetings is confidential, the kids felt free to say anything and that really appeals to high school students—a safe place to talk.

More importantly, RC students love the peer teaching and tutoring. They love the "aha" moment when a student they are working with "gets it." They love shedding their fears and speaking in front of a class. Shy students suddenly blossom and they love it! Kids never drop this class.

Lastly, they feel like they are making a difference in the lives of their peers. No longer do they hold stereotypes about failing students. RC students lived by my mantra, repeated often: "Never underestimate the intelligence of a failing student." Time and again students had definite attitude adjustments after a semester in Rocket Corps. They learned to see their peers and teachers in a new, more respectful, light. Many decided to enter the field of education as teachers or policy makers. I had Rocket Corps interns coming back for recommendations after they left the program because they decided to come back to education.

Public relations: PR means building an attractive frame for RC with teachers, administrators, other high school students, parents and the general public. This took time. I first had t-shirts made for the kids with "Rocket Corps" embroidered on them. Only RC students could wear them or own them. This had a great deal of appeal to the kids because the T-shirts were considered "cool."

RC public relations checklist

- Meet face-to-face with cooperating teachers
- Make special ID card stickers
- List ideas for teachers on how to use interns
- Contact press/tv/radio
- Nominate RC students for awards
- Make a video
- Get on conference/convention programs
- Compile guest speaker list
- Write articles for journals
- Volunteer students for events
- Design and wear RC tee-shirts
- Keep administrators updated

I had special stickers for their ID cards to let them at the front of the lunch line on meeting day so they would be on time. I "moved into" the guidance office at scheduling time to meet kids and

invite them into RC.

Rocket Corps did not become popular overnight. I spoke to teachers and enlisted the cooperation of teachers with low-level classes. I wrote lists of ideas for interns and teachers to help make suggestions of things interns could do in the classes. I sought out the press and took every opportunity to publicize my program and my students. I nominated them for awards; and even if they didn't win, they were pleased with the nomination. I made a video about the program and taught workshops at the Blue Ribbon Schools Conference and at county teaching seminars. I started a guest speaker series with journalists, politicians, and school board members (among others) and this helped me to make connections and get noticed by the press. I submitted articles to journals. I volunteered my students for every event at school that needed volunteers and had them wear their RC T-shirts. I did everything I could to get RC noticed and to make my students know how important they were to our school and community.

It worked; not immediately, but it worked. The program has grown to the point where I had to limit the number of students—and I did this as a part time employee. My position was a little over half time. Yes, I did work at home. Yes, it would have been best to work full time, but that was not an option.

You can do it! The rewards are great because you will be working for a profession you love with the best students in your high school. The interns helped their peers stay in school by giving them extra individual attention in work that frustrated them and that they believed that they could not do. Interns assisted teachers, taught warm-ups, taught lessons, made friends, felt important, felt needed, learned about life, learned to speak in front of others, gained confidence and a whole host of other benefits came to them. I made sure they were not viewed as "teacher

aides" by making sure they were there to help the students and not the teachers. They did not run errands, did busy work, grade papers, or did copying. This helped make them a conduit between students and teachers in their internship class. Several of my students told me that they didn't realize how much they were learning until after they finished the class. Some said it was a "life changing experience." Many decided to enter the field of education and still others said that it is now an option for a future profession. All of them said "thank you" at the end of the class. I love them and I love coordinating and teaching the Rocket Corps program. Yes, you really can do it. Just ask me if you need help!⁴

Rockville, Maryland
March, 2009

¹ Hoenny Center note: *The Rocket Corps is a lighthouse program for future teachers, and should serve as a national model of what visionary leadership and hard work can accomplish for kids. It came to our attention through our national study of Phi Delta Kappa's Future Educators Association. In the survey, we requested curriculum materials and other locally generated guides that would help us build a richer picture of the practice of guiding high school students into the teaching profession. Fewer than 10% of respondents sent this additional information, and one of them was Julie Good. She sent a large packet of material that revealed a well considered, well run program for interested high school students. We asked if we could visit, and we spent most of two days with Julie, her students, her administrators, and some of her cooperating teachers. It was even better than the print materials revealed. In a few years, Rocket Corps became much more than the name of a future teacher club: it became part of the school's vocabulary. "Rocket Corps" was the term for both interning ("I Rocket Corps in an on level math class") and people ("He's been my Rocket Corps in Spanish class for two months"). If you have a program like this, we want to know about it and honor it at The Hoenny Center.*

–J. T. Gates (teachers@hoennycenter.org).

² See <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/dropoutguide1108.pdf>.

³ See <http://www.nea.org/home/18106.htm>.

⁴ Juliet.Good@yahoo.com