

RAPSA JOURNAL

HOW TO SUPPORT AT-PROMISE STUDENTS: WRITTEN BY A FORMER AT-PROMISE STUDENT

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Those of us who work with at-risk students know that they need extra love, care, support and guidance. Oftentimes, we may be the only caring adults in their lives and their only source of motivation to continue their education and go onto successful lives and careers after graduating. While conferences, training, and professional development can be great tools to develop strategies for working with and engaging at-risk students in their education, the only way we can really know what they need to feel supported is to ask them what they need. The article below was written by B. Isabel Velasquez, a 2017 graduate of YouthBuild Charter School of California, on her experience as an at-risk student and the work she is doing now to support current at-risk students. We hope Isabel's story inspires you to keep up the work you are doing and also gives you ideas for how to better support opportunity youth.

My name is Isabel Velasquez, and this is my story of transformation from someone labeled "at-risk" to someone seen as "at-risk." Although I was born in the United States, I was three months old when my mother decided to return to Mexico, where she raised me and where I went to school for most of my life. When I was sixteen, I received a phone call from a stranger who told me that my father was sick and could die, so I decided to move back to the U.S. to help my father recover and support my step brothers who were living here.

When I got to the United States, I entered the traditional school system, and even though I was doing alright in most of my classes and never got in trouble, I struggled with understanding English, and the ESL classes I was in did not help. My teachers noticed that I was falling behind, but they didn't seem to care. They'd tell me to come in early for more tutoring, but that wasn't helping. It was clear to me that they had too many students to worry about and they didn't make any effort to reach out to find out the source of my struggles.

Then, when I was 18, I got married and became pregnant. My teachers and counselors did not really support me or offer any care or assistance, and I felt unsafe attending my school with a baby growing inside me. On top of that, I was experiencing domestic violence at home, and I felt I had no one to turn to at school. I eventually stopped attending school, and after I had my baby, I found myself in a lot of pain since I was living in a place where not only my life, but my baby's life, was always in danger. My father was around, but he was absent and not someone I could turn to for support, and my mother was in a different country. I felt so isolated and alone. In the darkest moment of my life, I almost died by my abuser's hands, and my body was found by police. After going to the doctor, I felt I had no one else to turn to. I was isolated and fighting against my bad thoughts. However, I did not want to let my child see me in depression, so I began to focus on giving myself time to recover physically and breaking the chain of trauma.

During my recovery, I eventually met a woman who became my friend and helped me care for my daughter. One day, she told me about a second chance school called YouthBuild [Charter School of California.] I looked into it and decided to enroll. YouthBuild became extremely meaningful for me because the teachers were like superheroes. They were the true meaning of revolution, love, and care. These words are not enough to describe how impactful they were to all of us students. They planted seeds of knowledge, culture, leadership, and change into each of us, watering us like plants with the consistency, compassion and love of a mother or father.

At YouthBuild, my peers and I found a family that many of us did not have at home. I finally learned English in my YouthBuild classroom. I learned communication skills, and my social interactions and the way I dressed and presented myself changed too. The teachers would take the time to explain anything we didn't understand and were always so patient. They respected us and let us grow both emotionally and mentally, helping us transform into leaders. My teachers Mr. Scott and Mr. Steve unearthed in me talents that I always had but that I never paid attention to. They made an effort to discover talents in each and every student, and they would make sure we continued to develop those talents.



Isabel reading one of her poems at a school open mic and art show event called "Hidden Voices"

A revolution of love started in a classroom filled with humble teachers, counselors and staff who changed our lives forever. I gained confidence and learned that even small acts, as long as they were done consistently, could deeply change humans. They watered and took care of us like seedlings until we were ready to grow into trees that now bear fruits and seeds, passing down that same knowledge, love and care to everyone we meet. The snowball effect they had on my life and the lives of my fellow students will go on and on because that is what love, respect and care does- it is a true super power! My teachers encouraged me to apply to college- something I never thought I'd do- and they helped me understand all the complicated paperwork. I am proud to say that I graduated as my school's valedictorian in 2017 with a GPA of 4.0. When I look around now at all the students I graduated high school with, I see them thriving. Many of them have gone on to graduate from college, start families, and/or start a good career path.



Isabel (far right) celebrates on her graduation day

After I graduated from YouthBuild Charter School of California, I enrolled at Santa Monica College where I studied international relations and political science. Although I had to leave college to support my family during the Covid-19 Pandemic, I plan to return next semester. I want to be able to finish college, not only for myself, but also because I want to honor all those who helped me at YouthBuild. I want to show them that their effort was valuable. I also want to finish college to show my daughter that it is never too late to graduate and that anything is possible if you believe in yourself. Graduating college will show everyone who helped me all these years that every little thing they did for me had an immense impact on my life. I want to study for a career that will allow me to continue giving back to other at-promise students the same way my teachers gave hope when I needed it most. Currently, I am working at YouthBuild Charter School of California as an office and outreach assistant, helping other students with similar challenges to what I experienced. I love being able to listen to their stories, and my mission is to help their voices be heard so that they can get the support they need.



Isabel and Emily presenting at the 2024 RAPSA Forum

There are many things that opportunity youth need to be successful, especially because many of us feel like we are on our own with absent parents or no support system at home. Consistency, respect, care and love go a long way to help at-promise students. While it was helpful to receive basic resources like bus passes and school supplies and nice to learn leadership, life and vocational skills in school, the most valuable thing we were given was the respectful treatment and realness that came from the hearts of the teachers and staff. That's what really kept us going until we all graduated. Unfortunately, that is something that many students do not experience in school. I am so grateful that I had an opportunity to experience the transformational power of love, care and respect at YouthBuild. It's important for teachers to build a strong rapport with students and let them know they are a safe person to talk to if they ever need help. It was a relief to be able to reach out to my teachers whenever I needed support or guidance, and I knew I could ask them anything without feeling any judgment. My school was a safe space for everyone, where I could form positive bonds with my teachers and classmates and where we all lifted each other up when we were down.

Our teachers showed us how valuable we were as students and how we could make a difference not only in our own lives, but for everyone else around us.



Isabel (far left) at the YouthBuild Charter School 2017 Prom

I want teachers to know that there are no "bad students." When students act out or are disengaged, it could be because they don't trust their teachers- especially when they haven't been able to trust other adults in their lives- or perhaps there is a lack of strong school culture where teachers and students feel bonded and united in each other's success. The energy that teachers and counselors give out into their classrooms will be mirrored back to them by their students, so if you are radiating positive energy and respect, you'll get that same energy back. It's important for teachers and school staff to make an effort to actually get to know their students. It can be as easy as asking them to share their favorite food, movie or song, and then sharing your own favorites with them. After all, everyone loves talking about food, movies and music! When teachers open up and share with their students about their own backgrounds, experiences, and interests, students are more likely to open up to them in return.

At-promise students also need to see consistency, love, respect, care and patience demonstrated by teachers and counselors on a daily basis because we often lack that in our lives outside of school. We need someone who can believe in us, someone who lifts us up, someone who is a positive role model, someone who makes it clear they are there for us at all times, and someone who can understand us and lead us to the light and instead of leaving us feeling alone. Having someone who provides resources and education is helpful, but having someone who is consistently showing up for us and providing emotional support is critical. Many opportunity youth have trouble expressing their emotions and properly communicating, but by sharing your own stories and background, you'll find that they will start sharing their own stories and background with you too. They'll tell you what they need to succeed. They just need to know that you're a caring and trusting adult who consistently shows up for them.

I want to leave you with some questions to think about:

- What is your "why" for working with at-promise students?
- Have you lost the engagement or energy you had earlier in your teaching career? If so, why do you think that is and what impact has it had on your students?
- Do your students have a trusted adult in their lives? Are you that trusted adult?
- Are you showing up consistently for your students and showing them respect?



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Isabel Velasquez is a 2017 graduate of YouthBuild Charter School of California (YCSC.) She currently works at YCSC supporting with student and community outreach. She presented at the 2024 RAPSA Forum with her colleague Emily dos Santos in a session titled "Leveraging the Superpowers of At-Promise Students & Alumni for Recruitment, Outreach and Retention."