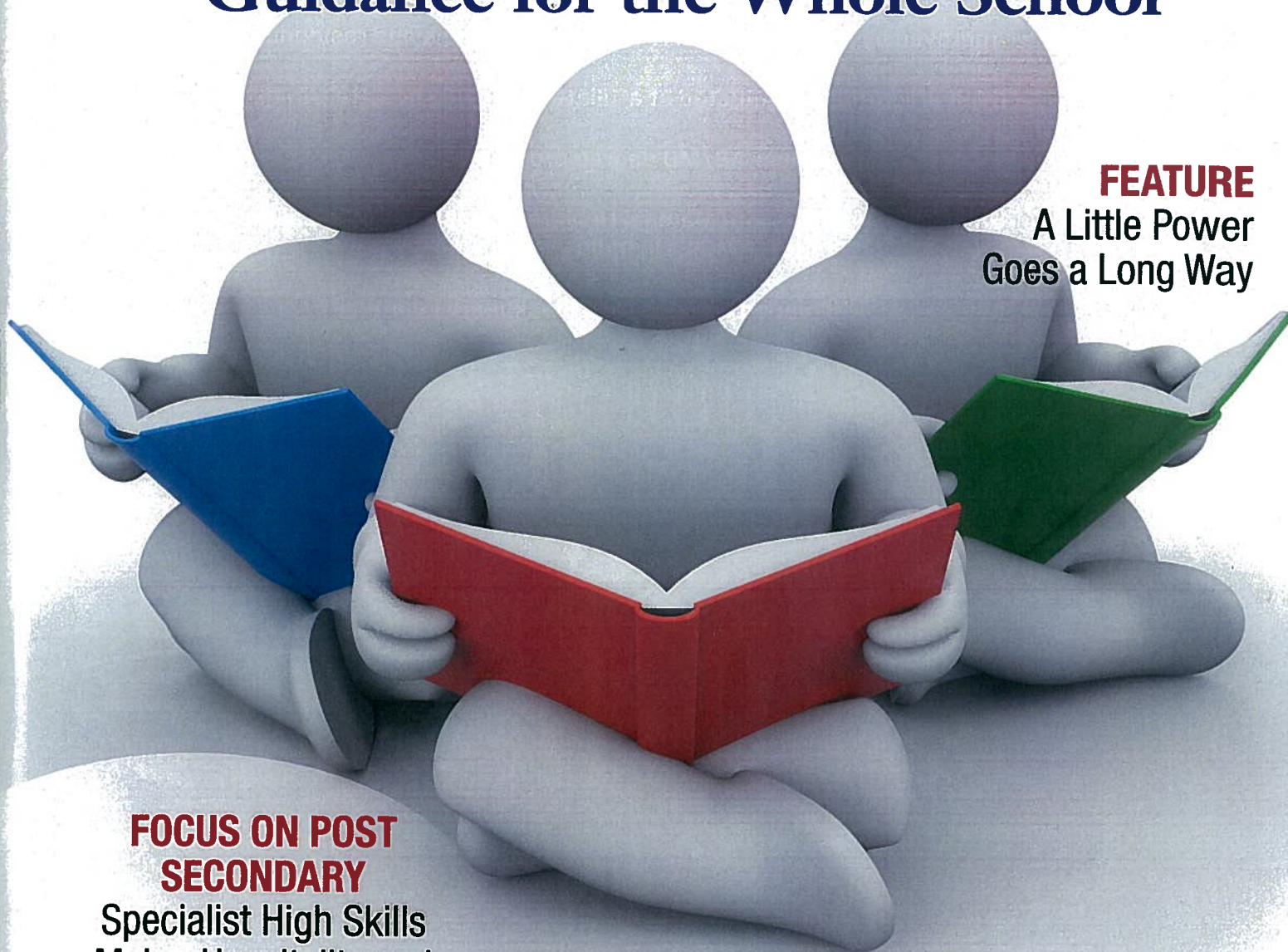


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FEATURE
A Little Power
Goes a Long Way



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A Little Power Goes a Long Way

By Doug Basso, Link Crew Co-ordinator, O'Gorman High School,
Northeastern Catholic District Board



Have you ever wondered how to engage students to be something others think impossible? How does a guidance counsellor reach out to a Grade 9 student who seems to be distant? How can a school ease the transition between Grade 8 and Grade 9? The two-word answer is: Link Crew.

Link Crew is a transition program designed to welcome Grade 9 students to high school... and so much more.

The message was, "We would like you to be trained in a new program that is going to reduce absenteeism,

eliminate hazing, and improve the school climate." My administration selected me for this daunting endeavour. I wasn't sure if I should be honoured or terrified. What were they getting me into? What type of program can do all this, in one weekend? I set off, not quite sure what Link Crew was, or what to expect.

The adventure began when upon arrival at the hotel I was greeted by a simple message on a note: "Be prepared to make a difference." This note accompanied a card and a Link Crew t-shirt that displayed the slogan that has become a labour of love for me and those in my crew, "Students

Helping Students Succeed." A simple phrase, but a powerful message.

I still didn't know what I was getting into, but I definitely was intrigued. As I left for the first session, I was greeted by a rather large group of teachers standing outside a ballroom. Most had quizzical looks on their faces similar, I am sure, to my own. My anxiety level and my excitement were both beginning to build. I wondered why we were all here and how could I change a school climate standing in a lobby waiting for something to happen?

As the crowd grew so did the excitement. The group would grow

to 250 people and then noises began to emanate from the ballroom. Loud music, screaming and yelling. I asked myself, "What is going on in there?" as my anxiety peaked. Then the doors flew open and my life changed forever.

The next hour or so would expose the group to the power of Link Crew. I would later learn that I would be returning to my school and leading the same activities that we performed as a group of total strangers on the first day of our conference. The teachers that had waited in the lobby were transformed into Grade 9 students on the first day of high school. Anxiety, excitement, and perhaps fear and trepidation are all feelings experienced by neophyte students on their first day of school. I would leave that first session feeling very comfortable with myself. I gained friends and made contacts with many colleagues. In addition to their names, I knew details about their lives and their families. This information provided intimate context for our new relationships and set the stage for the "Link" experience. My anxiety had diminished and I couldn't wait for the next day's activities.

The next two days would provide me with the tools necessary to return to my school to start Link Crew. The detailed analysis of the activities and the curriculum were instrumental in the successful implementation of the program.

2011 marks the fourth year that our school has been a "Link School." We have been able to change the culture of the school. We have helped ease the transition of our students as they enter Grade 9 and we have done so much more. The Link Leaders, the Grade 11 and 12 students who are responsible for running the program, are perhaps the biggest winners in the process. Senior students receive training so that they can work with a group of Grade 9 students. The leadership skills they gain through this training and the empowerment that comes with it change the climate of a school. Within two years of implementing Link Crew, hazing incidents had been eliminated.

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Senior students were touring Grade 9 students around and sitting with them at lunch. Students of all grades mix thereby reducing the senior superiority complex.

Link Crew training for senior students includes an extensive three-day session prior to the start of the school year. Students learn how to be leaders and they come to know their roles for the opening day assembly. Training is hands-on, experiential learning designed to break down barriers and build character. Senior students become mentors, friends and confidantes to a small group of Grade 9 students, their Link Crew. The relationships built on the first day of school are lasting. Many current Link Crew leaders are still in contact with their leaders from their Grade 9 year. Imagine a school where you as the teacher/administrator can pick the role models for an entire Grade 9 class. Link Crew works on this premise. You get to choose the students that help students succeed.

Link Crew is more than a welcoming committee. The "Start of Year" assembly introduces the senior students to the Grade nine students, but Link Leaders remain in contact with their crew members for the entire year. Academic Follow-ups are lessons that are student-led and taught during regular class periods on a wide range of topics; such as, dealing with prejudice, being prepared for school, managing time, and perspective. Lessons are timely and created in such a way that Grade 9 students learn through play and by reflecting on their own experiences. Social Follow-ups include activities such as movie nights, dances, floor hockey games or any organized event leaders feel would build spirit in the Grade 9 class.

Link Crew has changed our school in many positive ways. Empowering senior students and using select students as role models will enhance the atmosphere of any school. Peer pressure has many negative connotations, but it can be used for good purposes when directed in a precise manner. Link Crew provides the necessary instruction and the training that will prove to you that "Students can help Students Succeed." ♦

Link Crew is a program of the Boomerang Group. Information can be found at <http://www.boomerangproject.com>.

