

RURAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY WEBINAR SERIES

Effective Reengagement and Recovery Programming in Rural Communities



Communities in Schools Performance Learning Center Berrien County, Georgia

WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

Berrien County is a very rural community in Southern Georgia, just an hour from the Florida border. The county is large geographically with a low population density. Historically the county has been a major agricultural producer, primarily of tobacco. In past decades factories and textile mills have taken the place of agriculture as the primary employers. More recently, several of these industries have left or downsized, leaving many without employment.

WHY IT WAS STARTED

In 2002, Georgia Communities in Schools (CIS) launched the Performance Learning Center (PLC) model to provide an alternative setting for students not succeeding in traditional high schools. Berrien County School District and The Berrien County Collaborative decided to work in partnership with CIS to open one of the first PLCs as a charter school in the district. They were interested in improving their dropout rate and strengthening the community. The partners set out to provide students who had struggled in school with learning opportunities that were relevant to their lives.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

The PLC provides a unique environment for students who are in danger of dropping out of the main district high school. The hallmark of this school is the presence of a site coordinator. The coordinator works closely with each student to identify barriers that might be preventing them from focusing on their academics and finding the services the student needs from partners in the community. Students also flourish in a smaller and more personalized learning environment, forming close relationships with other students as well as the staff. In addition, the approach to academic preparation allows students to recover credits quickly using an online curriculum.

WHO IS SERVED

The school serves approximately 75 students per year. Students range in age from 14 to 19. In addition to students who are behind in their course work, the school prides itself in serving students who may be at risk of failure for many different reasons. For example, the school serves many teen parents, students who have a family member facing a major illness, and students who were passing their courses but struggling socially in the larger high school environment. Students are referred, often by a staff person at the high school. In the past few years the leadership has proactively reviewed the 8th grade classes, looking at test scores and grades to identify students who may be in danger of failure in high school and could benefit from the specialized environment at the PLC.

HOW IT WORKS

The PLC has a principal and five teachers specializing in social studies/history, language arts, science, math, and electives. Like other schools working with Communities in Schools, in addition to the school guidance counselor, the PLC has a site coordinator who helps connect students to community services. The Collaborative has relationships with many community members and organizations and has a strong board of directors. If a teen parent needs diapers, a younger student needs a jacket, or a student needs medical care, the need is quickly met. Filling in these gaps in each student's support system allows them to focus on their academic growth.

The school day is approximately the same length as the school day at the regular high school. They run on a block schedule with four classes per day. Two days a week the schedule is adjusted for enrichment activities and speakers. Classrooms have 20-25 students. About half of the classes are taught by the school's five teachers. In the other half, students use an online curriculum called Education2020 (e2020) to work individually. This online curriculum allows

students to recover more courses in a semester and get caught up. Students can work beyond the regular school day at home or at the library or other community location with internet access. Students also have the opportunity to participate in internship programs.

HOW IT'S FUNDED

The PLC is a charter school within Berrien County Schools. It is run jointly by the Collaborative and the Berrien County Board of Education. It receives per pupil funding from the district. PLCs also receive support from corporations and individuals. On average, 68% of PLC funds come from public and 32% from private sources. The PLC in Berrien has received funds from AT&T, the local Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, and grants and donations from the Collaborative.

WHY IT WORKS FOR A RURAL COMMUNITY

Staff members are familiar with the resources in their communities so they can more easily connect youth to the support and follow-up services they need. The Executive Director of the Berrien County Collaborative grew up in the community. The Collaborative has an active Board of Directors they can tap. If students need coats or eye glasses, the Board and other partners come through very quickly. Thus the Collaborative harnesses the resources of the entire community. They have been instrumental in building a community-wide commitment to supporting students. There is a strong feeling that helping individual students strengthens the community as a whole. Students at the PLC know the community wants them to succeed and this knowledge helps them build confidence and motivation.

CHALLENGES

- As in many other organizations, the Collaborative has struggles with taking on too many projects and trying to be everything to all people in the community. In the last few years they have been working to stay true to their mission and focus on what they do best--supporting students.
- In this very rural community, transportation for families continues to be a major challenge, especially for pockets of the population that live very far from any populated area. These families often become very isolated.
- The downturn in the economy has hit Berrien County hard. As in many rural communities facing similar challenges, youth often feel the opportunities they hear about don't apply to them or their communities. This sense of hopelessness is something the PLC works hard to help students overcome.

SUCCESSES

- Berrien County has seen an approximate 10% increase in the graduation rate from 2005-06 to 2010-2011.
- Across Georgia the PLC approach has had a great impact. In 2009, an independent evaluation was conducted by ICF International using a quasi-experimental design. On average, the study showed that having a PLC in district increased graduation rates by 1.3% after one year and 6% after two years across the district. Dropout rates decreased by 1.3% after one year. The strong impact of PLCs is particularly striking since each PLC serves only an average of 75-80 students per district.
- Berrien County PLC staff members have found that having an accelerated opportunity to catch up motivates many students to work hard. In the end they feel they have really earned their success which serves them well throughout life and builds confidence.
- Berrien County PLC students develop camaraderie at the school. Knowing that everyone there is facing similar challenges, allows students feel more at ease and be themselves. Strong relationships with staff in a small environment bolster this sense of belonging.
- In the last two years, the Berrien County PLC has targeted more 9th grade students. The smaller class sizes, intensive language arts class, and the other opportunities have helped younger students with the transition to high school. Many students have returned to the regular high school for tenth grade with the skills to succeed.
- Staff at the Berrien County PLC work hard to help students develop and articulate a plan for next steps after graduation. Many students are going on to the local technical college. Others are moving into employment or directly into a four year college.