

RURAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY WEBINAR SERIES

WEBINAR TWO



COMMUNITY REPORT CARD CONFERENCES FEATURED TIER ONE INTERVENTION STRATEGY

WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

Ware County High School (WCHS) serves 1,500 students in the rural community of Waycross, GA. Ware County, situated in southeast Georgia, is home to 35,000 residents. The high school houses several small learning communities including a freshmen academy and several career academies. Students have access to many state-of-the-art facilities and technology to connect them with the wider world.

WHY IT WAS STARTED

In 2006, Dr. Joseph Barrow, Jr. was hired as Superintendent to help improve the low graduation rate at the high school, which was 45% in the 2003-2004 school year. He and his staff first examined the demographics at the school to determine which subgroups were falling behind. They found that nearly 50% of the freshman class was failing courses. The team laid out a plan to bolster the whole 9th grade class by shoring up supports for struggling students, while also providing opportunities for high-performing students. Over the next three years, the school worked with a national comprehensive school reform program to implement many changes, including use of a common core curriculum and block schedule, professional development for staff, the creation of career academies, and involvement of the community. Report Card Conferences build on this work, and are one way in which the school continues to involve community members in supporting all students.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Holding Report Card Conferences is a high-impact strategy which is very simple to implement. It requires just a little preparation and does not involve additional costs or class time. Three times a year community volunteers meet with students to discuss their academic progress. Students have short positive conversations with caring adults from the community who encourage them and learn about their goals and support needs for the next quarter. This fills a vacuum as many students have indicated that no one at home asks to see their report cards. In addition, in the course of conversation with outside volunteers, students learn about career options, can see the value of coursework to future success, and are exposed to role models from the community. Community volunteers report that the experience is very positive and many participate regularly. This strategy, combined with many other efforts to involve the community, have led to a shift in attitude about which students are capable of success and the community's role in contributing to this success.

WHO IS SERVED

All students participate in conferences with a community volunteer, school counselor or other school staff person.

HOW IT WORKS

At the end of each quarter, except the one immediately preceding winter break, volunteers come to the school to meet with students. Volunteers are recruited through ads in local newspapers, flyers in local businesses and meeting places, and through support from community partners such as local churches and other organizations.

Volunteers sit in one of four locations in the school with about ten adults, including an administrator, a counselor, and staff member facilitator who can answer questions and distribute needed forms. Volunteers receive detailed instructions, ideas for interaction, and sample report cards.

The whole school completes the activity in 90 minutes. Each class moves through in 5-10 minutes. The facilitator directs students and maintains discipline. Conversations are short, lasting just a few minutes. Volunteers are instructed to focus on the positive progress students are making, solutions to problems, and encouragement. Students who are failing two or more classes discuss solutions and are given a recovery contract to fill out. The volunteer keeps a list of any discrepancies or questions students raise. At the end of each conference, every student receives a certificate with a star for each class they are passing. Certificates are all the same color to avoid any stigma by peers.

At the end of the event volunteers fill out a feedback form so staff can improve the experience the next time and are invited to stay to tour the academy or ask questions about the school.

HOW IT'S FUNDED

Implementing this intervention is simple. It requires little prep time other than a small amount of time from administrative support staff to coordinate the volunteers and arrange the schedule for the day of the event. There are no additional costs beyond purchasing some basic supplies to provide volunteers with informational packets and students with certificates for participation.

WHY IT WORKS FOR A RURAL COMMUNITY

Staff members from the school have observed that this strategy helps build awareness of the value of education in today's changing economy, helping community members understand that higher levels of education are needed for jobs that pay a living wage. Giving community members a chance to hear students' experiences, plans and hopes has helped create positive attitudes towards young people and the high school. The time commitment of just 90 minutes allows many community members to participate, and many to do so regularly. This activity has contributed to a shift in community culture shown through a growing commitment to quality education for all students.

CHALLENGES

- A small investment of time must be made upfront to recruit community members. After the initial investment of time many volunteers participate year after year.
- Privacy must be addressed and carefully maintained. Volunteers are trained on privacy issues and must sign an agreement. Students willingly share their grades and are always allowed to choose not to share with someone from outside the school. In this case students meet with a counselor instead.

SUCSESSES

- Every student has a positive conversation with a caring adult concerning academics. They also are exposed to adults from a variety of career areas.
- Community members meet students and to hear first-hand about their needs. This has led to a change in attitude about education and increased community involvement.
- The comprehensive approach at WCHS has led to an increase in graduation rates from 45% in 2004 to an anticipated rate in the mid 80th percentile for 2011-2012. The rate was 9% over the state average for the 2010-2011 school year.
- In 2006, 50% of the 9th grade class failed to advance. Supports for the whole school have decreased that number to 10% in the 2010-2011 school year.