

RURAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY WEBINAR SERIES

WEBINAR TWO



DROPOUT COUNSELING PLAN FEATURED TIER THREE INTERVENTION STRATEGY

WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

Dothan and Northview High Schools are both located in Dothan, AL. Dothan. Each high school serves approximately 1,200 students. Dothan is a small city in Southeast Alabama home to 66,000 residents. The surrounding area is an agricultural center known for its peanut crop. Dothan is the largest city in an 85 mile radius making it the commercial center for many families. Thus, in addition to the students who live in town, the high schools serve a number of students who live in rural areas.

WHY IT WAS STARTED

In 2007, there were 127 names on the list of students who had withdrawn and no one knew where they had gone. Julie Turner, District School Improvement Specialist (known around the district as “the graduation lady”), began an effort to account for every student at the school. The school reorganized their existing guidance staff so they could be more focused on this mission. They began tracking down students to figure out where they had gone. Now guidance staff receives a graduate tracking report each month. Certain indicators flag students to be proactively moved to a watch list. Counselors focus special attention on helping these students, meeting with them one day a week. This rigorous prevention and intervention work is supported through intense community involvement. Among other things, community members sponsor billboards encouraging students to graduate and a parent involvement specialist can be found visiting the homes of students who are absent, often bringing them to school. Once the structures were in place for strong prevention and intervention, the district took one more step. The dropout counseling process was instituted to catch the students who are considering dropping out and intervene before they leave school for good, putting in place the supports they need to be successful.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Previously students could drop out simply by walking into the guidance office, requesting an exit interview and signing a form, the minimum requirement from the state. Dropout counseling plans were instituted to structure the process—in effect making it more difficult for students to leave school. A more onerous process in itself serves as a deterrent for students while also enabling school staff to provide information and alternatives to students before they simply disappear. Students must meet several times with a counselor and graduation team, as well as write three essays describing their reasons for dropping out and explaining the plans for their future. They also must take a practice GED test. Graduation coaches report that many students view the steps required to dropout as more work than staying in school. In addition, the process is very active and takes place over a period of time; giving students time to think through what they want for their future and the implications this big decision to leave school without completing might have in their lives. Most importantly, at every step in the process students interact with caring adults who help them identify what they can do to get back on track or help them connect with the right alternative.

WHO IS SERVED

This strategy focuses on students who are considering dropping out.

HOW IT WORKS

When a student comes to the guidance office and says he/she would like to dropout, the student is first scheduled for an appointment with a counselor. The counselor talks with the student about his/her reasons for wanting to leave school and works with the student to try to find a solution or accommodation. If the student still wishes to leave school he/she will next receive and discuss with the counselor a packet of materials that provides detailed information on salaries and career options based on degree attainment. Next the student must write three essays. The first must explain the reasons that students wishes to leave school. The second describes where the student sees him/herself in 5 years, and the third details the student's goals and what they envision for their future life. Students then make an appointment at the media center to take a practice GED. After, they meet with the counselor to go over their scores and the implications. If a student still wishes to dropout, he/she meets with a graduation team that includes the principal, 2 or 3 teachers, the school improvement specialist, and several other staff.

Students are strongly encouraged to stay in school throughout the process. At whatever point in the process a student decides he/she wants to stay in school the student creates a graduation contract with the counselor. This contract formalizes their plan and is, in essence, an intervention plan. However, the counselors believe the term "intervention plan" is a turn off for students and want to focus on making the name of this plan and the process very asset-based and student-focused. This contract, and the entire process, puts students at the center of determining their future. Very few students complete the entire dropout process. In fact, in the 2011-2012 school year only two students withdrew from school—a dramatic drop from 127 students withdrawing in 2007.

HOW IT'S FUNDED

This strategy does not require any additional funding. When Dothan and Northview High Schools began their intensive efforts to prevent dropouts they reorganized the structure of their existing counseling office to focus on this mission.

WHY IT WORKS IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

While Dothan, AL is technically not a rural community, this small city serves students coming from surrounding rural communities. This strategy can be easily adapted for a school of any size. Existing staff can be reorganized to support students who are considering leaving school through the dropout counseling and planning process. This strategy relies on strong relationships between staff and students, a key asset found in many rural schools. In addition, the strategy does not involve additional costs.

CHALLENGES

- At times, staff at DHC has not received support from all of the parents of students participating in the process. Some parents become frustrated that the school will not let their child drop out of school. Therefore, staff needs to be prepared to work with parents, enlisting them to help encourage their child to stay in school, and when needed explaining the new economic realities that jobs that previously paid a comfortable wage are no longer available to their children if they do not earn at least a high school degree.

SUCSESSES

- Administrators and staff are committed to the mission of keeping track of all students. "I don't know" is now not an acceptable answer when asked about a missing student.
- In 2007-2008, 127 students were on the administrative withdrawal list. The comprehensive efforts at DCH brought that number went down to 117, then 30, then 3. There were only 2 dropouts in the last school year, 2011-2012.