

# RURAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY WEBINAR SERIES

## Effective Reengagement and Recovery Programming in Rural Communities



## Guided Online Academic Learning (GOAL) Academy Colorado

### WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

GOAL Academy serves students throughout the state of Colorado. They have 18 local drop-in centers. Eight of these are located in rural communities. Two more are categorized as suburban, but serve many students in more rural areas outside of the city limits.

### WHY IT WAS STARTED

GOAL was started in 2008 to reach out to “disenfranchised” students who were not being effectively served by their traditional local high school. Their goal was to remove any potential barriers that were preventing these students from obtaining diplomas and to inspire them to achieve and continue on the path to college and/or careers. GOAL strives to fill the need for online learning opportunities while maintaining personal relationships. Frequent personal interaction between academic coaches and students sets GOAL apart from other online high schools.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

GOAL Academy is a public online charter school accredited by the Colorado Department of Education as an Alternative Education Campus. GOAL blends online learning with personal connections. Using a laptop provided by the school, students work at their own pace using several online software packages. They communicate daily with their academic coach by email, text, phone, and in person. Students can also visit drop-in centers for academic counseling, tutoring, to work with the wraparound support team, or to meet other GOAL students. Students must be enrolled full time, but the block system used means a full 7-8 hour day is not always needed to stay on track.

### WHO IS SERVED

GOAL enrolled 2567 students state-wide for the 2012-13 school year. This is up from approximately 2,200 the year before. Twenty-four of the students served live in rural areas. If two suburban districts that serve many rural students are included that number increases to 30%. Most students range in age from 14 to 21. Most of the students enrolled in GOAL are high-needs, high-risk students who have dropped out of school. However, the school serves a wide array of students, including Gifted and Talented, students with disabilities, and those who just want to participate in the online learning environment. There is no minimum skill level required. The only students GOAL cannot serve are those that might have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that the school cannot fully meet or students who are about to turn 21, the state's maximum age for receipt of student funding, and could not complete the required credits before their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Sixty percent of GOAL students receive Free and Reduced Lunch.

### HOW IT WORKS

The recruiting period begins each July and runs through October. GOAL conducts a lot of marketing to reach potential students, through community outreach, television radio, local papers, and flyers. Enrollment has been growing very quickly. Students enroll online or through one of the 18 drop-in centers. Once enrolled, they take skills tests, receive a literacy plan, and review their past credits with an advisor. A learning team then develops an academic plan for the student.

GOAL follows a block schedule. Each school year includes four, nine-week blocks and in the summer students can participate in an optional three-week block. Students receive a minimum of 1.75 credits per block. It is not uncommon for students to work on one core subject at a time. Students receive a laptop computer free of charge, and GOAL pays for

wireless mobile internet access if a student does not have service at home and cannot access a drop-in center. The program uses a variety of online learning software that allows students to work at their own individual pace. The school relies mostly on NovaNet and Grad Point curriculums, while Think Through Math, Write to Learn, and Reading Plus are used to supplement learning and help students strengthen basic skills. In particular, Reading Plus helps students reach the 8th grade reading level—the level needed to use NovaNet. Students are asked to commit to a 4-6 hour block of time each day and to be on NovaNet during that time. Students are free to use the local drop-in centers as often as they like to use the facilities or receive tutoring support, but it is not required. Centers are open Monday through Saturday, including extended evening hours. Some students visit the center daily to get work done and to socialize; others work more individually. At the centers, students also receive wraparound supports such as access to mental health services from partners or help with food stamp applications.

Students are required to interact daily with their assigned academic coach. This communication occurs through email, text, phone, and in-person meetings. GOAL has a 30:1 academic coach to student ratio. Often when serving students in rural communities, academic coaches travel to a mutually agreed on location closer to the student, such as a local library or coffee shop. Coaches receive a traveling stipend to cover the cost of gas. Coaches are available to help students with any of their course work. Coaches also receive support from Academic Specialists to help them serve students' academic needs. Students are required to meet face-to-face with their coach twice a month and are encouraged to attend meetings with their parents or support system once a month.

Students meet with a counselor to complete the state's required postsecondary planning document—the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP). Students have the opportunity to enroll concurrently in college courses both in traditional classrooms and online, and many do so.

## HOW IT'S FUNDED

As an accredited charter school, GOAL receives per pupil funding from the state. GOAL has also received grants and leverages resources through partnerships with the business community. For example, GOAL receives laptops and other hardware for discounted prices from T-Mobile and Sprint.

## WHY IT WORKS FOR A RURAL COMMUNITY

The online environment gives rural students access to opportunities available in larger communities. For example, last year rural students used the video conferencing equipment at local drop-in centers to participate in a “mini medical program” offered by Colorado State in Boulder. Technology also allows GOAL to reach students who might not attend traditional high schools, such as the state's migrant population.

## CHALLENGES

- Transportation to the local drop-in centers can be challenging for students who live in remote areas. In many cases, academic coaches travel to a community to meet with their students in a convenient location.
- Access to an internet connection is still difficult for students in the most remote communities.

## SUCCESSES

- Since 2008, GOAL has graduated approximately 600 students. In 2012, there were 245 total graduates. In 2013, the program anticipates 380 graduates. Over the last three years 24-27% of graduates have been from rural communities.
- GOAL has partnered with the Board of Cooperative Education which serves migrant students in the state. After starting a pilot program helping a small number of students complete an English course, GOAL hopes to expand to serve approximately 100 migrant students. The program has purchased a 39-foot RV with wireless internet service to act as a mobile classroom and drop-in center outside of the areas where migrant families live and work. GOAL hopes to purchase more RVs in the future.
- Six of the 8 rural sites now have partnerships with local community colleges. More students are taking college courses through the dual enrollment option. Fifty-three of the graduates from 2012 received college credits. Some students have even taken advantage of the states option to defer one's senior year for a year in order to extend the time they can be enrolled in college courses free of charge.