

# RURAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY WEBINAR SERIES

## Effective Reengagement and Recovery Programming in Rural Communities



### Alternative Learning Center (ALC) in Haywood County, NC Waynesville, NC

#### WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

Haywood County is located in the Western part of North Carolina. It is bordered on one side by the Great Smokey Mountain Park and on two other sides by other Blue Ridge Mountain sub ranges. The county seat is Waynesville. The county is geographically large with a low population density. Some students may have a 1 hour and 15 minute bus ride to reach school.

#### WHY IT WAS STARTED

The Haywood County School district was very concerned about their dropout rates. In 2007, they had the 5<sup>th</sup> highest dropout rate in the state. They saw that they had dropout rates similar to those in the Charlotte area without the factors associated with more urban communities, such as concentrated communities of poverty and larger, more impersonal schools. The district opened the Alternative Learning Center (ALC) to support students who were not successful in the traditional high schools in the district.

#### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

The ALC believes that there is not just one factor or event that causes a student to dropout and there cannot be one solution. The school district alone cannot fully support a student so the ALC works with community partners – agencies, organizations, and employers – to provide supports students need to focus on and be successful in school. The school uses a blended learning approach, offering both traditional classroom and online learning. While some students stay and graduate from the ALC, most return to their home high school and graduate from that school after recovering needed credits. There are just under 200 Alternative Learning Programs in the state of NC.

#### WHO IS SERVED

The Alternative Learning Center serves approximately 200 students per year. Students range in age from 16 to 23. They are referred to the ALC by their home high school while they are under the age of 21. About 85% of the students are under 21. The students at the school had all either dropped out and wished to return or were struggling in their home schools and in danger of leaving. Some may have a history of repeated truancy or behavior issues, or they may be returning to school from the juvenile justice system. The ALC can also provide an option for students who were facing a long term suspension. As the ALC has expanded their capacity, it has become an option for students who need a specialized environment for a wide variety of reasons. Thirty percent of the students served have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

#### HOW IT WORKS

Students are referred to the program from their home school, one of the district's two traditional high schools. They complete and interview with the Director before enrollment. Once enrolled a team assesses their needs, both academic and personal. The counselor works with students to identify barriers to their academic success

and to connect them to the services in the community that will provide needed support. Staff also works closely with social services and the juvenile courts system, among other agencies.

The school uses blended learning. Some classes are taught in a traditional classroom. In addition, students complete other courses using APlus software by TE-21, which is recognized by the State Board of Education and aligned with state standards, as well as ODYSSEYWARE, which offers many elective and career-tech courses. Students also use Academy of Reading and Math and My SkillsTutor online computer programs to catch up on basic skills and supplement the curriculum. The school has an administrator, 2 counselors, 4 part-time teachers, and a teacher dedicated to working with Exceptional Children, as 30% of students at the school have IEPs. It is important to note there are several state laws in North Carolina that help make the ALC possible. For example the state allows for students to receive credits through demonstration of competency rather than seat time.

The main goal of the school is to return students to their home school with the supports and academic skills they need to persist and graduate. For example, a student might complete a second 9<sup>th</sup> grade year at the alternative high school and then return to their home school for 10<sup>th</sup> grade or a 11<sup>th</sup> grader might recover a few credits and then return to their home school to graduate. Some students do stay for multiple years and graduate from the ALC, if it is agreed that the alternative environment is the best fit. Additionally, some students are served through age 22 or 23. Once they receive their diploma, the ALC can tap other funding sources for adult education and help students receive additional training, such as completion of certificates or postsecondary courses.

## **HOW IT'S FUNDED**

The ALC receives 60% of their funds through the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Most of this funding is for youth, but they do receive some funds for adult education to support students who are over 21 with additional training opportunities. The ALC also receives funding from the state for their four part-time teaching positions. This represents about 30% of their funding. The last 10% of their funds come from the Local Education Agency (LEA). These local funds allow them flexibility to serve students that might not be eligible for services through other funding sources. Lastly, the County Commissioners Office pays for maintenance, internet service, and other building-related costs.

## **WHY IT WORKS FOR A RURAL COMMUNITY**

The community is small and the district has made a commitment to not letting any student fall through the cracks. The ALC is the right environment for many students who need extra supports. The blended learning approach—utilizing technology as a learning tool—makes staffing the program doable and efficient in rural areas. In addition, ALC staff knows the community well and are therefore able to connect students to services in the community that help address barriers to success and allow them to focus on their education.

## **CHALLENGES**

Transportation is a major challenge in this geographically large county. Many students take public transportation. If they have access to a car, the program can provide stipends to help cover the cost of gas from the federal WIA youth program funding.

## **SUCSESSES**

The ALC has had a major impact on graduation rates in the district. Since the inception of the Alternative Learning Center in 2007, the dropout rate has decreased by 64%. The ALC has graduated 300 students and recovered 3 times that number who they have helped via other paths, most returning to their home high schools after recovering credits at the ALC.