NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

Upson-Lee Learning Academy
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Upson-Lee Learning Academy

Funding Sources

Funding sources for the Upson-Lee Learning Academy were the High School Graduation Initiative (HSGI) and Thomaston-Upson School District/FTE.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

Equipment (Computers & Furniture):	$40,000.00
Salary:	Program Director (State Salary)
	Teachers are paid $25.00 hourly
Transportation (Fuel/Drivers):	Approximately $30,000.00 per year
Security:	$20.00 per hour

Scope and Setting

The project implemented research-based activities focused on seven key areas:

1. Systematic, early warning systems to identify students at risk of dropping out
2. Personalized learning environment with Freshmen Academics
3. Access to rigorous and relevant instruction
4. Consistent adult advocates (teacher advisors, mentors)
5. Intensive academic support
6. Social and behavior skills development
7. Opportunities to reenter school (Learning Academy) and complete secondary education

Dropout prevention coordinators, middle and high school graduation coaches, learning academy directors, and work-based learning coordinators are key staff involved in the implementation of the project. To maximize the effectiveness of the project services, a variety of public/private entities were added as partners: interagency committees; local churches and banks; Families, Youth, and Collaborative Alliance (FYCA); universities and colleges; other local businesses and nonprofit organizations.

Table 1

Comparison of Dropout Rate of Coalition and Dropout Rate of Thomaston-Upson Schools

Objective	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Dropout Rate for Coalition	5.3%	5.7%	3.8%	3.3%	Data Not Available
Dropout Rate for Thomaston-Upson Schools	6.5%	6.8%	4.9%	3.6%	Data Not Available

Staffing Pattern

The program was designed to include a full-time program director. The director's responsibility was to enroll students in the program after receiving recommendations from the high school principal and his team (Gateway to Educational Achievement and Reengagement "GEAR" staff, teachers, assistant principals, and counselors). Teachers were contracted to work with students and facilitate sessions using Odysseyware®. Since the program operates from 2:30 pm-8:30 pm, the district employed a security officer to ensure the safety of the students and staff.

Population Served
- Number of students, subjects, or participants:
     The program could accommodate 20 students at any given time due to a limited number of computers and physical classroom space. There is an active "wait list" for students desiring enrollment in the learning academy.
- Description of project participants (ages, grades, demographics, etc.):
     Students ages 16-20 were eligible for the program. Each case was examined on an individual basis and a graduation plan was developed during the initial interview with the student and parent/guardian. If the student did not complete the program by age 21, other community resources were shared with the family (i.e., GED literature, Technical College Certificate Options, DOL training opportunities).
- Participant selection criteria:
     The primary selection criterion was to seek out students who had not attended school in 60 school days and were withdrawn from Upson-Lee High School. However, this effort was in collaboration with high school counselors and administrators. The program director designed and distributed brochures to local churches and community organizations/agencies. The director initiated a door-to-door campaign for in-home visits. As a result, word of mouth became a very instrumental advertisement tool.

Project Origination

Jones County Schools, Georgia, was the recipient of a FY 2010 HSGI grant which began its implementation on October 1, 2010, centered at Jones County High School (JCHS), Greene County High School (GCHS), Upson-Lee High School (ULHS), and their four feeder middle schools.

The HSGI program, known as GEAR: Gateway to Educational Achievement and Reengagement, is guided by a single overarching vision: to tackle and end the dropout crisis facing our most vulnerable young people. To that end, the coalition developed a detailed management plan as a guide to provide research-based strategies and supports designed to ensure every student earns a high school diploma.

Prior to implementation, the district planned and executed this program after examining the school improvement plan, curriculum options, and the current school calendar.

Issues Addressed
- How to identify potential dropouts in the school?
- Who is dropping out, who is failing?
- When do they drop out?
- Why do students drop out?

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

The desired outcome was to eradicate the dropout problem in the community; however, the major outcome was to encourage students to reenter school and receive their diploma. The four goals identified in the program description guided the work of the GEAR Coalition with the GPRA and Program Objectives (Table 2) at the forefront:

- Increase the graduation rate at each of the high schools.
- Identify and encourage youth who have already dropped out of school to reenter school and complete their secondary education.
- Prevent students who are at risk from dropping out of school.
- Ensure students successfully complete the ninth grade.

The preliminary analysis suggests that the program had positive effects on decreasing the dropout rate for all districts in the coalition.

Table 2

Measurable Objectives of Program

Objective	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Increase Graduation Rate	74%	72%	70%	72%	Data Not Available
Increase number of students earning ¼ credits needed for graduation	88%	88%	86%	87%	Data Not Available
Identify students who had not attended school in the previous 60 days	196	242	103	107	Data Not Available
Increase the number of students two or more years behind in age and credit being served	202	135	127	48	Data Not Available
Decrease the number of students who were absent 15 or more days	24%	20.6%	18.75%	18%	Data Not Available
Increase the number of 9th graders promoted to 10th grade	79%	81%	84.7%	88%	Data Not Available

Strategies and/or Interventions

The team employed the following 10 strategies: Systemic Renewal, School-Community Collaboration, Family Engagement, Active Learning, Individualized Instruction, Mentoring/Tutoring, Afterschool Opportunities, Alternative Schooling, Professional Development, and Career and Technical Education to implement in the learning academy program.

During the application and planning processes, the district reviewed policy, practice, and organization structure to establish a protocol for the learning academy. Community partners were solicited and a memorandum of understanding was signed describing the details of the partnership with desired outcomes.

The dropout prevention team in each district identified, recruited, developed a graduation plan, and built an academic and social support system for all students on their caseloads. The graduation plan was developed during the interview with the student and parent/guardian. When parents are closely woven into the educational process, the students perform better in school and have a higher attendance rate, resulting in a favorable outcome—high school graduation.

The director referenced the students' high school transcript, standardized test scores, discipline report, and attendance when developing the graduation plan. The transcript was used to evaluate completed courses, identify the courses needed for graduation, and completed assessments. The discipline report helped to assign the best teacher, establish classroom norms, and identify patterns of academic frustration. The attendance report was useful in creating the schedule.

The primary curriculum for the learning academy was Odysseyware, an approved online learning tool aligned with the Georgia Standards, and it allows students to continue their studies from where they left off in high school. The teachers serve as facilitators and provided direct instruction when students were unable to grasp the concept in the Odysseyware lesson. The director modified the online curriculum to meet the needs of each individual student.

Mentoring was an intricate part of the learning academy. The most at-risk students were paired with a caring adult from the community who met weekly to motivate and encourage them.

Afterschool tutoring sessions were available for students struggling academically. This targeted tutoring was available two afternoons per week. In addition to afterschool tutoring, students were able to attend credit recovery summer school or regular summer school. Transportation was provided for all afterschool tutoring and credit recovery opportunities.

A summer institute was held each summer for teachers working with this critical population. The project director for the HSGI GEAR project invited local, regional, and national presenters to motivate teachers. This professional learning provided necessary strategies and interventions to help them better relate to their students and to develop that meaningful adult/student relationship. Teachers earned professional learning units and a stipend for attending this 2-day event. The institute included general sessions, keynote addresses, and breakout sessions for all participants.

College tours were provided to help students plan for their postsecondary education. Other strategies the team incorporated were: a small learning environment, biweekly progress monitoring, flexible scheduling for the individual student, and parenting classes for students with young children.

Project Timeline

The project was approved for a five-year period beginning October 2010 through September 2015. However, an extension was granted through March 31, 2016. The district will absorb the full cost of the program starting April 1, 2016, as a regular general budget line item.

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project

The love and compassion for teaching and learning were by far the most important aspects of developing and carrying out a project of this magnitude and creating a nurturing environment. Many of these students left school because they did not see the relevancy and/or had no personal relationship with an adult on campus. Many were considered "high maintenance" in the sense that they needed constant validation and a strong desire to be heard. These students have shared various risk factors for leaving school, covering domains such as individual, family, community, and school. Furthermore, the students' cause of dropping out of school includes the following three factors: pushed out, pulled out, or falling out (W. J. Jordan, J. Lara, and J. M. McPartland, 1994, http:// files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED375227.pdf).

Program flexibility is paramount to ensure students are successful. The traditional school day did not work for most of our students as they needed special consideration to care for children and/or parents, to maintain or seek employment, and other personal issues. Personal situations and family dynamics are discussed during the interview to ensure the best schedule is developed for the student. When students' situations changed, our program had the flexibility to change their course schedule instantly.

Parental involvement is vital to the students' success. Constant contact (telephone, home visits, and/or postcards) was made with parents to foster an open-door policy and welcoming environment.

Transportation was available to all students attending the learning academy.

Outcomes and Achievements

The main outcome of this project was to ensure students graduate with a high school diploma. New students are enrolled at various points during the school year. Enrollment is a fluid process and is based on currently enrolled students completing the program or dropping out of school again and moving on with their lives. The enrollment data in Table 3 categorizes students as dropouts (all students not attending school 60 or more days), students who had not attended in 60 days but enrolled in the learning academy, total students enrolled in the learning academy, and students who enrolled in learning academy and graduated.

Graduates of the learning academy have matriculated to postsecondary institutions, obtained immediate employment in the local community, or enlisted in the armed services. This program was instrumental in helping young men and women who would have been otherwise lost, secure a monumental first step to a promising future.

Table 3

Attendance and Enrollment Data

Objective	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Number of students not attending school in the last 60 days	63	63	51	35	22
Number of students enrolled in program who had not attended in the last 60 days	9	22	7	4	4
Total students enrolled in Upson-Lee Learning Academy	47	29	21	22	28
Number of students receiving diplomas/Graduates	3	4	15	9	6

Outcomes Related to School Completion and Graduation Rates

The outcomes of the project were more instrumental in helping students complete high school than it was in increasing the graduation rate. Many of the learning academy students are extremely academically deficient or overaged, resulting in them not graduating with their cohort. For this reason, the graduation rate has not reflected a significant change.

Current Status of Project

The project is currently in the final months of HSGI funding by the U.S. Department of Education. However, due to the significant level of student success, Thomaston-Upson Schools will sustain the learning academy program with local funding.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

My role as learning academy program director was assigned in Year 2 of the project. The program was entering the second year when I was assigned. The previous director was instrumental in enrolling the inaugural candidates in the learning academy. As I began my tenure, I secured demographic and academic information for students who were coded as dropouts. In an effort to encourage students to reengage in the learning process, I reached out to them through phone calls and home visits. Each student was interviewed with his/her parent(s) to develop a realistic educational plan. This plan included attendance, academic, and postsecondary goals. Highly qualified and caring teachers were recruited to help in this monumental task of educating these students. Respected community members were screened (through background checks), interviewed, and trained to become mentors to our students. The president of Mentors Unlimited, a certified professional school counselor, conducted all training sessions.

Lessons Learned

A noteworthy lesson learned was the importance of carefully planning and organizing the project to ensure a thorough review of the Intervention Readiness Checklist: (1) School or district capacity for change, (2) Community acceptance for change, (3) Initial, maintenance, and sustainability cost of the interventions, (4) Administrative capacity to lead the implementation of interventions, (5) Timeliness of the implementation plans and activities, and (6) Relationship of the new intervention to other initiatives currently underway (J. Smink, 2014, presentation from 2015 National Dropout Prevention Network Conference, San Antonio, TX).

Another lesson learned was the need to develop an Early Warning System (EWS). At the onset of implementation, the dropout rate was 5.9% (2009-2010), which provided a large pool of potential students for the program director to seek and enroll in the learning academy. As EWS were implemented (i.e., graduation coaches, dropout prevention coordinators, mentoring program, teacher as advisor program, and the 9th-grade academy) the pool of students dropping out of school started to decline.

The third lesson learned was the difficulty in seeking innovative interventions to keep students engaged and motivated upon returning to school. When schools consistently do things the "same old way" students will continue to disengage from the educational process. Allow the students to help develop their graduation plan and incorporate as much of their input as possible.

The GEAR team focused on at-risk students resulting in a decrease in the actual number of students dropping out of school. Unfortunately, the students who dropped out of school typically have multiple/complex issues when leaving the traditional school setting. Many of those issues also prevent them from being successful in the learning academy. The team continues to search for strategies and interventions to motivate these students to complete their high school requirements and graduate.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

Take time to establish patterns and trends to target specific areas/needs and incorporate professional development for the teachers because they are the first line of defense to keep students in school. Provide diversity training for your staff. Many of our students do not feel as if they "fit in" or "belong" anywhere so teachers must be willing to step outside the traditional atmosphere to help the students discover themselves. All students deserve a true opportunity to succeed.