

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

Alternative Graduation Pathway

Roanoke Rapids Graded Schools

Roanoke Rapids, NC

Jessica Elias

School Counselor

Roanoke Rapids High School

800 Hamilton St.

Roanoke Rapids, NC 27870

eliasj.rrhs@rrgsd.org

252-519-7236

Key Words: relationships, student narrative, alternative graduation pathway, traditional school setting

Alternative Graduation Pathway

Project Location

Roanoke Rapids High School
Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina

Funding Source

Roanoke Rapids Graded Schools local funds

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

The Alternative Graduation Pathway does not require separate funding to operate. The two participating high school counselors are employed as full time (10 month) school counselors at Roanoke Rapids High School. Their yearly salaries are included in the overall district budget.

Scope and Setting

The Roanoke Rapids Graded School District is composed of two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school in rural North Carolina and is one of three school districts in Halifax County. Halifax County is ranked among the most economically distressed counties in North Carolina. The population of Halifax County is around 55,000 with about 16,000 in Roanoke Rapids. Roanoke Rapids High School is a public high school for students who live in the school district.

Roanoke Rapids Graded School District requires 28 credits for high school graduation. These credits include four English, four math, four history, three science, one health and physical education, and 12 additional electives. This exceeds North Carolina's state requirement of 22 credits needed to graduate. The high school operates on a 4 x 4 block semester schedule. Students have the opportunity to earn four credits per semester and eight credits per school year in a traditional setting. The Alternative Graduation Pathway allows approved students to graduate with fewer than the elective credits required locally while still meeting the state minimum number of credits.

For several years, the high school counselors and administration observed that many of the dropouts fell behind in their credits due to various hardships. Interventions such as credit recovery, after-school tutoring program, and tutoring with assigned teachers during the school day often were not enough to support the most at-risk students. They often became discouraged and dropped out because they saw no way that they could graduate from high school in four or even five years. The Alternative Graduation Pathway was developed to better support these students and ensure they reach graduation within their cohort.

Staffing Pattern

- School Counselor: Jessica Elias
- School Counselor: Angela Lassiter
- Alternative Graduation Pathway committee: Student, parent, grade level counselor, Principal, Director of Secondary Education, and District Superintendent.

Population Served

Roanoke Rapids High School serves students in 9th through 12th grades. Students' ages range from 14 years old to 21 years old. Since the 2014-2015 school year, student population has increased. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were 890 students enrolled. There are currently 974 students enrolled for the 2016-17 school year. In the Roanoke Rapids Graded School District, 67% of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. At Roanoke Rapids High School, 50% of students enrolled are eligible for

free/reduced lunch. Table 1 shows demographic information (ethnicity) for the total student population at Roanoke Rapids High School.

Table 1

Enrollment by Ethnicity

Grade level	Total in Grade	African American	Hispanic	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Two or more	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	White
9	267	61	14	0	10	0	175
10	269	74	12	0	6	0	174
11	222	63	8	1	4	0	141
12	216	57	12	1	2	1	141
Total	974	255	46	2	22	1	631

During our first year (2015-16), five students were approved for the Alternative Graduation Pathway and all five graduated. Three of the students graduated within four years, while the other two graduated within five years. This school year (2016-17), we currently have eleven students who have been approved for this pathway. Of the e11, seven of them have the chance to graduate in four years. The remaining four will possibly graduate within five years. The school counselors currently have three additional students identified who are being considered for the pathway, contingent upon first semester grades. The participation selection criteria include, but are not limited to, attendance or truancy issues, chronic behavioral difficulties, deficiencies in credits, previous dropout status, retention in at least one previous grade, or environmental, psychological, or physiological challenges.

Project Origination

After attending the At-Risk Youth National FORUM in February 2015, the counseling team began reviewing student records to identify students at risk of not graduating with their cohort. We reviewed transcripts of 11th and 12th grade students who had been retained and/or failed one or more class. We noted that many of these students also had extenuating life circumstances that often contributed to academic difficulties. The counseling team and administration began to develop an Alternative Graduation Pathway. The high school principal and 12th grade school counselor first requested that the school board approve an Alternative Graduation Pathway in Spring 2015. The school board accepted the request, then researched and discussed the options before developing the policy which they formally adopted on June 29, 2015.

Issues Addressed

- How to identify students at risk for dropping out?
- What factors contribute to students dropping out?
- How can the high school increase the graduation rate?

- What supports can we put in place to ensure students with hardships graduate with a high school diploma?

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

Increase graduation rate to equal or surpass the State rate.

Strategies and/or Interventions

- Evaluate students' transcripts and progress towards graduation.
- Identify students who may be eligible for the Alternative Graduation Pathway.
- Schedule Alternative Graduation Committee meeting to identify specific student needs.
- Create plan for individual student based on their needs and graduation requirements.
- Counselors monitor students' academic, social, and emotional status.
- Provide counseling, academic tutoring, targeted interventions, and referrals to community services, as needed.
- Conferences with teachers and other school staff related to students' progress.
- Check in with student, teachers and parents to ensure student is compliant with Alternative Graduation Pathway contract.

Project Timeline

2015-2016 school year and ongoing

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

Since our local graduation requirements exceeded the state of North Carolina's graduation requirements, our local board of education had to develop and adopt a policy that allowed approved students to graduate with fewer elective credits than required locally for the general student population.

It is also important for the counselor working with these students to have a full understanding of the graduation requirements in North Carolina. Although students will be required to have less than 28 credits to graduate, they still must meet all North Carolina graduation requirements.

The counselor working with the student and family must be able to form a working relationship with them. It will be important to know and understand each individual student's future plan to ensure they have access to all classes needed to assist them with reaching their goals after high school. Students and families will also be sharing personal information with the counselor. The counselor and other involved school staff must maintain the student's confidentiality throughout the process.

Outcomes and Achievements

- Year 1 (2015-16): Five students approved and all five students graduated by the end of June 2016.
- Year 2 (2016-17): Eleven students have been approved. More students may be approved after first semester grades are finalized.

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates

- 2014-2015 graduation rate: 4-year - 82.6%; 5-year - 81%
- 2015-2016 graduation rate (first year of alternative graduation pathway): 4-year - 82.3%; 5-year - 84.5% (See Figures 1 and 2.)

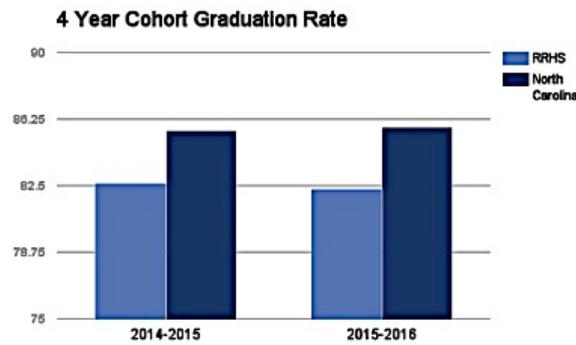


Figure 1. Two-year comparison of Roanoke Rapids High School’s 4-year cohort graduation rate to the state’s 4-year cohort graduation rate.

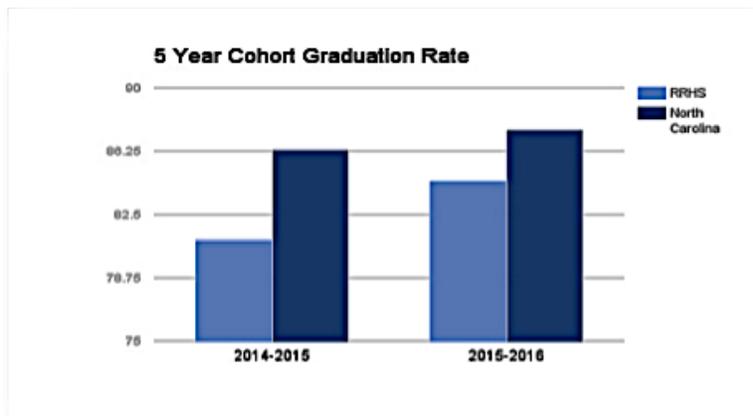


Figure 2. Two-year comparison of Roanoke Rapids High School’s 5-year cohort graduation rate to the state’s 5-year cohort graduation rate.

Current Status of Project

Information about the Alternative Graduation Pathway is published in the curriculum handbook and is given to all students and parents. More students and parents are beginning to inquire about this possibility prior to being contacted by the school counselors. We are expecting our alternative graduation pathway numbers to increase each school year. Currently there are 11 students approved and three students pending approval for this school year.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

I am currently the school counselor for all 12th grade students and half of the 11th grade students. During the summer, I analyze the transcripts of third-year high school students who are behind on credits. If the Alternative Graduation Pathway is a possibility, the student and parent are contacted in August to discuss the pathway and decide if this is an appropriate option for the individual student. As a team, we then begin the process to complete the needed paperwork. The student is required to write a narrative explaining why he/she should be approved for the Alternative Graduation Pathway. I explain to the student to only share information they are comfortable with sharing. Once I receive the student’s

narrative, I write a narrative about the student to explain the demonstrated hardships that make the student a good candidate for the Alternative Graduation Pathway. A completed packet includes the following: terms of agreement form, contract, counselor narrative, student narrative, analysis of completion of state graduation requirements, current grades and attendance, entire year schedule and high school transcript that includes attendance information since elementary school.

Once the packet is complete, I set up the committee meeting which includes the student and parent. I conduct the meeting and share the packet of information with the committee. If all are in agreement, the signed paperwork is sent to the Superintendent for final approval.

Upon receiving approved paperwork from the Superintendent, the student is moved to senior status. I continue to monitor the student's attendance and grades and meet with the student personally, as needed. I also depend on the teachers to alert me if there are any issues with the students.

Lessons Learned

- The students who are approved for the Alternative Graduation Pathway are some of our most at-risk and time-consuming students. Their approval for this pathway is not a "magic wand" that fixes their challenges.
- As more at-risk students are identified, an additional student support position dedicated to these students will be necessary to continue to provide intense interventions.
- We have added an Alternative Graduation Pathway Contract to the paperwork that must be completed during the initial meeting. The student and parent sign this contract and it states the specific conditions that must be met. It also includes the statement that the approval for the Alternative Graduation Pathway may be revoked at any time, if the specific conditions are not met. The specific conditions include a list of classes in which student must receive credit; regular attendance; active participation in classes; tutorials as required and/or needed; and no discipline referrals.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

We cannot stress enough how important it is for educators to develop relationships with these at-risk students. When relationships are developed, educators learn more about individual students' life stories and often become more empathetic towards them. Armed with this new understanding of what individual students are dealing with in their personal lives, educators become more willing to think outside of the box in their quest to find ways to help at-risk students succeed in school and graduate with a high school diploma.