

# **NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report**

## **BUCS – Believing U Can Succeed for Destination Graduation**

Buckhannon-Upshur High School  
270 B-U Drive  
Buckhannon, WV 26201

### **Lisa Heinbaugh**

Graduation 20/20 Regional School Support Specialist  
RESA 7  
1201 N. 15<sup>th</sup> St.  
Clarksburg, WV 26301  
304-624-6554,6 ext. 236  
lheinbaugh@k12.wv.us

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## **BUCS – Believing U Can Succeed for Destination Graduation**

### **Funding Sources**

This project is partially funded through the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) Office of Special Education through a new initiative called Graduation 20/20. One activity was partially funded by the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services. Some school and county grant funds were also used to support this project.

### **Project Cost and Budget Narrative**

The team had \$2,500 from the WVDE to use to support the initiative. Most of the money was used to pay stipends for teachers to meet after school to work on Graduation 20/20; \$500.00 was used for student incentives. The school paid for some of the incentives as well.

The team also received a grant of \$2,000 from the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services that partially funded the field trip described later in the report. County funds were also used to support the trip.

### **Scope and Setting**

Buckhannon-Upshur High School is a large, rural school located in Upshur County, which is in north central West Virginia. It is the 28<sup>th</sup> largest of the 115 high schools in West Virginia. It is the only high school in the district. It has one feeder middle school. There are seven elementary schools in the district.

They were one of 69 schools invited by the West Virginia State Department of Education to participate in a statewide initiative named Graduation 20/20. The goals of the initiative were to ensure all students graduate from high school with a world-class education, PreK-12, who are college and career ready and to improve the graduation rate annually with an ultimate goal of 90% for all students by 2020.

Specifically, Buckhannon-Upshur was included because of the graduation gap between all students and special education students in 2013 (21%).

### **Staffing Pattern**

Buckhannon-Upshur has one principal and three assistant principals. There are three school counselors, 55 teachers and 25 service personnel.

### **Population Served**

#### Number of Students, Subjects, or Participants

There were 53 students that were identified as being at risk for dropping out and were selected as a target group for intervention. Additionally, all students (1,021) participated in a schoolwide/universal goal to improve attendance.

#### Description of Project Participants (Ages, Grades, Demographics, etc.)

Of the 1,021 students in grades 9-12 at Buckhannon-Upshur High School, 97% of the students were white, 54.8% receive free or reduced lunch, and 13.7% of the students had an IEP. Fifty-two percent were male and 48% were female. There were 309 ninth graders, 255 tenth graders, 223 eleventh graders, and 234 twelfth graders.

Of the 53 students in the at-risk intervention group, 80% receive free or reduced lunch and 20% have an IEP. Seventy-one percent were male and 29% were female. There were 13 ninth graders, 22 tenth graders, 8 eleventh graders, and 8 twelfth graders.

### Participant Selection Criteria

For the at-risk intervention group we used an early warning system called BrightBytes that is being used in West Virginia. BrightBytes analyzes 15 different success indicators in the areas of academics, attendance and behavior to predict students who are most at risk for dropping out of school.

In November of 2015, the Graduation 20/20 team analyzed the report from BrightBytes showing those students categorized as having a high overall risk for dropping out of school. Of the 81 students identified, 47 students were selected for the intervention group. The team identified seven additional students for whom they were concerned.

### **Project Origination**

Buckhannon-Upshur was invited to participate in a statewide initiative called Graduation 20/20. They were selected because in 2013-14 their special education graduation rate was 61%, and they did not meet the state target of 70%. The graduation rate for all students was 82%. The goal of the initiative is to close the gap between regular and special education students and have a 90% graduation rate by the year 2020. In the last seven years, this gap was as high as 27% and the lowest was 5%.

An implementation manual was developed by the WVDE, which utilized tools provided by the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC). Monthly webinars on dropout prevention strategies developed by the NDPC were also used for professional development for schools participating in the Graduation 20/20 initiative. All the resources for this initiative can be accessed at <https://wvde.state.wv.us/osp/graduation.html>

To support the initiative and the participating schools, eight graduation regional school support specialists (RS3's) were hired to support the 69 identified schools. I am an RS3 for RESA 7. I am working with 13 schools in my RESA, one of which is Buckhannon-Upshur, which I selected for my field project. The RS3's attended an academy last fall with presenters from the NDPC as well as state department staff. We have also had many other professional development opportunities throughout the year. Furthermore, I was permitted to attend the NDPC annual conference and the NDPC At-Risk Youth National FORUM to broaden my knowledge.

### **Issues Addressed**

After a study of their data, the school leadership team at Buckhannon-Upshur High School decided to focus on the areas of increasing the attendance rate and improving student supports to reduce ABC (attendance, behavior, and courses/grades) concerns.

The team realized that their attendance was the lowest of all the high schools participating in Graduation 20/20 of the 12 districts in our RESA, and it had been steadily declining over the several years. This was very concerning to them especially after looking at the research on the connection between poor attendance and dropping out.

The team also felt that identifying and supporting those students that were identified as at risk through the early warning system should be a priority. The research they studied always came back to the fact that building positive relationships trumps every other strategy for reducing dropouts. They wanted the students to know that someone cared about them and were there to support them. They were hopeful that a mentoring program as well as some incentives would reduce attendance and behavior concerns, and increase their academic success.

### **Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives**

The overall desired outcome was to reduce the number of students dropping out thus increasing their graduation rates.

For focus area one of their action plan, the outcome was to improve school programs, policies, and environment to increase attendance of all students thus decreasing their risk factors for dropping out of school with the goal to increase attendance rates to 95% for the 2015-2016 school year.

For focus area two of their action plan, the outcome was to prevent identified high-risk students from dropping out of school with the goal to reduce the number of students identified as overall high risk for dropping out of school by 20% according to BrightBytes data.

### **Strategies and/or Interventions**

For focus area one of their action plan, they had several attendance incentive activities. They had weekly prize drawings for perfect attendance. One winner was selected from all students and the second winner was selected from the at-risk group. However, it was not publicized that there were two groupings. Winners were given \$10.00 gift cards of their choice. Also, to attempt to reduce the number of students being tardy in the morning and acknowledge those present, reward coupons or other items were passed out on random days throughout the year by various groups such as the school mascot, student government, teachers, principals, etc. Additionally, during the second semester, an attendance trip to a local state park was planned for those with perfect attendance during the third nine weeks, as well as monthly rewards for the graduating class with the best attendance. Posters were hung throughout the school to encourage good attendance. Attendance for each grade was also posted at the entrance to the school. Staff members made attendance calls home for those chronically absent.

For focus area two of the action plan, the at-risk list of students was shared with all staff members and a teacher adopted a student from the list to “silently mentor.” Also, to help build positive relationships with the students, they were taken on a field trip to West Virginia University where they learned about the programs of the school and employment opportunities on campus. They were taken on a tour. Before leaving they had dinner at CiCi’s Pizza and attended a WVU baseball game. All of the students were given a WVU t-shirt and during the game they were featured on the jumbotron! Many of the at-risk students had not “earned” a reward trip since elementary school and had only seen WVU on television, so they absolutely had the time of their lives!

At-risk students were also given the “BUCS Challenge.” Students were invited to take the BUCS challenge during a special assembly. The activities on the card were chosen because they addressed attendance, grades, or behavior or they were things that would help connect them to their school or community. Once the card was completed, they could turn it in for a \$10.00 gift. Parents were also sent a letter explaining that their child had been selected along with a brochure with information on tutoring opportunities and a list of important contact numbers at the school.

### **Project Timeline**

From September to November of 2015, the two main things we focused on were to look at the research regarding what we know about dropouts and proven prevention strategies. Monthly, we utilized the WVDE/NDPC power points to have rich, collegial conversations. We also spent this time looking at their data to determine trends and gaps and used data to identify at-risk students for intervention.

From November to December of 2015, we developed their action plan. The action plan was rolled out to the entire staff in December 2015 as well as professional development on “silent mentoring.” Most of the activities in the plan began in January 2016 and continued through May 2016. However, some of the activities aren’t starting until next school year. The action plan will be revisited in the fall of 2016 and revised as needed during the next two years.

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

The resources provided by the state department were extremely helpful to build capacity of the school leadership team. It was also of great benefit that they have a full-time graduation coach in their county as well as the support of RESA 7. I was able to continually provide them with data throughout the year, first to develop their action plan by examining trends and gaps and at-risk students and then later to see if the elements of the action plan were being effective.

Training on silent mentoring was provided to all staff. I also provided training to the administrators and counselors on ZoomWV-e and BrightBytes.

Time for the team to meet was also necessary.

### **Outcomes and Achievements**

For focus area one, their overall yearly attendance for all students is 91.84%. It has increased 1.34%. The attendance rate for students with disabilities went from 91.1% to 92.2% increasing 1.1%. Students identified in the at-risk cohort increased from 84.54% to 85.73% from November to May, increasing 1.19%. However, they did not meet their goal of 95%, which is the statewide goal for all students in all schools.

For focus area two, they reduced the number of students identified as high overall risk by 25 students from 81 to 56, which was a decrease of 31%. The goal was to decrease it by 20%, so they far exceeded it!

When examining the data for the at-risk intervention group there are many positives to celebrate. Of the 47 identified as at risk by BrightBytes, 52% improved their risk level score. Fifteen percent moved from high risk to medium risk and 37% went from high risk to low risk!

By examining their data for the at-risk cohort of 54 students set up in ZoomWV-e, at the end of the first three months of intervention 70% of the students had improved their attendance and 48% had no new discipline referrals. By the end of the year, attendance dropped to 51% showing improvement. However, it is still a celebration that over half of the students had improved and some made gains of up to 19%! Additionally, 29% had no new discipline referrals at the end of the year.

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

The school has had 9 (.8%) dropouts so far this year, two of which were in the at-risk intervention group. Last year, they had 28 (2.7%) students drop out. This is a dramatic improvement! Graduation rates and dropout rates from the department of education will not be available until the fall of 2016.

### **Current Status of Project**

The school will revise their action plan at the beginning of next school year and also revise their at-risk intervention group adding freshmen to replace the seniors or additional students as needed. They will be revising the challenge card to make it more attainable. They also want to focus on attendance during the first 30 days of school. Of course, they will be continually looking at their data to help drive these decisions.

### **Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant**

As a Regional School Support Specialist and the Graduation 20/20 Initiative, I helped the school collect and examine their data continually. I helped them identify their at-risk students and provided data at every monthly meeting regarding their progress. I assisted them in writing their action plan. I led the discussions regarding effective dropout prevention strategies during the professional learning that took place in the fall. I helped them to write the grant from the WVDRS.

### **Lessons Learned**

Writing the action plan took a lot of time and at first, we were too ambitious. We had to take several activities out because it was not realistic to accomplish them all the first year. Also, by the time many of the activities were to be implemented half or two thirds of the year was over. We ran into weather issues with cancellations and delays. The last quarter is so busy with testing, scheduling, graduation, prom, awards, banquets, and so on that things were difficult to accomplish or follow through on. Next year, we will start much earlier.

We were also not prepared for the negative reaction from some staff members and students. Another issue was the challenge card was not as successful as hoped. The goal for challenge card was not

SMART. It was not attainable and staff did not want to change it because they did not want to lower expectations for fear of sending the wrong message.

It was also to get staff to mentor students some of the at-risk students especially those with lots of issues

### **Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project**

If any one were to use the challenge card idea, I would suggest setting reasonable attainable goals and then increasing them in increments. I also would reinforce that extrinsic rewards really don't motivate the kids. It is the relationships behind them that are more important.

I also would suggest that data is reviewed continually and shared with all staff members. I know part of our struggles came from the fact that not everyone understood what we were doing and why we were doing it.