

Rewriting the Story

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Funding Sources:

This project is funded as part of the school counselor position at Suwannee Virtual School.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

There is no separate budget for this program.

Project Description:

This program seeks to identify and intervene with high school students from Suwannee High School and Branford High School who have left or may be considering leaving school. Students are identified by their counselors or assistant principals. Students who have been expelled by the school board may also be given the option of participating in online classes through virtual school in order to continue earning credits and reducing their risk of dropping out.

The program is part of the Suwannee Virtual School which is an ACCELL accredited public school of choice within the Suwannee County School District. The virtual program currently serves K-12 students with a total enrollment of 107.

Staffing Pattern:

The project is administered by the school counselor of the district virtual school working with local school administrators.

Population Served:

This program is open to any student who seeks to withdraw from their local school. This chart shows a breakdown of students for each year of the project:

2016-2016 22 total students

- 16 white, 5 African American, 1 Hispanic
- 13 female, 9 male

2017-2018 20 total students

- 14 white, 3 African American, 2 Hispanic, 1 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- 14 female, 6 male

Project Origination:

Suwannee County is a small rural district in north Florida with an enrollment of 5119 students in grades K-12. Two distinctly different high schools are in the district. Branford High School, located in the southern part of the county, serves approximately 700 students in grades 6-12. Graduating classes are typically in the high 70's to low 90's. Suwannee High school, located in the northern part of the county, has a more traditional configuration, serving approximately 1,100 students in grades 9-12. Graduation cohorts are approximately 300 to 350. Over the past five years, graduation rates for both schools have been trending upward, with an aggregate district rate beginning at 59.5 % for the '12-'13 school year improving to 90.5% for the '16-'17 school year. During these same years, however, an increasing number of students withdrew to enroll in home education without following through. Although these students did not affect the school grade or graduation rate, the district realized that there was a significant number of students who were not completing their education. An assistant superintendent for the district with a passion for ensuring the success of all students recognized this need. She worked

with the superintendent and board to explore ways of bringing these students back in as well as ensuring that future students did not follow this trend. To address this need, the district added a school counselor position to the recently established district virtual school to identify and seek out these students in an effort to encourage them to drop back in and earn their high school diploma.

Issues Addressed:

By the time students walk out of school, they have experienced frustration and failure, giving up on gaining a high school diploma. Through actions and circumstances both in and out of school, many of the students participating in this program expressed discouragement, some to the point of hopelessness. During the initial intake interview, students explained why they withdrew. Some students were above age and lacking sufficient credits to graduate with their cohorts. Others had taken the required graduation assessments multiple times without achieving a passing score. Three students were working to help support families. Two students were unable to attend school regularly due to their parents' illnesses, which required them to stay home as the caretaker or to provide transportation to medical treatments so that their other parent could continue working. One student was pregnant and one was a teenage parent. One student who lacked only four credits, had withdrawn on the advice of family members who encouraged him to seek a GED. Three students had moved to the area and did not want to enroll in a local school with which they felt no connection. The last participant was a student who was expelled for a serious, one-time offense. He was allowed to participate in the program to earn the last four credits he needed to graduate. Every student who was interviewed for the program had a story to tell. Up to that point, their stories were full of barriers and obstacles. Family dysfunction, economic hardships, medical issues, poor decision-making skills, learning difficulties, and many other factors were woven into the context of their stories. This program offered them hope and a chance to rewrite the next chapter.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

- Reduce the number of students withdrawing from local schools to home school without following through with continuing education
- Increase the graduation rate for these students

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

Seven students joined the original group, bringing the total students served in the first year of the project to 22. Of those 22, 16 earned their diplomas for a completion rate of 73%. Of the five that did not graduate, one left the program to earn her GED, one was continued for another year in the program, three moved, and one was incarcerated. Of the twenty participants this year, two have graduated and 17 are on track to graduate. One student has completed all requirements except a passing score on her statewide reading assessment. At this time, she is planning to retake her SAT and ACT. The projected completion rate for the second year of the project is 95%. One important outcome of the first year was the establishment of working relationships with the local schools. A student who states their intention to leave school no longer signs a paper and walks through the door. Students are interviewed by an administrator at their school who tries to resolve the students' concerns and keep them enrolled. If the issues remain unresolved, the administrator contacts the virtual school, most of the time with the parent and student in their office, to discuss the possibility of their participation in this program. An

appointment is made and the virtual school is provided with the school conference notes prior to the appointment for review. Most virtual school meetings take place within 24 hours of the administrative conference.

Strategies and/or Interventions:

Using the student information system, a search was conducted for all students who had withdrawn to home education during the '13-'14 and '14-'15 school years. Efforts were made to contact each student on the list. Calls were made, letters and emails were sent. When these weren't successful, the counselor went to the last known address, working with the district parent liaison and local schools to find as many students as possible. From that initial list, fifteen students were scheduled for face to face interviews with parents, the student, and counselor. During the meetings, a thorough review of credits and assessment information was conducted. Diploma options were discussed and an individualized service plan was developed identifying strengths, weaknesses, expected time to complete each class, potential barriers and solutions, and a tentative sequence and schedule for completing classes. Students earn credits through an online provider with classes aligned to the state standards. The virtual school employs two full time teachers as well as twelve adjunct teachers who are employees of district schools. An on-site lab is open three and a half days per week for tutoring and assistance. Some students elected to take one or two classes at a time while others chose a full schedule. This individualized approach has been an integral part of the program's success. Some of the strategies used included:

- face to face intake interviews
- individual service plans developed and regularly reviewed
- individual pacing calendars based on student work schedules or medical appointments
- child care through the district's teen parenting program
- scheduled time in the virtual school lab for tutoring
- study time for state assessments
- weekly phone check ins (more frequently if needed)
- monthly review of the students' service plans with students and parents
- home visits to students who stopped working or fell behind pace
- reviewing transcripts for errors or missing credits including semesters that could be credit averaged
- credit recovery courses

The program addressed six of the fifteen effective strategies for dropout prevention:

- Systematic Approach
- Alternative Schooling
- Active Learning
- Individualized Learning
- Educational Technology

Project Timeline:

The project began in the summer prior to the '16-'17 school year and is currently in its second year. The project is expected to continue as an ongoing part of the Suwannee Virtual School program

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

I have worked with this program for the past two years and will continue to do so until my retirement midway through the upcoming school year. I have been asked by several people about what qualities my replacement will need to exhibit. The most important quality this person will need is an overwhelming belief that every student wants to graduate, though some may protest more than others. Being able to see through the barriers, work toward helping the student overcome them, and celebrating each milestone along the way is crucial to making this work.

It will help if a person also has the following:

- experience in working with at risk youth and their families
- an ability to establish working relationships with at risk youth and their families
- strong communication skills
- a knowledge of current graduation requirements and diploma options
- experience in or knowledge of virtual learning
- working relationships with local schools
- ability to motivate as well as to confront issues that interfere with progress in a positive manner
- perseverance and tenacity

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

Since the students engaged in the program withdrew from their local school to home education, their withdrawals did not impact the local schools' graduation rates or the district's dropout rate. These students basically became invisible dropouts and may have never taken action to complete their education.

As the project has progressed, all of the students withdrawing to home education have either filed a letter of intent to home school or enrolled at Suwannee Virtual or the state virtual school. Although no data exists for years prior to the start of this project, the 73 % completion rate for the first year and projected 95% completion rate for the current year most certainly is an improvement in reaching students who had previously disappeared once they left school.

Current Status of Project:

The project is ongoing with plans to continue for the third year. Plans to expand the program services include more opportunities for state assessment practice and inclusion of students on their junior year of high school.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

My role in this project has been to design and implement a program working in conjunction with virtual school, local school, and district staff. From the process of identifying students, enrolling them, and providing support as they worked toward graduation, the district now has a comprehensive tool to ensure that all students are served. I have developed enrollment forms, tracking forms, credit worksheets, and an individual service plan format to assist in the implementation and documentation of the project. Most importantly, I have served as the chief contact and cheerleader for the program participants. Many of these students already struggled with relationships and, based on interviews, felt left out or let down by their school experience. Since the program utilizes online classes, it is essential to develop and build a strong relationship with each student as well their families. Helping them to rewrite their stories meant regularly

providing them with evidence of their success through emails, phone calls, and visits until they were able to recognize this for themselves.

Lessons Learned:

In today's data driven world of education, it is important to review that data to determine both successful practices and to identify needs within a district or school. However, data does not always make up the total picture. It is still important to truly see each student, to recognize their needs, and, when we find those who have given up, to intervene in a way that helps them change their expected outcome of their lives. Teaching them to overcome obstacles and adversity on their way to earning a diploma and to ultimately assume control of their future lets them rewrite their previous stories in a positive and powerful way. With this in mind, the following lessons were learned:

This requires a great deal of energy.

- It cannot be accomplished by one person. Building support within the district is essential to continuing this work on a long-term basis.
- You can't win them all as evidenced by the five students who left the program in the first year. But you can keep on trying!
- Just when you think you've seen it all, you will be presented with a unique situation that requires creativity and teamwork to resolve.
- You do not have to reinvent the wheel to develop a new program. All the interventions and strategies that went into the success of this program are things that I have done throughout my career in various positions. The key was to put them together in a purposeful way that met the needs of these students.

I recently began contacting former students who participated in the first year of the program. I reminded each of them of my original question, "Are you satisfied with the story you've written up to now?" Each one remembers and was glad to share their most recent chapter. One has used her diploma to move into management of a national restaurant chain, gotten married, and just closed on her first house. Two students have earned their Certified Nursing Assistant licenses and are now enrolled in a community college to complete their prerequisites for an RN program. Another is married, recently became a father to a little girl, and works for a road paving company. My favorite phone call was answered by a young man who has fulfilled his dream of serving our country as a helicopter mechanic in the United States Army, currently stationed in Alaska. Everyone I have contacted so far is either employed or in a post-secondary education program. I am impressed with their drive and determination as they continue the process of writing successful stories through their work and studies.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

Every district, even those that seem similar in demographics and size, has its own strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing these and looking at them in a systemic way will help to determine the individuality of each program. Projects that reflect the personality of the district and community may be more effective than trying to exactly replicate one from another district. It helps to define roles and develop procedures that move the process forward in a systemic way. These procedures should be periodically reviewed and revised if necessary to meet the needs of the project and its participants.