

Curbing the Pipeline of Potential Dropouts as Early as Elementary School
Through Literacy

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Project funding sources:

The project cost for this field study was incorporated into the five-year school funding by a private Charter School program, Academia, located in Miami, Florida. Academia is a national Charter School Program that acquired the entire district of Jefferson County, Florida in 2016.

Project cost and brief budget narrative:

The true cost of the program was acquiring the Explicit Reading Training from the Florida Department of Learning Resources, at no cost to the school.

Describe the scope and setting of the project:

From 2013 to 2018, Jefferson County has had an average graduation rate of 65.42%. The five year mean in Florida is 86.1%. Performance data for the 2014-2015 school year indicate the following for high school seniors: 20% proficient in ELA, and a 60% graduation rate for 2013-2014. The district experienced an increase of 17% in the graduation rate for the 2014-2015 school year; however, did not graduate any students with disabilities with a standard diploma in 2014-2015. According to the district's SP&P, academic progress monitoring tools include universal screenings such as Stanford 10 for grades K-2, Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) for grades 3-10, Jefferson County Pre and Post standards based assessments in ELA, Accelerated Reader, STAR and Early Literacy STAR. As no common curriculum for reading was used, grades K-5 implemented Wonders core curriculum assessments for ELA. In addition to the above universal screenings, our county implemented additional programs to monitor Tier 2 and Tier 3 students. Yet, the school continued to fail academically. In 2016, using Florida Statute 1008.33, the state and school board of Jefferson County approved the takeover of the district by Somerset, an Academia Charter School. Upon taking over the county, Somerset identified the following three key factors as contributing to the dropout rate in Jefferson County: absenteeism, literacy level and relationships between student and staff.

What was the staffing pattern of the project?

Jefferson Somerset also used Florida Statute 1008.33 to limit the amount of rehires to the combined elementary, middle and high School. Each teacher was vetted and as a result only 50% were rehired. Administration sought to hire the best teachers for each subject area with a concentration on reading teachers.

Population served by the project (number of students, subjects, or participants; description of project participants, including ages, grades, demographics, etc.; and participation selection criteria):

The following data is for Kindergarten through High School:

- 64.9% Black, non-Hispanic
- 31% White
- 2.2% Asian
- 1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- 0.9% Multi-racial

The number of students who were selected for the literacy component of the program was 255 the first year, 261 the second year and 200 this year. They ranged in age for 6 to 12 and selections were based on reading criteria.

How did the project originate and how was it developed?

Upon taking over the district, three main factors were identified by the administration: absenteeism, respect of teachers, and failing academics. However, when middle and high school teachers were surveyed, they felt that the problems in the school originated in the elementary school. Performance data at Jefferson Elementary School for the 2014-2015 school year indicates 28% proficiency in ELA. The school system felt that if literacy were improved, students were encouraged to attend school, and programs of character education were taught to elementary students, the overall graduation rate would improve. The school designed specialized programs to meet the needs of the population.

What were the issues and/or needs addressed by the project?

The issue that was addressed by this project was literacy.

What were the desired outcomes and measurable objectives of the project?

The desired outcome of the project was to increase the literacy rate of 3rd through 5th grade students to 65%.

What were the strategies and/or interventions of the project?

There were three strategies and interventions to this project. The first was remediation. All students in the second through fifth grade were monitored with IREADY diagnostic tests to gain an accurate reading level. Students who were found to be two or more grade levels behind but did not meet the requirements for exceptional education were immediately placed into remediation pull outs. Students were assigned a specialized reading teacher who took groups of students (no more than five) on an average of 90 minutes a week (3 times a week for 30 minutes) to a designated room or quiet place and worked with them on their foundational core. Students were taught using IREADY ITeacher's toolbox. Another aspect of the reading literacy program was to coordinate with the exceptional student educators, inclusion and gifted teachers, to work with their groups during the pullout time. This left the "average" students to be taught explicit reading strategies to enable them to stay on track and increase their scores. It was quite a feat but when it was put into place and done effectively, no teacher had more than five students at a time. This enabled us to reach all aspects of reading! It also helped to improve relationships with students. Teachers saw growth in respect and eagerness to work.

The second strategy was responsibility. Teachers were required per nine-week grading period to make parent contact after a student's third absence. Each teacher documented their contact by using a parent contact form that was turned into the registrar who then noted it in the computer data base. Following parent contact, if absences did not improve, the Parent Liaison was sent to make a home visit.

Another requirement was data tracking. Each teacher was mandated to attend monthly data chats to analyze changes in growth and progress of their students in reading. Charts, data tracking sheets, and conference notes were kept as documentation. Teachers maintained up-to-date data charts to visualize and document student progress.

What was the timeline of the project?

The timeline of the project was three years, starting in the 2017 school year and ending in the 2020 school year.

What special conditions, expertise, and/or skills were required to carry out the project?

All teachers were required to attend professional development classes in explicit reading programs including curriculum alignment, fluency, vocabulary building and teaching strategies.

What were the actual outcomes, results, and achievements of the project?

The first year we saw a growth in reading to 45%. The second year we declined to 38% and this year as of winter we were at 62%. However, the COVID-19 virus has caused us to close our school, and we are not doing state testing, so data from this year is unreliable.

What and how are/were the outcomes related to school completion, dropout prevention, and/or graduation rates?

Currently we are on track to show a reading improvement rate of 62% this year. Preliminary results from the Winter progress monitoring show us at 62% growth. However, factors outside of control of the school can always change the growth rate. The 62% rate would mean that students are reading on grade level or six months below.

As a NDPS certification program participant, what was your role or involvement with the project?

I developed the plan and helped schedule the coordinating participants. I was able to help direct the teachers in explicit teaching strategies that they were unfamiliar to them, model the strategies for them in their classrooms and help them with data chats with their students and administration.

What were the lessons learned from the project?

The first year we had very good success with an increase of 17%. However, the very next year we had a downward trend of 17%. We realized that we had not been as diligent with data chats and accountabilities. The administration had eased up on the documentation and requirements by each teacher. This year we have reimplemented requirements from the first year and have seen improvement.

What advice would you give other dropout prevention practitioners about the project?

Change is difficult. Everyone reacts differently to requirements and accountability. Go slow and expect some backlash from veteran teachers or those who are set in their ways. Accept nothing less than the best and it will be obtained.

Any important additional information not addresses previously? (optional)

Overall, our area of Florida is one of the poorest in the state. There are only four employment opportunities in the immediate area (in order of greatest to least): prison system, school district, nursery industry and private businesses. Yet, we are only 20 miles from the state capital! As the county continues to struggle with positive relationships between the school district and the community, we are still striving to improve in this area.