

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

Career Connections Program

Bunsold Middle School
Marysville, Ohio

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Key Words: career based intervention, middle school, experiential learning, service learning, career exploration, soft skills, life skills

Career Connections Program

Funding Sources

The Career Connections Program is funded through general school funding, which includes weighted funding through Perkins Funds for Career and Technical Education.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

The cost to start a Career Connections Program can vary greatly. It can be a relatively low-cost program but it is important to note that this model has grown to include more expensive components to create a richer learning environment for students. The basic program includes a set of classroom laptops for student use during the school day as well as textbooks to guide the career exploration and life skills development portion of the curriculum. The supporting school district has allotted \$1,500 for classroom supplies and \$3,000 for textbooks for the new program. The current program has also grown to include a laser engraver/cutter, small vinyl cutter, heat press and point of sale system to operate our school-based business.

Scope and Setting

The Career Connections program at Bunsold Middle School is a two-period model of Career Based Intervention (CBI) that is under the umbrella of career and technical education in Ohio. Students in this program attend the class two periods of the day. One period is focused on career exploration, life and soft skill development, and academic linkages are made between core academic content and careers of potential interest. The second period is focused on core academic work, which could include reteaching of concepts, assistance in homework/project completion, organizational skill development, and other academic practice and assistance.

Experiential learning is also a vital part of the program and is woven into the two periods. When the program began, the students were responsible for paper recycling in our school. We tracked the amount of paper gathered and the money our school made in return. We also partnered with the multiple disabilities classroom to build raised bed gardens and tended them throughout the spring. When another classroom took over the recycling and gardens, the Career Connections students were given the opportunity to work in other capacities in our building. They were able to work in the cafeteria to prepare lunches; work with the maintenance person to learn hands-on skills of troubleshooting and repairing items in our school building; in the office they learned to file and deliver messages to teachers and students; in the library Career Connections students learned organizational skills and ran a copy center for teachers, and learning to take customer orders for copies and learning proper use of the copiers in the building. This took tremendous partnership from other adults in the building, but they gladly accepted the additional responsibility.

The final evolution of the experiential learning took place when the students and teacher developed an idea for a school store. There was not a store present in the school so there was a need for a place where students could purchase basic school supplies (which is where the inventory began). The inventory grew due to a local grant that funded the purchase of school spirit wear. After completing a cost comparison, it was determined that the students could create their own spirit wear with the purchase of a small vinyl cutter and a heat press. Now the students are involved in creating their own designs, producing a finished product and selling that product in their store. A laser engraver/cutter was also purchased for the program and is utilized for part of the business as the students are able to offer custom awards and other laser engravable items through the store. Employees of the store have their own assigned jobs such as manager, accountant, cashier, and advertiser. Students rotate through the jobs during the year giving them the opportunity to try each job and develop new skills.

Service-learning is another critical component of the program. Every year students participate in a countywide day of community service and have completed such tasks as mulching local parks, collecting and sorting clothing for the local clothes closet, painting a room and staining a deck for a local elderly person, and collecting and sorting food for the local food pantry. The students have also used the laser engraver/cutter to provide central Ohio veterans with magnets to commemorate their participation in Honor Flight. The mayor of the city also contacted the students and commissioned them to create a city Christmas ornament that was presented to city council members and was sold to local community members. The relationships the Career Connection students have developed with the city have allowed them to now be called upon more readily when help in the community is needed.

The following principles guide this, and other similar programs, in Ohio: higher expectations—partnering with administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and community to support a belief system that all learners will achieve academic success, establish a career pathway, and become contributing members of society; common curriculum—engaging learners in the common curriculum of the school that provides opportunities for graduation and links with school district and state curriculum and performance expectations; authentic learning—providing appropriate and effective instruction by meeting student needs through active learner engagement and relating subject matter to life and work; supportive structures—achieving optimum conditions for learning through a student-teacher ratio that promotes effective interaction and instruction, physical location to develop psychological and social identity, and instructional resources and technology to meet individual learner needs; sense of belonging—providing activities and a classroom/community environment that lead to increased positive social interaction, citizenship practices and leadership development; continuous improvement—monitoring and improving classroom achievement by using student assessment and program data in relation to the district's continuous improvement plan; and student identification—in partnership with administrators, counselors, teachers, and parents, selecting students who have barriers to career and academic success.

Staffing Pattern

One teacher is responsible for this particular program. When searching for the right teacher, the school focused on looking for someone passionate about students and education and was willing to go the extra mile at all times. In Ohio, teachers must be willing to get the Career Based Intervention (CBI) endorsement, which requires work outside of education at several Ohio universities.

Population Served

Students in the program are in grades seven and eight. Their academic teachers and/or guidance counselors refer students who are struggling academically and/or are economically disadvantaged to the program. Student data such as grades, standardized test scores, attendance, behavior incidents and discipline are collected and the students are then interviewed to determine their interest level and commitment to improvement. The number of students enrolled in the program varies from year to year but the recommended maximum number is 25 per grade level.

Project Origination

The program was a joint venture between the local school district and the career center (vocational school) that serves that local school. Because this program is housed at the local school district and funded through the career center, both parties discussed adding the program a couple of years before the actual program was put into place. The principal of our school visited a similar program at a neighboring school and after the visit, he was fully on board to implement it at this school. Once in place the principal and director from the career center continued to support the basic framework while giving the teacher enough flexibility to mold the program into what it is today.

Issues Addressed

The issues and/or needs addressed by the project, in a broad sense, were to improve attendance, academic competence, behavior, and put students on a path toward graduation.

Strategies and/or Interventions

- Strong partnerships with other adults to make the program successful: student “employers” at work stations, principals, guidance counselors, community stakeholders and service providers, and advisory committee.
- Online remediation program (Stride Academy) to help give extra practice to students who struggle academically in math, reading, and science.
- Work-based learning opportunities to give students a sense of responsibility in their school.
- Constant communication and call for collaboration with parents/guardians to form an educational team of support for students.

Project Timeline

Students are able to participate in the program one to two years in middle school. Each year they are required to be present in class two periods per day (giving up one unified art course to participate in the program).

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

A partnership between the career center and the local school district was vital to making this project a reality. Expertise in middle level education and proper certification (in the state of Ohio) was also required.

Outcomes and Achievements

The outcomes of this program have been stronger rapport between students and the teacher in which students feel as though they have an advocate for their academic work, social behavior, and attendance at school. The students also leave the middle school having a solid exploration of career choices they may pursue and have an academic plan in place to achieve their goals (of which high school graduation is first and foremost). Finally, students have confidently acquired skills such as teamwork, organization, customer service, accounting, and operation of a vinyl cutter, laser engraver/cutter, and heat press through their participation in the school-based business, which could transfer to the true workplace of students when they leave the program.

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

Of the 39 students who should have graduated from high school at this point, 14 have transferred out of the district and graduation data is not available, one (4%) dropped out of school, and 24 (96%) students graduated.

Current Status of the Project

Ongoing

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

I am the Career Connections Instructor.

Lessons Learned

- Some students are resistant to additional support. Interviewing them prior to enrollment in the program is helpful to gauge that.
- Because this program is based on career exploration and experiential learning, creativity is the key to finding opportunities for students to learn transferrable, soft and life skills without having to leave the school grounds.
- If a student chooses to participate in the program for one year and then move out of it that does not mean that the student has given up. It may very well mean that the student has learned what skills are needed to be successful in school and is risking boldly to step out on his own. Continue to support the student in less formal ways than in a classroom (i.e., hallways, cafeteria).
- Documenting student progress, and allowing them to be a part of the process, is so important.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

Be creative with how the program can work for you. There are ways to gain supplies through grants and partnerships, which would not cost the school district money. It is so important to involve stakeholders in the process of designing a similar program because one person (the teacher) cannot do the job alone. Surround yourself with the right people who are student-centered. Finally, be open to all types of students. Some students may be straight A students but may need the opportunity to develop soft or life skills. These types of skills along with academics are equally important.