NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

The Open Campus High School: An assessment of student recovery, engagement, and achievement

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The full technical report for this project can be found at
https://www.odu.edu/education/programs/tcep/publications#.WNkeano5RRB

Funding Sources

This project comprised a formative evaluation designed to inform efforts to maximize program effectiveness. My colleagues and I at Old Dominion University were contracted by the Norfolk School Board to conduct the evaluation.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

We worked from a small evaluation budget of $19,846. Project personnel included our center director, Dr. John Nunnery, myself, and two other investigators: Dr. Terrell Perry and Ms. Pamela Arnold. Dr. Nunnery and I designed the evaluation. Other than developing the evaluation design, my role was to create the student questionnaire that was administered, to administer the student questionnaire during a site visit, to work with the school division to obtain student-level achievement data, to analyze all quantitative student data, and to conduct site observations and interviews with students and staff.

Scope and Setting

This project occurred in an urban school district in southeastern Virginia during the 2014-2015 school year.

The Open Campus High School (OCHS) is an alternative school in Norfolk, Virginia that is based on the Magic Johnson *Bridgescape* program and provides alternate pathways for students to obtain their high school diploma.

The main strategic goal of OCHS is to elevate high school graduation rates by providing educational services to students who have already dropped out of school, or who are at risk for leaving school as indicated by their overage-for-grade status. The overage-for-grade enrollment is not a typical population in other Bridgescape schools, but the school board wanted to explore how some of these students would perform in the Bridgescape environment.

This is done by providing accelerated credit recovery to help students receive a regular high school diploma. Students graduating from the program must meet the same graduation requirements as students attending other high schools within the district, including passing pertinent state-mandated end-of-course assessments in required subjects. Students who graduate from OCHS receive regular diplomas from their "home" school, which is also credited as having graduated the student for accountability purposes.

The program provides online coursework that students may complete at their own pace toward credit recovery and graduation. As originally implemented, OCHS offered flexible scheduling in two half-day shifts. Students were expected to attend one of these half-day shifts per day, but were permitted to attend two shifts per day, if desired. On-site meals and transportation services were also provided.

The program structures a blended model of computer-mediated and face-to-face instruction. Curriculum is self-paced, with students engaged in two credit-bearing, online courses at a time; students worked on their own schedule, with pacing guidance from teachers and advisors. Students were also permitted to complete coursework off-campus. Teachers provided individual facilitation in the large computer lab and also conducted small group pull out instruction for groups of students who were working on similar objectives.

In addition, the program offered "wrap-around" services to students to address non-academic obstacles such as economic hardship, early parenting, homelessness, and mental and physical health issues.

Staffing Pattern

The Open Campus High School faculty and staff include a school director, a curriculum specialist, a counselor, and five instructional staff – one special education teacher and four subject area teachers, one each in mathematics, science, social studies, and English. There is also a security officer on staff.

The evaluation staff included myself and the three researchers identified in the budget section above.

Population Served

Number of students, subjects, or participants
The program is designed to serve a maximum of 125 students and enrollment varied slightly from day to day. At the time that state assessments were administered, the school had 111 students, about 25% of whom were overage-for-grade students; the remaining were dropout recovery students.

Description of project participants (ages, grades, demographics, etc.)
The overage-for-grade (OFG) students had an average age of 16, with students ranging in age from 14 to 18. The majority of OFG students were male (62%) and African American (greater than 80%) and they read on an average 3rd grade level. Fourteen percent of the OFG students were identified as special education/504 status. None of the OFG students enrolled in this project year had earned any academic credits at the beginning of the school year.

Participant selection criteria
The dropout recovery (DOR) students had an average age of 19, with students ranging in age from 16 to 22. There were slightly more female DOR students than male (51%) and most DOR students were African American (greater than 80 percent). About 10% were identified as special education/504 status and about 14% were involved in raising a child of their own. The DOR students read at an average 5th grade level. Twenty-three percent of the DOR population was eligible to graduate in 2015, meaning they entered the school with 15 credits, three of which were English.

Overall, the school served a diverse population of students in this project year who had a wide range of social, behavioral, and academic needs, including low literacy abilities, social difficulties in their previous school environments, out-of-school life circumstances (parenting, transiency, incarceration), and academic difficulties.

Project Origination

The Center for Educational Partnerships was approached by the Norfolk School Board to conduct this formative evaluation of The Open Campus High School in its initial year to identify the factors that contributed to the process of dropping out of school or being at risk of dropping out of school, to determine how preliminary data from the program could suggest the program's promise for achieving its stated goals, and to determine if preliminary data could be used to guide efforts to improve recruitment and overall success rates of the program.

Issues Addressed

The Open Campus High School functions under a main goal of elevating high school graduation rates by providing educational services to students who have already dropped out or who are at-risk of leaving school as indicated by a number of predictors.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

We focused our research and evaluation efforts to identify what factors motivated students to re-engage in school through The Open Campus High School, what factors influenced continued student engagement in The Open Campus High School, and to determine how students performed on such academic outcomes as credits recovered and diplomas earned.

Strategies and/or Interventions

To measure our objectives and outcomes, we used a mixed-method design with multiple points of data:

- Observations
    - Lab and breakout sessions, multiple full session observations
- Program artifacts
    - Lesson plans for all content areas
- Performance indicators
    - Attendance
    - Behavioral data
    - Credits earned
    - Diplomas earned
- Interviews
    - Students
    - Program faculty and staff
- Questionnaire
    - Students

Project Timeline

This project evaluation occurred during the 2014-2015 school year. Observations, interviews, and student surveys occurred mostly in the late winter/early spring of 2015 and all other data collection occurred in June. Findings were analyzed and reported to the Norfolk School Board in October of 2015.

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

This project required approval by the Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee, which determined that this project is exempt from Institutional Review Board review according to federal regulations. All researchers who participated in the evaluation maintained current Social and Behavioral Research certification and followed Responsible Conduct for Researchers guidelines. All project personnel who conducted observations or interviews underwent training to provide reliable and consistent data collection. Otherwise, all evaluation personnel were full-time research faculty in The Center for Educational Partnerships who are experienced in conducting K12 educational evaluations.

Outcomes and Achievements

Students identified a number of program characteristics that motivated them to enroll in The Open Campus High School. Over 85% of students indicated the following as factors that motivated them to re-engage in school through The Open Campus High School:

- Being able to work online
- Being able to monitor their own academic progress
- Having the flexibility of half-day sessions and being able to choose which session they attend
- Being able to work at their own pace
- Getting one-to-one assistance from teachers
- Having smaller class sizes
- Being able to target very specific needs and goals

Students also indicated that the program provided a caring and supportive environment which encouraged them to continue engagement in the program.

Over 90% of students reported that they liked attending The Open Campus High School, that they respected their teachers, and that they believed that their teachers cared about them.

Over 75% of students indicated that they liked their teachers, that their teachers cared whether students met academic goals, that they felt they were making academic progress, that they liked the way course material was presented, and that they had become more hopeful about their futures since enrolling at The Open Campus High School.

Further, qualitative data revealed that a positive school environment contributed to students' continued engagement in school in a variety of ways, notably

- by providing an atmosphere of freedom and respect
- by improving peer interactions as compared to those in previous school settings
- through encouragement from faculty and staff and communication of expectations for success and the behaviors that would lead to success;
- through comprehensive responsiveness to students' needs beyond academic needs; and
- through a perception of support and collegiality among faculty and staff

Overall, student outcomes were mixed but promising for a first-year implementation. Of 40 students enrolled in the program who were eligible to graduate (i.e., that had at least 15 credits upon entry), 18 (45%) graduated with a standard diploma.

However, about half each of both the drop-out recovery and the overage-for-grade students earned no credits.

Progress in reading was minimal and nearly equal for both groups. Overage-for-grade student grade-level equivalency scores in reading improved from 2.8 to 3.1 (+0.3), whereas drop-out recovery student scores improved from 5.2 to 5.4 (+0.2).

Although overage-for-grade students exhibited modest academic progress, only one passing standardized assessment score was earned out of 28 attempts.

Overage-for-grade students also were
- 5 times as likely to exhibit problem behaviors at school, and
- 12 times as likely to have out of school behavioral incidents

Behavioral incidents included physical altercations, destruction of school property, and criminal behavior sometimes leading to incarceration.

Finally, student attendance and it was found that the number of days present on-site was a statistically significant predictor of the number of credits earned.

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

The program was clearly most successful in serving students who were fairly close to achieving graduation at the time they dropped out of school.

Binary logistic regression analysis revealed that the number of credits upon enrollment was a positive and statistically significant predictor of graduation status (B = 0.27, c^2 = 4.81, p < .05). The exponentiated coefficient, Exp(B), associated with number of credits upon enrollment was 1.31. This means that the odds of graduating increased by 13.1% for each credit earned prior to enrolling in the program.

Beyond the obvious explanation that these students were nearly over the hurdle to begin with, they were also more motivated to engage in the program as evidenced by higher lesson completion rates.

For all enrolled students, the importance of on-site attendance can hardly be overstated. Attendance rates were strongly predictive of the number of credits earned. However, we were not able to collect data regarding off-site engagement, which may also be correlated with positive student outcomes.

Current Status Project

We are currently seeking further funding to continue evaluation efforts for The Open Campus High School. A proposal was submitted to the Brady Foundation in December of 2015 for continuation of this project but it was not funded.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

This project was in its final stages when I decided to enroll in the NDPS certification program, but participation in the project emphasized the importance of dropout recovery in my efforts in the college and career readiness field overall.

Lessons Learned

We made the following recommendations to program officials based on our findings to help improve the program's success rate:

- Target recruitment and retention efforts on DOR students rather than OFG students
  - In its second and subsequent years, the school did not enroll OFG students
- Provide services, scheduling options, and resources to support attendance
  - For example, we suggested that they consider adding an evening session for students who struggle with work or child-care availability
- Explore additional supports for instructional staff teaching multiple courses at a wide variety of levels
  - We suggested that they foster collaborative opportunities for teaching staff to interact with content colleagues in the division

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project

I strongly encourage providing students an opportunity to voice their opinions and experiences. We cannot really understand what their obstacles to and struggles with education really are unless we allow them a voice toward what they feel they need to overcome these obstacles and struggles.