

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

Graves County Virtual School (GCVS) Pilot Program

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Graves County Virtual School (GCVS) Pilot Program

Funding Sources

This project is considered a program under the umbrella of a non-punitive alternative school in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Gateway Academy High School and a punitive alternative Graves County Alternative Education Center in western Kentucky. This program is 100% funded by the Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) funding, a formula-driven allocation of the Commonwealth of Kentucky provided to local school districts including Graves County Schools.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

Gateway Academy High School is managed through \$150,000 annual budget. Under the budget staffing includes the following:

- 1 principal/teacher
- 1 certified teacher

Project Description

Graves County Schools, located in the far western part of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, have approximately 4,250 students enrolled in preschool through 12th grades. Approximately 1,300 of Graves County's students are in Graves County High School. Of those 4,250 students, many have unenrolled in the district's traditional public schools and enrolled in home schools. To re-enroll as many of those students into the county district, the principal of the district's alternative schools implemented an initiative, a pilot program, in the district's A5 school, a non-punitive educational setting for students with unique needs. This new pilot program was designed to take high school students who had enrolled in home schools prior to August 24, 2017.

The targeted population were students on the district's established homeschool list of more than 225 children who had submitted letters of intent to homeschool. An advisory committee, composed of district administrators, narrowed the list to the high-school-aged students, of which there were 60. Of those 60, four enrolled upon the first call. During the first three-month period, a total of 15 enrolled, 25% of the high-school-aged students back into a public school.

With 25% of these high-school-aged homeschooled students enrolling or re-enrolling in the school district through the virtual school, the advisory committee decided to expand the virtual learning school into the middle school level for the 2018-19 school year. If the re-enrollment of the middle school homeschoolers into the district is successful, the elementary-school-aged students will be targeted to be included in the virtual school in 2019-2020 school year.

The curriculum, which was used for this pilot program and was contracted by the Graves County School Board, is the same performance-based online program used by Gateway Academy High School, Graves County High School, and Graves County Middle School. It is in alignment with the Commonwealth of Kentucky's core academic standards.

Staffing Pattern

The staffing consists of one teacher who has more than 30 years' experience and is certified by the Kentucky Department of Education as well as several other state boards of education and one

K-12 principal who is certified by the Kentucky Department of Education in all district level positions and learning and behavioral disorders. The principal, who is highly qualified in Kentucky Department of Education's requirements and has more than 14 years' experience, also serves as head teacher in this project.

Population Served

Number of students, subjects, or participants

- 225 homeschool-enrolled students in K-12 of which 60 high school students were targeted for the pilot program.
- All academic subjects including electives were included in performance-based credit bearing courses for the high school level.
- Academic classes will be provided by an online-curriculum vendor contracted by the district.

Description of project participants (ages, grades, demographics, etc.)

- Students chosen are ages 14-17 in grades 9-12. All socio-economic statuses were included in selection process.

Participant selection criteria

- 60 high-school-level students on the official homeschool list of more than 225 children from K-12 grades who had submitted letters of intent to homeschool as of August 24, 2017.

Project Origination

Graves County Schools' student population had been declining for the past few years due to several reasons, including families choosing to enroll their children into home schools, students dropping out of the county's schools, and industries closing in the community causing a decrease in the county's workforce. The school board and administrators were seeking ideas to increase enrollment. In a district-wide meeting to discuss the conundrum, the alternative schools' principal researched potential ideas including beginning a 100-percent-performance-based virtual school, not only to include the homeschooled population, but eventually, potential and current dropouts. In the meeting, the alternative school principal presented to the committee members the pilot program proposal, which was modeled after several virtual schools she researched within the Commonwealth of Kentucky including Graves County Schools' Gateway Academy High School.

The advisory committee decided to include only the high-school-aged homeschooled population in the pilot to expand to include the dropouts if the rate of success deemed successful, which is above 10% enrollment of current homeschooled 9-12 graders.

Issues Addressed

The following are issues that were addressed by the development and implementation of the GCVS:

- Students of all ages within a district not receiving an education due to parental withdrawal to home school, also known as a part of a silent dropouts epidemic;
- Parents falsely claiming to be educating their children in a homeschool setting;

- State, county, and city work/career readiness and workforce, which attracts new industries, being negatively affected;
- The Commonwealth of Kentucky has no accountability system for homeschools;
- On a district level, school district losing hundreds of thousands of dollars with students enrolling in home schools causing reduction in teaching staff, instructional resources, etc.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

- The desired outcome of this program is to have 100% of the homeschooled students in the county to enroll in the local county schools; however, the committee decided to set a goal of getting 10% of those students being homeschooled enrolled in the Graves County Schools District. The committee chose to start with the high school level to establish a baseline to measure success. The pilot program had a 25% rate of success after the three-month trial period.
- To measure success, several criteria were considered including the following:
 - Number of students interested in participating (15 of 60 high-school-aged homeschoolers);
 - Academic progress made by each student enrolled in GCVS (Each student must achieve five (5) assignments per day or 25 assignments per week at a passing level of 70% or above);
 - Number of students' continued participation within the program.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements)

- 15 of 60 students in 9-12 grades in home schools were enrolled in GCVS equivalent to 25% of the high-school-aged homeschoolers.
- All 15 are abiding by the requirements of five (5) successfully completed assignments or 25 assignments per week. "Successfully completed assignments" means that students score at least a 70% on every assignment.
- All 15 students in the pilot program meet the program requirement of making weekly or more frequent contact with GCVS teachers and/or principal.
- District is planning to include other grade levels and dropouts in the future model of GCVS.

Strategies and/or Interventions

A variety of strategies and interventions were used to implement the pilot program. The list of strategies and interventions are listed below:

- Face-to-face meetings with all GCVS students and their families
- Offering face-to-face and/or one-to-one instructional sessions including tutoring
- Community involvement with high-school-aged students with community service element
- Quarterly parent meetings for all homeschooled students
- Daily progress monitoring with feedback and remediation services available on an individual needs basis
- Post-secondary counseling available
- All state testing preparation included in instruction
- Self-monitoring and self-advocating instruction provided
- Soft Skills training
- Special education services are provided.

Project Timeline

August 15, 2017 – Scheduled district administrators’ meeting to discuss possible pilot program for homeschooled students

August 18, 2017 – Sent invitations for potential advisory committee members

August 24, 2017 –

- Met for the first time with advisory committee members – superintendent, assistant superintendent/instructional supervisor, alternative schools’ principal, director of pupil personnel, high school principal, and special education director
- Cutoff date for students homeschooling to participate in pilot program
- Committee members assigned alternative schools’ principal and director of pupil personnel to call all high school homeschoolers’ families to invite them to participate in the program

August 25, 2017 – Made cold calls to all high school families homeschooling their children to measure interest; offered a guaranteed spot in the pilot program to each child on the high school homeschool list

August 28, 2017, to present

- Daily monitoring of all student progress
- Weekly and/or as needed communication with each student enrolled in GCVS
- Scheduled individual tutoring sessions

August 28, 2017 - Sent GCVS introduction information and invitations to every homeschool family with high-school-aged children

- Enrolled first four (4) participants into GCVS
- Scheduled individual meetings with families of homeschooled children

August 30, 2017 - Report to advisory committee via email and shared Google spreadsheet document

August 30-September 8, 2017 - Continued to make follow-up calls for GCVS enrollment

September 1, 2017 - Created “tip sheets” for GCVS on operating the online curriculum, course requirements, enrollment requirements, etc.

September 8, 2017 - Scheduled a “Meet and Greet” with all GCVS enrolled students one evening from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m.

September 15, 2017 - Report to advisory committee via email and shared Google spreadsheet document (report made every two weeks on 15th and 30th of each month)

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

- Knowledge of online, performance-based learning and credits
- Knowledge of the Commonwealth of Kentucky's core standards
- Knowledge of the socio-economics of the local area
- Knowledge of local student, parent, family needs
- Knowledge of support resources for students (i.e., device and internet accessibility, transportation needs, need for county library internet services, etc.)
- Student recruitment experience
- At-risk student educator experience
- Special education certifications and experience
- Educational administration experience
- Acquisition and accessibility of online curriculum

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

- The Commonwealth of Kentucky has no accountability system for its home schools at the time of this writing. The GCVS attempts to ensure that more six-year-olds to 18-year-olds in the county's population will be educated and complete a high school diploma; thus, increasing the school completion rate.
- If students complete the program successfully, almost 1% of the student population will be added to the school completion rate; therefore, increasing graduation rates.
- When the pilot program is expanded to include former students from the dropout list, the school completion percentage will increase as will the graduation rates. It will also provide another layer in dropout prevention for the county schools.

Current Status Project

Ongoing progress.

Now 15 students are successful in the pilot program earning performance-based high school credits. The district plans to expand the program to include middle school students and dropouts underway for the 2018-2019 school year.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

Alternative Schools' Principal Donna Crouch, who is the NDPS certification program participant, was the initiator of the program and presented it to district leaders for consideration. The following list includes many of the duties in her role as principal of the newly designed Graves County Virtual School (GCVS):

Development stage

- Researched virtual schools to use as models for Graves County program;
- Submitted program design to potential advisory committee;
- Presented pilot program to advisory committee in initial meeting;
- Agreed to take the project on as a part of alternative schools' principal's duties with no extra compensation;
- Called during the first round of cold calls;
- Made all follow-up calls;
- Conducted all home visits;

- Scheduled and held a “Meet and Greet” for each participant and his/her family to build a support system for each one;
- Planned and conferenced with each participant and his/her family for enrollment;
- Evaluated all transcripts;
- Developed individual graduation plan for each student;
- Enrolled each student in GCVS and input data in Infinite Campus (IC), the student information database;
- Scheduled every performance-based class for each participant;
- Constructed tip sheets on how to use the vendor-generated online curriculum;

Continuous stage

- Collects and monitors all progress and data generated from students’ coursework;
- Initiates weekly communication with each student;
- Is point of contact for all GCVS students who have questions and/or concerns including tutoring;
- Tutors students regularly via telephone, in-school instruction by appointment, email, and text;
- Reports to the advisory committee twice a month or as needed;
- Provides recommendations to the advisory committee regarding future of program;
- Delegates some tutoring and progress monitoring to the teacher involved in pilot program;
- Anything needed as directed by the advisory committee.

Lessons Learned

Planning a virtual school takes a considerable amount of research. Below are a few lessons learned during this project:

- A virtual school requires extensive work on the part of the principal or head teacher. Program developer should have asked for additional compensation regarding the GCVS.
- Many homeschoolers’ parents were not interested because of negative experiences with the schools in the district, the administration of the district, or perceived politics of the districts. Those parents’ decisions to homeschool cannot be influenced to participate.
- Some homeschooled students who do actual work in their home schools are not accustomed to working with computers.
- Some homeschooled students who do actual work in their home schools do not adhere to an established schedule.
- All homeschooled students are not accustomed to having accountability to a third party.
- Consistency is key to virtual learning.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project

The advice I would offer a dropout prevention practitioner would be to start off gradually with a pilot program as Graves County Schools has done. A project like this is much more labor intensive than first thought. Below are some items to consider when trying to establish a virtual school:

- When promoting this type of school, do not take the initial “no” as the final decision.
- Being understanding and compassionate are the key to connecting with parents who homeschool their children.
- Remind parents that many students who are homeschooled and are not kept to a rigorous schedule and curriculum often drop out of homeschool.
- There is no “perfect” model of virtual school; a school district must design one to fit its demographic.
- Be flexible in the homeschool design. Many students do not have access to the internet or a device. Budget for a few hard copies of aligned curriculum for special circumstances/needs.
- Consider supplementing the online curriculum with a flipped classroom type setting.
- Enlist certified teachers who want extra duties to monitor progress of students in classes of their specialty areas.