NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

#WHYTRY

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Project conducted at:

Colorado's Finest High School of Choice
Englewood School District
300 W. Chenango St.
Englewood, CO 80110

http://whytry.org/

Funding Sources:
Local school funds

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:
Total cost for this project was limited to the renewal fee for a current Why Try subscription plus the personnel cost of having one of our registrars, who has a Master's degree in Counseling, away from her desk to lead the class.

Project Description:
Englewood Schools had run Attendance Support Groups at our traditional high school (Englewood High School) during School Year 2015-16 for students whose rate of attendance was problematic. The groups were divided by grade-level, and Counselors, the Dean of Students and the Truancy Intervention Specialist all had input on the composition of the groups. Students were chosen first on the basis of grade-level, then attendance, and then a subjective consideration about whether we felt that they would be receptive to the group setting. The subjective piece was especially pertinent because we were taking them out of a class period in order to attend this pull-out, and we wanted to be sure that we were selecting students who would get the most benefit. The groups were run by a licensed mental health counselor who was not school staff.

The cost of the outside provider for the School Year 2015-16 groups was considerable, and upon review of the group as well as of the outcomes, the district determined that we would not continue this project in the same way for the following school year. Instead, we invited in a national trainer from Why Try for a 2-day session in September, 2016, to train many of our school-based counselors, psychologists and social workers in the program. The outside provider had not used any particular curriculum, and we felt that this hindered our sharing-out of information as well as follow-up with students by anyone who hadn't been in the group. Why Try was chosen due to my past experience with the program in other schools as well as past exposure and some use of Why Try within the Englewood district.

Because we had piloted the first year's program at Englewood High School, we chose to implement the second year's Why Try program at our alternative high school (Colorado's Finest High School of Choice). The principal of Finest chose one of her front office staff, who has a degree in counseling, knows most of the students, and who had used Why Try before in a summer program, to lead this class. Why Try is a curriculum and has a pre/post assessment that we felt would be useful as far as data-collection. I had asked this staff to use the assessment pre-, post- and as follow-up a few weeks after the class was complete in order to gauge retention of the ideas presented. Students for the group were chosen by this staff in coordination with one of the Assistant Principals and included teacher input as well. It was set up as a class period elective rather than as a pull-out, called hashtag classes, and students were enrolled in it at this staff group's discretion. The class began with 16 students enrolled and ended the session with 11.

Staffing Pattern:
The staff leading the class holds a Master's degree in Counseling and has lead a Why Try class before as a part of summer school. She is employed generally as a registrar for Colorado's Finest High School of Choice.

Population Served:
Sixteen students were chosen by staff to participate in this first session of Why Try. We felt that they would be students who would be receptive to the program and would benefit from it. Five of those sixteen opted out. Of the remaining eleven:

- Four were/are involved in truancy court; three of those are additionally involved with human services.
- Four students were in 9th grade; six were in 10th grade, and one was in 11th grade.
- Eight were male; three were female.
- Six identified as Latino; five identified as White.
- Two students were 15 years old; four were 16; four were 17, and one was 18.

Project Origination:
The project originated out of our concern for students we felt were just not engaged at our traditional high school and was implemented initially during School Year 2015-16. School connection was a big part of that along with our

recognition that our high school counseling staff was not able to spend enough time checking up on this particular cohort of students (with severe attendance issues), partly due to their absence and the difficulty we had just locating them, but partly also due to the counselors' general workload. We felt that bringing in an outside mental health provider would be beneficial. We would offer food as an incentive for attendance and hold support group meetings (with parent permission) to promote school connection as well as offering a safe space to talk about attendance issues and barriers as well as hopes and dreams and goals for the future.

This group had some promising outcomes, and with all truancy interventions, we learned to count the baby steps, but we felt that we needed to have a "curriculum" with a little more structure going forward and that we could facilitate the groups internally. The Student Services Department was willing to arrange and offer Why Try training with a national trainer, so that was our next step.

Issues Addressed:

Attendance has been our biggest concern, and we recognize that there are many, many barriers that can contribute to truancy including substance use (by parent or student), mental or physical health issues (parent and/or student), transportation issues and poverty. Why Try teaches life skills and resiliency. Our hope was to boost student confidence in these areas, promote school-connectedness through the small group setting, and provide a space for growth and support for dealing with barriers to success.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

One of the reasons that I chose to use the Why Try curriculum is that there is a pre- and post-test associated with the program. The Why Try Measure-R is considered valid, linking "increased internal locus of control with greater academic success and positive behavior". We hoped to see increased positive numbers with the post-test and then were interested to notice retention with the follow-up test.

(https://whytry.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=170&Itemid=959)

Strategies and/or Interventions:

Why Try "was created to provide simple, hands-on solutions for dropout prevention, violence prevention, truancy reduction, and increased academic success." It is structured around ten visual "analogies" that teach life skills to youth. For example, the Reality Ride lesson teaches that decisions have consequences; Desire, Time and Effort teaches that there aren't shortcuts to things that are worthwhile. The program uses pictures and words as well as writing, music and activities to help students to understand the messages.

(Quotes taken from Why Try training materials obtained during district-sponsored training event September, 2016)

Project Timeline:

The Why Try class met several times per week for the 6-week session, during a regular hour-long class block. We anticipate using the same framework this year although hope to offer it more than once during the year and will start third session (of six for the year), allowing teachers time to get to know their students in order to be able to make recommendations about which might benefit most from this structure.

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

The staff who lead the class was selected by the principal of the school and was therefore allowed to set aside her registrar duties in order to teach. We had wanted someone who had experience with Why Try, which she did, and we needed someone with a Master's degree in order to be able to teach a class for credit.

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

The 15 NDPC Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention include promoting a **Safe Learning Environment** – to "enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students", **Alternative Schooling** – "programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma" and **Active Learning**.

This Why Try intervention/elective class took students from an alternative schooling setting, encouraged them to participate actively in learning life-skills strategies through journaling, movement, music and cooperation, in a safe environment with a Master's-level trained group leader.

Of the questions asked on the Why Try Measure-R, the one in our sample that had the most answers move in a positive direction was #24: I can see the opportunities that lie ahead of me in the future. This is really what we were asking the course to do - to give these students hope for their futures and a reason to stay in school.

(http://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/overview/)

Current Status of Project:
We plan to continue this program in the upcoming school year. As our group leader gets more proficient and with greater up-front collaboration by staff, we believe that this program will make a difference for our at-risk students.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:
My involvement with this project began with set-up and is now ending for the school year with evaluating the data collected.

The project was initiated by my collaboration with other district-level personnel who were could authorize training in Why Try. Follow-up at the school level with the principal and assistant principal at Colorado's Finest resulted in permission to move forward, and the principal selected the registrar as teacher/leader for the group. I participated in initial conversations at the school level about content and how to facilitate the class without too much overlap with our New Student Orientation, which uses some similar materials, and I followed up periodically with the teacher/leader on progress throughout the class. When the session was over, the teacher/leader and I looked at the data collected and determined how to facilitate the follow-up assessment.

Lessons Learned:
Lessons learned and things we will do differently during the upcoming school year:

- Solicit more teacher input re: which students should be involved
- Ensure that more detailed data is collected on barriers/reason for recommendation
- Define success/SMART goals to be met in order to continue to offer this class

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:
We started this project by doing some training to ensure that we were all on the same page as far as language and expectations regarding the Why Try program. With our alternative high school population, it's crucial that students can see that staff have their backs and that there are adults in their lives who care. I think it really helped that someone familiar to the students was chosen as the leader for the group.

Advice that I would give to other dropout prevention practitioners is that starting small is worth it. As a small district, we didn't have the option at this time to put together a huge new program. Our project involved one class for one session, but it's given us a foothold, and we'll move forward from here. The number of numbers that we collected is tiny, and it's a start.