

EXCEL Academy and the Road to Recovery

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Funding Sources: General Funds

Project Cost and Budget Narrative: The budget for EXCEL Academy is based on one site with eight teachers, a part-time special services teacher, and two administrators serving approximately 100 students.

Position	Number of Staff	Allocation	Total
Core Content Teachers	8	\$50,000	\$400,000
Graduation Coach	1	\$40,000	\$40,000
Coordinator	1	\$66,000	\$66,000
½ SPED Teacher	1	\$25,000	\$25,000
Resources			
Technology (computers, smart boards, laptops)	100 computers, 8 smart boards, 8 laptops	Computers funded by districts model 1 to 1 learning tools plus smart technology	
GRAND TOTAL			\$531,000

Project Description:

The EXCEL Academy is the only alternative program of its kind in Richland One, an urban city school district located in Columbia, South Carolina. The program is located in the Greenview Community of Richland County and is dedicated to assisting at-risk youth in obtaining credits for grade promotion and on-time graduation from the districts seven high schools and nine middle schools. The program uses *Edgenuity*, Richland One’s adopted online platform, and other blended learning strategies to help students reach mastery within the courses they take. For the last seven years, our program was housed at the district’s CATE building; this year, the program was relocated to Pendergrass-Fairwold. The students are offered district transportation to the school while approximately 10% are car riders. The EXCEL Academy serves students Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m., an approximate five-hour school day.

The program serves students in 8th – 12th grade who may be overaged by 1 to 3 years. There are two primary groups: “EXCEL 8 to 10” and “EXCEL 9 to 12”. EXCEL 8 to 10 are overaged 8th graders who complete their 8th and 9th grade year in one academic school year to return to their traditional high school as 10th graders. EXCEL 9 to 12 is for students who may be overaged, not on track for on-time graduation, desire an alternative setting, or may be interested in early graduation.

Staffing Pattern:

There are eight 190-day classroom teachers, one 190-day graduation/parent liaison, one 190-day .5 special needs instructor, and one 220-day coordinator. We have the following highly qualified instructors within our program: Social Studies (2), English (2), Mathematics (3), Science (2), Physical Education (1), Counseling (2), Administrative Certifications (3), Master’s Degrees (6), Doctorate Degrees (1), National Board Certified Instructor (1) and Retirees (2). Of all the staff members, 50% have been with the program since its inception which is amazing for program continuity.

Populations Served:

The EXCEL Academy serves students from all the district’s middle and high schools:

Year	Middle	High	Total
2014 – 15	37	43	80
2015 – 16	28	56	84
2016 – 17	20	54	74
2017 – 18	24	60	84
TOTALS	109	213	322

At the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, our population served a total of 84 students at the beginning of the year. Of those students, 52% were male and 48% were female. 90% of our population consisted of Black ethnicity, 5% Caucasian ethnicity, 4% Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, and 1% Asian ethnicity. Our special needs population consisted of 4% of our students who were provided special services.

The students of EXCEL Academy are required to complete an application for admission provided by his/her guidance counselor and an interview with coordinator and/or principal and the parent; afterwards, the coordinator contacts the family if the student is selected. The applications are scored using a rubric. Based on the rubric, the interview, and student transcript the team makes a determination of acceptance. Each student is placed on a two-week probationary period, during which time the student is expected to complete a recovery course.

Project Origination:

Richland School District One was faced with an unacceptable graduation rate and significant number of overaged students in 2008. The district was in need of more versatile alternative programs to help reach the population with the schools that were not demonstrating success. As a result of studies and disaggregation of data collected, the EXCEL Academy program was developed in 2010.

Issues Addressed

- Overage students
- Dropout rate
- On-time Graduation rate
- Need for a smaller environment
- Motivation
- Increased rate of course completion
- Flexible class structure

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

- Increase credit acquisition and credit recovery
- Decrease the number of overaged middle and high school students

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

Year	Middle Schooler		High Schoolers	
	Enter as 8 th grader	Exit as 10 th grader	Enter as 9 th , 10 th or 11 th grader	Exit at 2 grades advancement
2014 – 15	37	33	43	28
2015 – 16	28	17	56	42
2016 – 17	20	18	54	40
2017 – 18	21	16	48	37
TOTAL	116	84	201	147

Just in the last four years the EXCEL Academy has demonstrated continuous improvement in the service and success of Richland One students. Even students that are not promoted to the 10th grade still enters high school with three or more credits.

Project Timeline:

EXCEL Academy began in 2010 and is presently ongoing. Currently, co-partnering in the development of an EXCEL *Too* Program which will be similarly designed with the exception of implementation within the traditional middle and high school settings is underway.

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

Overage middle school students that participate in the EXCEL Academy are entering their high schools at a greater advantage by being back on grade level with their peers. As previously stated, even middle students that do not advance an entire grade level have some credits. Students also have the option of remaining at the EXCEL Academy which offers a smaller, more intimate setting, and allows students to work at a greater rate of completion. Anecdotally, we have seen an increase in attendance for those students, a reduction in disciplinary issues, increase motivation, and greater interest in school. Eighty-eight (88%) percent of EXCEL Academy seniors graduated in the 2017-18. Those that did not, had the opportunity to return and become mid-year graduates.

Current Status of Project:

The program is currently in progress and under the district’s programs for continuous renewal as a premier Alternative Education Program.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

EXCEL Academy Coordinator – As the Coordinator it is my responsibility to coordinate the day to day operation of the program, meet with classroom teachers to review course customization options, review student progress and provide support and training. I am also responsible for instructional design, order of course selection and student assignments. I collaborate with the District Alternative Education Coordinator, Administrators, and Guidance Counselors for referrals of middle and high school students whose academic needs may be met by the EXCEL Academy. In addition, I collaborate with schools for promotion and return to school. I also serve as the school testing coordinator for the EXCEL Academy. I am responsible for conducting parent/student interviews, monitoring student enrollment, conducting progress conferencing and planning of parenting events. I also recruit potential candidates for the program and provide monthly reports to the Alternative Education Coordinator concerning enrollment, credits earned and concerns (discipline, attendance, etc.)

Lessons Learned:

- Students should be assigned only one class at a time so they engage themselves in that class. Many of our students experienced difficulties trying to work on multiple classes at one time.
- The importance of goal setting, especially number of daily activities, to combat distractions associated with self-paced learning.
- Ensure that teachers are appropriately trained. Our teachers have been trained to provide differentiated instruction, thereby allowing students to work on skills appropriate to their readiness levels, to explore developmentally appropriate application in science, technology, English, mathematics, and various electives. This training strategy promotes our students' abilities.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

- Ensure that your teachers selected has a passion for working with at-risk students. Rapport is critical for student success and the success of the program.
- Plan smaller teacher to student classroom ratios to better assist student with one-on-one instruction and special tutoring. Smaller classroom sizes also benefit the blended instructional units that promote improvement in end of course (EOC) results, course completion, and grade improvement.
- Ensure that teachers selected have a passion for working with at-risk students. Rapport is critical for student success and the success of the program.
- Encourage planning and implementation of best classroom practices, and analysis of student data (student activities, time spent lessons, units, on tests, etc.).
- Promote your program as a viable option for student success.