

**Small Group Strategizing for Success on High School
High-Stakes Reading Testing**

**Dawn Hamilton
English and Reading Teacher
Enterprise High School
2461 N. McMullen Booth Road, Bldg. B
Clearwater, FL 33759**

dawn.hamilton@enterprisehs.org

(727) 474-1237

<http://www.enterprisehs.org>

Key words: relationships, anxiety, dropout prevention, high-stakes testing, concordant scores

Funding Sources:

This project is integrated into other projects at Enterprise High School, which is a dropout prevention charter school. The funding is through the use of state and federal funds from the Pinellas County School District in Florida. We currently base our budget on 360 students. Our funding for the 2018-2019 school year was anticipated to be a total of \$2,293,375.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

There isn't an individual budget for the Small Group Strategizing for High-Stakes Reading Testing project. As the Facilitator of the Enterprise High School English/Language Arts collaborative group of teachers, I needed to find a cost-efficient way to implement these strategic lessons to aid students in passing their reading requirement to graduate. Technical resources in use by students in the English/Language Arts Department include the Reading Plus program for online reading instruction, and the Write Score program for writing practice and assessment. To add to these programs, and lessons the English teachers were already teaching, I used Google Voice for student/teacher contact, Gmail for teacher/parent contact, as well as smart boards, laptops, and iPads for student instruction and practice. These are all available for daily use at school and were very useful with this project. ACT practice tests were provided to the school at no charge and were used in the project. Additionally, a Kaplan ACT Prep 2019 book and Kaplan SAT Prep 2019 book were purchased with teacher classroom funds to assist with strategies and lesson planning. Each book's cost was less than \$15.00.

Project Description:

This project was designed to plan and execute a series of high-interest, strategic, small group, or one-on-one lessons to help students overcome testing anxiety. It also aimed to help students feel confident and prepared to perform successfully on high-stakes Reading Tests (ACT and SAT). These tests provide an alternative, concordant score to the Florida State Assessment (FSA) in Reading and Writing. These tests are considered high-stakes testing since a passing score is required on one of the three reading tests to graduate and receive a high school diploma. The small group lessons were offered to 11th and 12th grade students who did not pass the FSA in Reading and Writing in the 10th grade. Once students were identified, lists were sent to homeroom teachers of students who needed to attend the group lessons. Letters and emails were sent home to parents outlining the test prep sessions, and announcements were made on a daily basis for students to attend the sessions. I utilized Google Voice to text students to remind them of the sessions, and to send encouraging messages and relay progress. Lessons covered all aspects of the test including basic test-taking strategies to practice with the types of readings and questions students would encounter. Specific work was done on identifying the main idea of paragraphs in a reading passage to help students locate answers to questions in a timely manner. By testing time, students who attended the sessions were familiar with all aspects of the test, including bubbling in test forms.

Staffing Pattern:

Enterprise High School has two full-time English teachers on staff, as well as one part-time English teacher and a full-time Exceptional Student Education (ESE) English teacher. All four teachers work with students in their own homeroom and/or assigned homerooms to prepare all reading test-takers for the FSA Reading and Writing test. Teacher instruction

covers the reading and writing standards that are tested each year. As the Reading teacher, I added these small group Strategizing for Success lessons to build relationships with 11th and 12th grade student test-takers to increase their chances of success on the tests (ACT and SAT).

Population Served:

The student population at Enterprise High School ranges in age from 16 to 21, and students may continue to attend until the age of 22 if they have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as part of the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) department. Over 70% of our student population receives some sort of government assistance. Our students are almost evenly split between males and females. 30% are African American, 60% are Caucasian, and 10% are Hispanic/Latino. Additionally, 30% are part of the ESE Department. For this project, the students I worked with were non-ESE 11th and 12th graders who did not successfully pass the FSA Reading and Writing Test administered in the 10th grade, and once per year after.

Project Origination:

The project originated from an understanding of the at-risk youth population that we serve in our school. Many of our students suffer from testing anxiety, many (between 10% - 20%) are students who have a 504 plan and are entitled to accommodations during classroom and testing situations. The success rate of students passing the FSA in Reading and Writing was very low. These students needed to feel confident and be prepared with strategies to give them the best chance of success when taking the ACT and SAT reading tests required to graduate.

Issues Addressed:

Students attend one of two 5-hour shifts at Enterprise High School, either 7:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. or 12:00 to 5:00 p.m., and we are flexible with those shifts for students who are working or have other extenuating circumstances. Overall attendance at our school averages 50% throughout the school year. Our school uses an online curriculum (Apex), and the students stay in one assigned homeroom during their day. They may be working on various subject areas, and they are working at their own pace each day. I have a morning homeroom class myself so finding a way to reach the most students during the school day to prepare them for testing was challenging. Many of the students who have not been successful on the FSA are often unwilling to attend prep sessions for more testing. Dealing with student's negative attitudes about testing, testing anxiety, and attendance issues, as well as my own scheduling, were some of the challenges faced. With limited time to prep each student, determining the most effective strategies to teach was a key to helping students succeed. To be effective, the lessons needed to be short (20 minutes or less), high-interest to keep students engaged, and focused on the best strategies for success.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

The desired outcome for this project was to increase the number of students who meet all graduation requirements, including a reading test. Students who complete all graduation requirements, except for passing a reading test may walk at graduation and receive a Certificate of Completion, but not a diploma. These students must continue to take a reading test until they receive a passing score. Historically, students who fall into this category, do not return for reading or test prep instruction, and do not receive their high school diploma.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

The ACT test is administered in the fall and the spring. Fall 2018 results showed 74 students passed out of 142 tested, or a 52.11% passing rate. Spring 2019 results showed 38 students passed out of 82 tested, or 46.34%. The SAT test was given in the spring to a total of 28 students, and 8 of those passed, or 28.57%. The best outcome came at the end of the school year with our May graduation. In 2019, Enterprise High School had our largest graduating class of 95 students. Of these 95, only 3 students did not pass a reading test, and received a certificate of completion instead of a diploma. The previous year, in May of 2018, with a smaller graduating class, a total of 9 students graduating did not pass a reading test. Of those 9 students, only one returned to school in the 2018-19 school year and attended my strategic prep sessions. She passed the ACT test this spring and received her diploma!

Project Timeline:

The project timeline required looking at the whole year and the testing calendar. Much of the school year is devoted to some type of testing, where students are pulled from their regular homeroom classes to test. English teachers begin FSA small group test prep as soon as school starts, and the skills being taught carry over to the ACT and SAT tests. Students begin the Reading Plus online program the first week of school and are ideally working in that program on a daily basis to increase their silent reading rate as well as comprehension grade level and vocabulary knowledge. I held small group Strategizing for Success prep sessions in the fall, for six weeks, starting the first week of September through the ACT testing window, which began on October 16th. In the Spring, I held the small group Strategizing for Success prep sessions starting the second week of January, until the testing window, which began on February 20th. The sessions, therefore took place for the six weeks prior to testing, twice per day, four days per week. The students were instructed to attend at least two sessions per week. In total, I held 48 sessions in the fall and another 48 in the spring. Morning sessions averaged 10-15 students per day in attendance, and afternoon sessions averaged 7-10 students per day in attendance.

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

High-stakes testing in high school is a key component necessary for graduation. Students who don't pass a test, often become discouraged, and may dropout. As stated above, of those students who meet all graduation requirements except a passing score on a reading test, will most likely, not return to school to prepare or re-take a test. Working with students who perform poorly on tests, no matter the reason, is crucial for a dropout prevent school, such as Enterprise High School to successfully graduate our student population. Preparing students to feel confident going into testing is one of the most important tasks we must complete for our students and school to be successful.

Current Status of Project:

The project is ongoing, since we are a year-round school, and we are currently enrolling new students for the 2019-20 school year. All students are given an initial reading assessment through the Reading Plus program, and I begin identifying students who may be the most at-risk for passing a reading test to graduate. Students who have a 504 plan and who are closest to graduation and have not passed the reading requirement are placed in my homeroom for the most instruction. I will continue to hold these small group Strategizing for Success prep sessions during the new school year, as before, for all reading test re-takers.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

Being part of the NDPS Certification Program while conducting this project served to give me a realization of a picture that is bigger than our school. At-risk youth, no matter where they live or attend school, have many similar characteristics, and issues with high-stakes testing are universal.

Lessons Learned:

I never cease to be surprised by my students. There were many times when I felt I hadn't reached someone, and they would be the student who thanked me after testing for spending the time to teach them the strategy they used. The communication I had with students was vital. I used Google Voice to send texts to students who missed a prep session and to encourage them prior to testing. I also sent reminders the night before testing to get a good night's sleep and to eat breakfast. All these exchanges made a big impact on the students and their success. When I was able to meet one-on-one with students, especially those most resistant to testing, I found the conversations beneficial to helping that student feel more at ease with the prospect of taking and passing a test.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

The number one piece of advice for practitioners is to understand the importance of building relationships, as much as possible with the students, especially those who find the tests the most challenging. Second, I would advise that flexibility with the students, and the lessons is a key component of success. Data discussions are crucial so students are aware of their past performance and areas for improvement on this high-stakes testing. Improvement from test to test is celebrated, and encouragement for students to keep working on their skills. I found that the more I inspected what I expected, the students were more engaged and ultimately, successful.