

**Re-engaging At-Risk Teens in a Rural Community and  
Alternative Education School by Addressing Shared  
Protective and Risks Factors**

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**Key words: At-Risk, Rural, Protective Factors, Alternative school**

**Funding Sources:**

Funding for this project was provided through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Grant awarded to the YMCA Teen Center, and a catered lunch was sponsored by US Bank for the students and teachers.

**Project Cost and Budget Narrative:**

Opening speaker \$500, catered lunch \$1500

**Project Description:**

Welte Education Center is the alternative high school in the Fountain Fort Carson School District #8. Students come to Welte by way of the traditional high school in the district due to lack of credits, behavior, health needs, and/or social/emotional needs. The scope of the project was an all-day all-student Career Conference Day at the high school. Students started their day in the commons with an opening speaker who is a United States Airforce Academy graduate and commercial pilot for American Airlines. This speaker was selected as he was a youth from an alternative school system with whom our students could identify. Following the keynote speaker, students received their schedule (see attachment a copy of the schedule) and were released to their first breakout session.

**Staffing Pattern:**

The 12 teachers were assigned to 10-15 small student groups and rotated with them throughout the day. Building Administrators guided students through the hallways during transitions times, welcomed presenters, and escorted them to their assigned rooms. Student Ambassadors were in each workshop to give the presenters a thank you card. The YMCA staff floated from workshop to workshop offering assistance to the presenters and helping to supervise students. YMCA volunteers were greeters to our guest and assisted in the set-up for the catered lunch.

**Population Served:**

A total of 62 students, 14-20 years of age in grades 9-12, were served.

**Project Origination:**

This project originated with me having the passion and funds to address attendance issues revolving around specific students in the 2016-2017 school year. I recognized that a certain group of students either stopped coming to school or would not fully complete a whole school day. I had the opportunity to apply for additional funding for the following school year to support needs identified on the categories of the grant. I chose dropout prevention as a focus area and was successfully awarded \$87,000 to support this project from the Colorado Department of Education, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Grant. In addition to identifying the academic risk factors, community risk factors impacting the youth in the city were also identified. The community risks factors were identified by the Communities That Care in Fountain Valley, Colorado (Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, 2017).

***Low Neighborhood Detachment and Community Disorganization***

*Higher rates of drug problems, delinquency, violence and drug trafficking occur where people have little attachment to the community. Vandalism rates are high when there is low surveillance of public places. Neighborhood disorganization makes it more difficult for schools, churches and families to promote positive social values and norms.*

***Extreme Economic Deprivation***

*Children who live in deteriorating neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty, poor living conditions and high unemployment are more likely to develop problems with alcohol and other drug use, delinquency, teen pregnancy and dropping out of school, and to engage in violence toward others during adolescence and adulthood.*

**Issues Addressed:**

- Students not connecting their daily school work to college and career success
- Students not connecting with what they are doing in school, being unmotivated to attend and, therefore, less likely to achieve credits or graduate
- Students being detached from their community

**Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:**

This project's outcomes and objectives are for students to fully attain high school completion and to expose students to non-traditional paths to gain entry level into a variety of in-demand careers.

**Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:**

The dropout prevention strategies used were *School and Community Collaboration* and *Active Learning* (*National Dropout Prevention Center, 15 Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies. 2018*). Students were given a career inventory assessment, based on the Colorado cluster model, to complete. Based on those assessment results students were given an individualized schedule to rotate through certain guest sessions at career day which best fit their interests. The morning sessions of Career Conference Day focused on presenters sharing their educational journey. The afternoon sessions focused on skill development.

**Results (Outcomes and Achievements):**

I addressed the community risk factor (that students are detached from the community) by allowing students to meet with individuals from the community who spoke about their career fields. This allowed students to begin exploring a specific career based on their personal interests. 62 out of 125 students attended our Career Conference Day; this is above the average attendance for a regular school day at Welte. A post-Career Conference Day student survey stated that 78% found that Career Day was helpful and provided awareness on the multiple career options available upon graduation. The student survey also included students' comments such as, "I learned how to write a resume," "I learned some karate," "That having a job should be something you enjoy," and "That you have to be able to make moves on your own."

**Project Timeline:**

The goal was to host Career Conference Day in the spring of 2018. Planning meetings began December 13, 2017 and were held bi-weekly through winter and weekly in the Spring leading up to Career Conference Day on May 1, 2018.

**Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:****Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:**

Networking skills were required and allowed us to invite experts who represented the six different career clusters STEM; Hospitality, Human Services and Education; Health Science, Criminal Justice and Public Safety; Skilled Trades and Technical Sciences; Business, Marketing and Public Administration; and Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (Colorado Career Cluster Model, Colorado Community College System. 2015).

**Current Status of Project:**

The project is complete with the intention to provide a continuum of experiential learning in the upcoming academic school year.

**Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:**

My role in the project was project manager. I facilitated weekly meetings, followed up with correspondence, approved the workshop schedule and presenters. I trained student ambassadors and oversaw logistics during the event. I invited my building administrators which included the principal, assistant principal, school counselor, school social worker, school nurse, district college/career coach, and a new student transition teacher as partners in the planning process.

**Lessons Learned:**

I learned that rural communities and education systems lack resources and often have great disparities compared to their suburban and urban surroundings. The longer those disparities go without being recognized the greater the needs become. This has an impact on the youth in those communities, which then requires more of the education system, especially in an alternative school setting. At Welte, for example, it takes every adult in the building to get our students graduated. It also requires those same adults to seek out resources in their personal and professional network environments to support our students.

I also learned that without community collaboration this Career Conference Day could not have been successful in giving us actual outcomes that have set us up for the next level on the continuum of experiential learning which are developing relevant knowledge and skills and gaining hands on experience for our students. In addition, it became apparent that the reading level in the school is low; teachers realized that Welte has struggling readers. This fact was brought to light through the Journalism session; students could not read and comprehend the material. This created awareness therefore literacy has become one of our main focuses for the 2018-2019.

**Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:**

I want to encourage other dropout prevention practitioners to adopt this Career Conference Day idea and make it a part of their calendar every year. Make sure that the students have a voice; carefully review the students' assessment survey. Get the buy-in from administrators, teachers, and students; build relationships with the teachers to get and sustain their buy-in. Furthermore, keep trying, keep communicating. Do not stop until you get a yes from every community partner you have reached out to because they need to be at the table. Also, never underestimate the power of your personal impact on the youth that you serve; Welte students believed in me and that drove me to see Career Conference Day succeed.