

Highway to Higher Education Academy Dropout Prevention Program

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Funding Sources:

South Carolina Department of Education, EEDA funds.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

Table 1: West Florence High School Budgeted Expenditure—2016–17 School Year

Account (394)	Budgeted Expenditure 2016–17
345 Technology	\$350.00
445 Tech & Software Supplies	\$17,000.00
0175 Inst Prog Beyond Sch (410) Supplies	\$2,367.00
0214 Psychological Services	\$500.00
220 Retirement	\$84.45
230 Social Security	\$38.55
270 Workman’s Comp Tax	\$5.00
224 IMP INST In-Service Training	\$8,742.66
220 Retirement	\$1,476.63
230 Social Security	\$668.62
270 Workman’s Comp Tax	\$87.42
660 Pupil Activity Coll/Career Field Trip	\$522.00
TOTAL	\$31,842.33

Table 2: West Florence High School Budgeted Expenditure—2017–18 School Year

Account (394)	Budgeted Expenditure 2017–18
345 Technology	\$350.00
0175 Inst Prog Beyond Sch (410) Supplies	\$1,876.67
214 Psychological Services	\$500.00
220 Retirement	\$93.30
230 Social Security	\$38.25
270 Workman’s Comp Tax	\$5.00
224 IMP INST In-Service Training	\$6,342.67
220 Retirement	\$1,667.55
230 Social Security	\$668.81
270 Workman’s Comp Tax	\$87.42
332 Travel (Amended)	\$2,400.00
660 Pupil Activity Coll/Career Field Trip	\$300.00
TOTAL	\$14,329.67

Table 3: West Florence High School Budgeted Expenditure—2018–19 School Year

Account (394)	Budgeted Expenditure 2018–19
410 Supplies	\$2,281.66
214 Psychological Services	\$500.00
220 Retirement	\$106.00
230 Social Security	\$39.00
270 Workman’s Comp Tax	\$5.00
224 IMP INST In-Service Training	\$8,742.66
220 Retirement	\$1,866.77
230 Social Security	\$668.81
270 Workman’s Comp Tax	\$87.42
660 Pupil Activity Coll/Career Field Trip	\$300.00
TOTAL	\$14,597.32

Project Description:

The Highway to Higher Education Academy program is designed to provide a comprehensive alternative course curriculum with which to accelerate at-risk incoming ninth-grade students. Eligible students are those who have been retained in the same grade one or more times and who are thus outside their peer group. Findings reported in the *Journal of School Psychology* have indicated that grade retention is a powerful predictor of dropout (Hughes, Cao, West, Allee Smith, & Cerda, 2017). Florence School District One’s Highway to Higher Education program is intended to promote graduation for students who are overaged as a result of grade retention. The program takes an unconventional approach to high school completion that gives participants the opportunity to earn 11 units and achieve junior status within a single school year. Successful completion of the program makes students eligible to graduate in two additional years, after having spent three total years in high school. The program was implemented at each of the district’s three high schools. This field study summarizes the program at West Florence High School.

Staffing Pattern:

West Florence High School staff members taught students regular core courses and were given first priority in the pool of applicants to teach additional after-school courses. Paid staff members included two certified teachers, a career specialist, and a computer lab assistant. A school administrator was assigned to coordinate all aspects of the program at

West Florence High School.

Population Served:

The Highway to Higher Education Academy Program targets a specific subgroup of students through a strategic screening process. The students served are incoming ninth-graders who have been identified as being at risk for dropping out of school based on having been retained at the same grade level. The program has a maximum capacity of 25 students per year.

Project Origination:

This project was created to increase the rate of graduation among a critical group of students identified as being at risk for dropping out of school. Florence One Schools' findings indicated that approximately 85 diploma-tracked students who were promoted from eighth grade to ninth grade would turn 16 before the second quarter of their ninth-grade year. Most of these students performed below grade level in both math and English-language arts, and most were minorities who came from disadvantaged socioeconomic environments. Program participants reported dealing with social struggles related to the stigmas associated with grade retention. Several components of essential data were analyzed to screen students for program eligibility. Data rudiments were reviewed in the following areas:

- Grade retention
- Achievement
- Special education status
- Age
- Feeder school
- Discipline
- Attendance

Issues Addressed:

This program was implemented as a way of eliminating many of the barriers that prevent students from graduating within four years of having entered high school. Specifically, it is intended to renew hope in students by opening a realistic pathway to success through provision of extra support and supplemental services. Findings reported in the article "Building a culture of hope for youth at risk: Supporting learners with optimism, place, pride, and purpose" suggest that schools play a significant role in instilling the hope and optimism needed to help students overcome obstacles in regards to high school completion (Gibson & Barr, 2015). The Highway to Higher Education Academy Program addressed the following issues:

- Engagement
- Teacher selection
- Internet access
- Transportation
- Parental involvement
- Alternative discipline
- Tutorial services
- Communication
- Self-advocacy
- Student attendance
- Mentoring

**Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:
Table 4: (FSD1 Grant Proposal)**

Outcomes	Outcome Measures	Nature of Data Collection	Person Responsible	Baseline Data
Successful student participation	Number of student participants who successfully complete 11 units in one calendar year goal: 56 (75%)	Student transcripts	Building administrators	16-year-old ninth-graders have historically had a 61% freshman promotion rate
Increased graduation rate	50% 4-year graduation rate goal for this cohort	Graduation spreadsheets for each high school	Building administrators	16-year-old ninth-graders have historically had a 39% 4-year graduation rate
Demonstrated world-class knowledge	EOC goal: 70% passage ACT goal: 7% college-ready WIN goal: Match state average	Test data from EOC, ACT, and WIN	Building administrators	None available
Demonstrated world-class skills	Student portfolio reflections	Portfolios	Building administrators	None available
Demonstrated life skills	Percent of students on honor roll; student attendance; percentage of students requiring no discipline	Excel file	Building administrators	None available

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

To allow students to earn 11 units in a single year, three additional courses were incorporated into their schedules. The program coordinator submitted a course request to Florence One Schools for a new after-school course called Freshman Focus 101.

Course Description:

Focus 101 is a project-based course designed to increase the persistence and engagement of incoming ninth graders as they transition from middle school to high school. Freshman Focus 101 will provide students with 21st-century skills that are essential to success in the classroom and workplace, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and technological proficiency. Freshman Focus 101 will address common challenges and raise awareness for students entering high school in order to create a smooth transition from middle to high school that will better equip students to become graduates. Students will discover their own learning styles while developing an understanding of strategies they can use to progress through high school. Character education will be infused into

the curriculum, and students will learn how to apply concepts such as self-discipline, perseverance, and study strategies to improve academic achievement and life skills. Students will also learn time management and goal setting skills that they can draw on to help them organize their assignments and daily tasks, establishing habits that will be vital for college and career readiness.

Additionally, Personal Health and Wellness was taught during weekly after-school sessions by a certified teacher and incorporated the use of Fitbits to track physical activity. The third unit was obtained by taking an online course via Virtual SC, South Carolina's public virtual school.

Additional strategies submitted in the FSD1 grant proposal included the following:

- Course curriculums allowing for unit recovery within the semester time frame
- An Individual Graduation Plan incorporating 11 units in the first year of high school
- The opportunity for incoming freshmen to earn junior status in a single year
- On-campus training opportunities that help students prepare for job interviews and opportunities
- Free summer and after-school academic enrichment
- Parent sessions to promote school–family collaboration
- A close-knit learning community that encourages students and families
- Online learning options that increase scheduling flexibility
- ACT and WIN Ready to Work–related skills development
- Support services such as behavioral health counseling
- Approaches to student behavior that embed Positive Behavioral Intervention Support
- Provision of technological resources for student learning
- Mentoring that provides hope

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

Our students' success came in large part as a result of their renewed sense of hope. Many of the students carried the burden that accompanies being outside one's peer group and being overaged as a result of grade retention. Student data was analyzed for grade retention based on students' date of birth as an incoming freshman and reading level the Spring before the upcoming school year. Based on perception and historical data, participants showed significant improvements in discipline, attendance, and sense of hope. They also showed improvements in academic performance due to the use of mentors, the provision of extra help, and regular monitoring of grades by program coordinators and teachers. The overall objective of the program was to enrich and accelerate the curriculum and thereby help students matriculate from 9th grade to 11th grade in a single year. Many students who did not complete every unit were nonetheless closer to meeting graduation requirements as a result of having participated in the program. This program also educated teachers about the effects of grade retention on students' individual lives and society as a whole.

Project Timeline:

This project was funded by an Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) grant awarded to Florence One Schools prior to the 2016–17 school term. The three Florence One Schools high schools were given a budget that covered 1:1 technology, tutoring, field trips, supplies, and counseling services for students participating in the Highway to Higher Education Academy Dropout Prevention Program. Applicant screening took place in Spring 2016 and

included collaborations with administrators from the feeder school where eligible students were currently enrolled. Applications were mailed at the beginning of summer break, and parents were invited to an orientation that provided them with more information about the program.

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

The number of units students earned toward graduation increased significantly. Overall, student discipline decreased and attendance rates increased. Unfortunately, we were unable to track all transfer students to determine whether they graduated high school. The following table provides further data on the status of students in cohorts 1, 2, and 3.

Table 5: Student Data

Year	No. of Students in Cohort	GN	TO	TI	On track to graduate	Off track to graduate
2016–17	24	5	16	3		
2017–18	13		3	1	8	1
2018–19	19		6	1	9	3

Key: GN = Graduate, TO = Transfer Out, TI = Transfer In District.

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

Careful analysis and contextual knowledge of factors that correlate with students’ predisposition to drop out of school were needed to screen students and implement program components with research-proven results. Knowledge of research-proven strategies for improving graduation rate was obtained and used to make informed decisions when forming program objectives. Strategies included mentoring, extra help, counseling, parent involvement, career opportunities, and additional curriculum options.

Current Status of Project:

The 3-year life of the grant ended with the 2018–19 school term. The first group of freshmen graduated in 2019, the second group will graduate in 2020, and the third group will graduate in 2021.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

I served as coordinator of the program at West Florence High School. My responsibilities included, but were not limited to, screening potential applicants, hiring teachers for the after-school component, organizing parent events, assigning mentors, issuing devices to students, progress monitoring, and providing training to teachers, parents and students.

Lessons Learned:

- Never underestimate the power of hope.
- Accelerating students into their peer group grade levels increases their chances of graduating high school.
- At-risk students from disadvantaged homes need extra support.

- Maintain excellent records (funding, attendance, grades, discipline, and results).
- Staff members who work with at-risk students must be carefully selected and must be passionate about helping students.
- The stigma that surrounds retention creates anxiety and hopelessness in students.
- Plan for the unexpected:
 - Teachers who quit because they cannot handle the demands of at-risk students
 - Lack of parental involvement
 - The need for Internet access at home
 - Alternative placement of students as a result of disciplinary issues
 - Expiration or reallocation of program funding
 - Athletes who reject the program due to one less year to play high school sports
 - State audit of the program
 - Graduate school request for program evaluation dissertation

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project:

A holistic approach to dropout prevention is needed across the nation. One major misconception about dropout prevention is that it begins at the ninth-grade level. Rather, dropout prevention begins with proactive parenting and early childhood programs that build a strong academic foundation, and it continues with competent professionals who keep students engaged as they progress from one grade level to the next.

References

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