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Solutions Aren't Cheap

Springfield educators are looking at dropout prevention programs that work for other districts.

by Juliana Goodwin

Superintendent Norm Ridder agrees that something more has to be done to reduce the growing dropout rate.

The question is: What will work here?

Educators in the 24,000-student Springfield school district are examining research for new ideas and studying which existing programs show results.

They are in the process of gathering information and may roll out part of their new strategic plan as early as April, with a fuller implementation expected next fall. Among other things, the district is surveying dropouts to better understand why they left without a diploma and contacting comparable systems to see what types of programs, staffing and strategy have worked elsewhere.

"We need to be more flexible, provide more alternatives, night schools, different things like that," Ridder said. "That will be rolling out with our strategic plan as far as bringing alternative programs to the table, which is going to call for more tax money."

Under the federal No Child Left Behind education law, all public systems must improve high school graduation rates — and reduce the number of students who leave without a diploma — or face stiff sanctions.

Marc Maness, director of community development, is collecting data from the public through surveys, roundtables and focus groups for the strategic planning. Once the information has been collected, programs evaluated, and administrators give their input, the district will unveil a long range plan, which will launch in August.

"Of course, we will look at existing programs," Maness said. "Then also look at models that work elsewhere and make recommendations."

Peggy Riggs, associate superintendent, said implementing new programs is expensive and shouldn't be rushed. The district wants to make sure the research is there to support programs before they're implemented.

School board member Andy Hosmer said it's important to explore other school systems for answers.

"You have to look outside of our schools and see who's doing a really good job and bring some of those ideas back to our school and see if they would fit into our schools," Hosmer said.

The News-Leader examined districts that had significant success stemming dropout rates and found two examples: "The Met" in Rhode Island and the Guilford County Schools "middle college" program in North Carolina. While the district has not examined these specific schools, Ridder has talked about implementing similar programs here.

The Met — which emphasizes student internships — had a 94.6 percent graduation rate in 2005 compared to the Rhode Island state average of just 81.3 percent.

Guilford County has used the middle college approach — which is typically set up on community college campuses and allows high school students the potential to earn dual credit — and has cut its dropout rates in half since 1999-2000 school year.

Alternatives are not cheap, said Jane Pendry, college liaison at the middle college program at Guilford Technical Community College. She points out that a student teacher ratio of 15 to 1 requires more staff and money.

"You can spend the money now or you can spend the money later. If you don't educate these kids, they will end up in jail or worse. So, it's a matter of when do I spend my money," Pendry said. "You're eventually going to spend the money, and if you can prevent them from dropping out of school, isn't it worth it? I think it is."

Focus on interests

When it comes to the dropout rate, Dennis Littky isn't interested in excuses.

People can say, "Oh well, these kids won't learn. Oh well, it's just our city," he said.

Or they can change the way they teach.

Littky and Elliot Washor co-founded The Big Picture Company, a nonprofit educational organization that designed The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center — The Met — in Providence, R.I.

Students focus on projects and internships, not tests or grades. They write a 75-page autobiography before graduation and craft a senior thesis. A pivotal component is the adviser who helps each student form an individualized learning plan and stays with a student throughout his or her four years of high school.

"We build our curriculum around the particular kid's interest and passion. Two days a week, the kids are out in the community doing real work," said Littky, director of The Met. "Monday, Wednesday, Friday the kids are back at school with an adviser who has 15 kids and follows them for four years."

Relationships are also key.

The teacher "knows the family well," he said. "You say, 'Wow, this is a place I can see coming to school,' because you are very well known, you have a great relationship with an adviser and you're doing work you love."

Littky says the model can work anywhere — as it has from Oakland to Camden, N.J. — but it won't work everywhere.

It would be tough to enter a high school with 4,000 students and apply the model with this same rate of success, though it could be done if you extract a smaller group of students and teachers within a larger school, Littky said.

The Met has bucked national trends by graduating high numbers of minority and low-income students, who often have the highest dropout rates.

Last year, 24 percent of students at The Met were Caucasian; 65 percent qualified for free or reduced lunches, a measure of low-income status. By contrast, Springfield's rate is 42.6 percent.

The Met has a 98 percent college acceptance rate, and 75 percent of those who enroll are the first in their family to go to college.

The Met was largely funded by a \$29 million state supported bond issue in 1994. Its operation is entirely state-funded and receives the same per-pupil amount as the other Providence schools.

Unpaid internships and close relationships are the backbone of the system. Students have a database of 2,000 businesses and organizations to choose from to job shadow for a day. If they like it, they can set up an internship.

The beauty of the program is that students explore their interests and discover passions.

"Kids are engaged in what they are doing, and their work counts," Littky said. "They are making a presentation to the CVS regional managers. It's not like maybe I'll get a C on a paper or an A, I get to stand up before CVS regional managers."

When Carlene Merola, 17, joined The Met as a junior, traditional schools had failed her.

"I just wasn't excited. I felt like my teachers could care less whether I passed or failed," Merola said.

Now she loves the adviser concept. "That is one of the greatest things. You have someone who cares about you and is trying to help you with your goals."

Merola's senior thesis is on integrating technology into the classroom. To prepare, she interned in a media center and taught other students how to design a Web page, craft a brochure and create a film.

But is it more challenging than a traditional school?

"I definitely put way more time into my projects than I ever have because I care about it," Merola said. "It's not such a drag to do a research paper I'm interested in."

Littky said tweaking schools won't reduce dropout rates. America must change the way it teaches.

"We're being pretty short sighted about our country and we're (creating) a first-world and third-world country," he said. "With the great number of people dropping out, look at what that means

to our work force and look at who those kids are: They are mostly poor kids and poor kids of color."

Jump-start on college

In North Carolina, the "middle college" concept has paid off for Guilford County Schools. Its dropout rate of 2.98 percent is one of the lowest in North Carolina.

The 70,000-student Guilford system is larger than Springfield's but has a similar poverty rate — 47 percent, while its minority population, about 55 percent, is nearly four times the number of minority students in Springfield's schools.

Richard Tuck, director of school social services, dropout prevention and parent outreach for Guilford County Schools, said the district has six middle college high schools. A middle college is basically a high school on a college campus. It has its own accredited high school teachers, a principal and its own budget.

Like The Met, the student teacher ratio is 15 to 1.

In Springfield, Ridder said the district is interested in more collaboration with Ozarks Technical Community College.

"We're talking to OTC about the possibility of them having a program where we would run it with them, but the problem is their program is full," Ridder said.

Guilford Technical Community College has middle colleges on three campuses. When students enroll, if they pass the college placement test, they can take college credit courses at GTCC for no cost, said Jane Pendry.

There is no limit to the number of college credits they can earn, and even freshmen can take a stab at the college placement test.

"A number of the kids we get are dropouts or potential dropouts because they are so disengaged in traditional high school. A lot of the kids that we get would never go to college," Pendry said.

It has been a win-win situation, Pendry said.

"A large percentage of student stay with us after they graduate. It's a good relationship with the public schools. We get a tremendous number of visitors on campus through this. It gives us a lot of exposure," she said.

The college also uses its space more efficiently. Before middle colleges, few classes were held between noon and 6 p.m. Now the campus bustles all day.

Tutoring is a key component, said Williams.

"We pay tutors and we also use college students," Williams said. "It's an ideal opportunity for (college students) to be involved in service learning."

Each of the middle colleges is designed to meet different needs. There's an all-female middle college; an all-male; one specializes in the medical fields; some have nontraditional hours so students can take classes late in the day.

Each middle college has a screening and application process to better understand student goals.

Alexis Somers, 17, dropped out of high school last year due to attendance and discipline issues.

Now a senior slated to graduate in May, she credits the middle college program.

"I don't socialize that well with people, and here they make you feel welcome and they invite you and everyone talks to you," Somers said.

Middle colleges offer students a fresh start, said Pete Kashubara, principal at one of the GTCC middle college campuses.

"The expectation is you're like a college student; that is how we treat them," Kashubara said. "The kids look out for each other. My discipline is slim to none. Kids understand it's a privilege to be here, not a right."

There's a 100- to 200-person waiting list at each middle college, said Williams.

Williams points out that the program was implemented at the suggestion of a former superintendent who was familiar with the middle college approach in Tennessee. The specifics were then worked out with community colleges that saw investing in the students as an investment in the community.

A high school dropout earns about \$260,000 less over his or her lifetime than a high school graduate and pays about \$60,000 less in taxes.

"We need to do something to help the entire community. If these students drop out, we're not helping the community because they are not contributing to society," Williams said. "They are not productive citizens. What can we do to partner to help young people be successful?"

Want to know more:

Learn more about The Met:

<http://www.themetschool.org/home>

Learn more about The Big Picture Company:

<http://www.bigpicture.org/>

Learn more about Guilford County Schools:

<http://www.guilford.k12.nc.us/>