Alabama’s Graduation Coaches

School districts across the country are working hard to stem the dropout crisis by developing multifaceted programs that involve teachers, parents, and community agencies. Given the myriad reasons that students decide to leave school—from poor academic performance and student-teacher conflicts to teen pregnancy and family issues—the use of graduation coaches has proven effective in increasing the number of high school graduates and in preparing the next generation of students for the world of work, particularly in the state of Alabama.

Alabama has 1,389 schools, 855 of which receive Title I funding. Within the student population, 52 percent are economically disadvantaged, 3 percent are limited English proficient students, 11 percent have disabilities, and about 41 percent of the students are classified as minorities. Especially troubling for state leaders has been the number of dropouts. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, the Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) was 69 percent and the college enrollment rate was only 67 percent.

In 2006, state Superintendent of Education Joe Morton, in collaboration with the Alabama State Board of Education, created the Preparing Alabama Students for Success program and the Graduation Coach Program. These state-funded initiatives provided districts with seed money to pilot the first graduation coach program and locally designed initiatives for increasing the graduation rate and reducing the dropout rate. Because of the overall success since the pilot began, many districts that were not awarded funds have found other means to implement and sustain their own Graduation Coach Program. In Tuscaloosa City and Dothan City, for instance, graduation coaches who work in Title I schools are employed using Title I resources. Twelve school districts around the state are implementing the Graduation Coach Program in each of their high schools to increase the number of high school graduates. Through these state initiatives Alabama has trained more than 200 coaches for grades 7 through 12.

How the Program Works

A graduation coach hired by a school district is usually employed in a middle school or a high school. Schools that have a large number of students with serious academic and behavioral problems may require two coaches. The purpose of the graduation coach is to identify at-risk students and foster collaboration among schools, families, and community organizations to align services that promote the students’ academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral development.

One key to the success of the graduation coach program is Alabama’s Graduation Tracking System (GTS). Initiated by Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University and the Center for Social Organization of Schools in collaboration with the Baldwin County School System, it is one of few systems in the country that provides data on students as young as kindergarteners and follows them through the 12th grade. It assists graduation coaches with identifying at-risk students by reporting on attendance, behavior, course credits, and academic performance. For example, a student with three or more unexcused absences, a grade point average below
70, or a significant number of disciplinary referrals is identified by GTS as an at-risk student and in need of intervention services.

Once a graduation coach identifies a student at risk of dropping out, he or she begins devising an individualized plan to keep the student in school and working toward academic and behavioral success. The plan generally incorporates programs and stop-gap initiatives to address behaviors and issues that may cause a student to drop out. In many school districts, such as Baldwin County, parents are given resources to support and training to increase their ability to work with students through the Parent Project, a nationally recognized diversion program. For students who become parents before they graduate high school, the district offers a teen parenting program that addresses the challenges teen parents face while helping them complete the requirements necessary for graduation. The curriculum is currently being adapted for statewide use.

In addition, school districts including Tuscaloosa City, Birmingham City, Limestone County, and Blount County offer online high school courses that graduation coaches use to recruit former dropouts.

Alabama’s Graduation Coach Program also works along with other statewide efforts to keep students in school. The Helping Education/Linking Parents (HELP) program in Tuscaloosa, for example, gives coaches an opportunity to enforce the state’s compulsory attendance law (which requires parents of students with two out-of-school suspensions to meet with school personnel, the mayor, and the district attorney). If the student’s behavior does not change, parents could be fined $500 and/or be sentenced to jail for at least 30 days. Recently, the state’s compulsory school-age law was changed from 16 to 17 years of age. Under the new law, students who decide to leave school, especially as dropouts, must complete the Student Exit Interview Process jointly with their parents or guardians and a team of student advocates at the school. Additional legislative efforts for maintaining students in school to reduce crime-related or social service costs and to promote student success include the Student Harassment Act (an anti-bullying law) and another law that calls for revocation of a student’s driver’s license based on the number of discipline referrals or suspensions received or for leaving school before reaching the new mandatory attendance age of 17. These policies allow school systems additional opportunities to provide a family with wrap around services that can help students stay in school and succeed.

A new national report from America’s Promise Alliance, Johns Hopkins University, and Civic Enterprises, Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic (November 2010), found Alabama among the top states for improving its graduation rate between 2002-2008 (a nearly seven percent increase), underscoring the effectiveness of the Graduation Coach Program and other collaborative state initiatives. As states consider ways to stem the dropout crisis and increase the number of high school graduates, Alabama’s graduation coaches and comprehensive school support system is a model worth consideration.

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