

Ninth Grade Transition Academy

Clip 1: An overview of her school and how they implemented the 9th grade academy

Becky Harrison: I'm Becky Harrison and have been the Principal at Caprock High School, which is a comprehensive high school in Amarillo, Texas. 9-12 high school for 20 years. And back in the middle 90's we started looking at stream of success. Our state at that time was moving in the direction of high-stakes testing and had told us that we had to get to the point where our basic skills testing was at 90%, and that's really what propelled us to start looking at student success, because as we began to look at getting our kids to 90% on a basic skills test, we realized we had a long way to go. And as we began to look at the data, and that was really the point where we started getting serious about student success when we began to see that our 9th grade students were our dropouts. They had the highest failure rate, the worst attendance, and they were our dropouts. And so it became real apparent when we were looking at the data that 9th grade students were not successful at Caprock High School. The data also showed us that if we could get them to the 10th grade, they were successful. They were able to stay in school, pass, and graduate on time. And so that's when we began to analyze what is it we need to do to be able to help our 9th grade students be successful.

And as I presented the data to the faculty, I asked for a group of teachers to help me reinvent our 9th grade. And we went through about six months of talking about where are the concerns, where are the weaknesses of our students, and how are we going to

address each one of the weaknesses. And that moved us into going to a totally restructured 9th grade program. And this was teacher developed. Teachers looked at where our weaknesses are with our kids, what they weren't doing, and we built the program around how we wanted to help our kids, our specific kids, in a campus where 1,850 kids, low income, at-risk, 64% Hispanic population, large minority population, large economically disadvantaged population, and we also had a large special ed and ELL population coming to us, plus we were the regional program for the deaf. So we had lots of baggage, lots of students with dysfunctional homes, and how were we going to take their weaknesses, how were we going to take where they were instructionally weak, discipline weak, attendance weak, and be able to address those needs to where they were very successful? And that's what evolved into our 9th grade program.

That group of teachers and I, as we studied it, we developed the parameters of our 9th grade program and we are in our 10th year of the 9th grade program and those non-negotiables have not changed. We revisit them every year. Every year the teachers say, these are non-negotiable, we cannot change these. Now we may tweak something here and there, but, we have stayed with the same parameters that we started 10 years ago. Number one they said was small learning communities. We had to have the middle school teaming, we had to have a core of teachers and a group of kids that were on a team, and those teachers, along with a dedicated 9th grade assistant principal and counselor meeting every week several times a week with the focus being top student success, down to the individual kid level. And that was a non-negotiable. The second

main non-negotiable was academic interventions, because we can't have higher expectations of our kids if there's no support system. And one thing we went into this program saying was we will not allow freshmen to fail. They have to do the work, they have to do what's expected of them. And we've got to build a support system that deals with when they don't. And so we put together a strong academic intervention program that kicks in the minute the student does not turn in work. The minute the student fails a test they go into a mandatory tutorial situation and have to do the work. We have raised our expectations of kids. You cannot take a zero, you cannot fail, we will not allow it. And so we have put in a very, very strong academic intervention program for our kids. And then the last thing that we put in is intervening early in the form of credit recovery. We do six-week credit recovery. We do semester credit recovery where we build in catch-up classes as we call them. And then at the end of the year we do a two-week end-of-the-year credit recovery too with the whole goal being graduating to the 10th grade. Statistically when we went into this program we were averaging around 140 kids a year that were repeating the 9th grade. The first year we were able to reduce that number down to 50. Since that time we have consistently out of a class of over 600 freshmen every year been able to only have 10 to 12 students who do not graduate to the 10th grade. And it is basically because strong expectations, strong academic interventions, and everybody taking it to the individual kid level – personalization of that kid's education.

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