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Program aims to prevent dropouts

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A smart kid who struggles in a single subject might go unnoticed in many middle schools.

Not at McAuliffe Middle School. Not anymore.

“He’s a potential dropout in a couple of years,” math department leader Santos Serna said of just such a student during a meeting of a small group of staff at the school.

The student generally made good grades but was doing poorly in math class because dress code violations tended to land him in suspension earlier in the day.

Staff at the Southwest Independent School District campus knew this was a serious problem. Middle school students with poor attendance, behavior problems or who flounder in either math or reading have a slim chance of graduating high school with their peers, according to research from Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund.

A sixth-grader displaying any one of those four indicators has only a 10 percent likelihood of graduating on time, a study tracking students in Philadelphia for eight years found.

A new pilot program under way now in five cities, including San Antonio, aims to turn those numbers around.

Funded by the PepsiCo Foundation, it combines the Johns Hopkins research on early warning signs with interventions from two established programs: City Year and Communities in Schools.

At McAuliffe, the only local site for the pilot program, a member of Johns Hopkins’ Talent Development program monitors student data to look for early warning signs.

Staff members meet regularly to discuss students who show any of the four indicators. The student who refused to abide by the dress code was wearing too much of one color — signs of a “wannabe” gang member, faculty said.

“He needs a mentor,” City Year team leader Lila Givens said.

City Year members, who are serving on a yearlong Peace Corps-like mission, often serve as mentors or tutors. The recent college graduates say their youth and enthusiasm helps them connect with students.

Communities in Schools intercedes on more difficult cases, holding group meetings for students with behavior issues and subtly slipping packages of food to those whose needs extend beyond school. The longstanding dropout

prevention program has case managers who are social workers or licensed professional counselors.

Partnering with the nonprofits is not new for McAuliffe, which was chosen for the pilot because of its previous relationships with the three organizations. What’s new is the way they are working together, using data to drive decisions and making regular referrals to one another.

“The great thing about this partnership is letting all three organizations do what they do best,” Givens said.

Now City Year members call the homes of absent students while Communities in Schools case manager Beverly King prepares to take a group of boys on a team-building excursion. King works each week with a group of male students who have behavior problems, one of the four early warning indicators.

“Some of them have terrible home lives, with living in poverty and living in almost poverty, and parent issues,” she said. “They deal with a lot before they even get to school in the morning.”

Working together on the outdoor obstacle course gave the students a chance to test out leadership skills and to learn simple lessons such as the importance of asking for clarification when they aren’t sure about instructions.

The hope is that such lessons will help keep students in school until graduation. Dropping out of high school is expensive, and not just for the dropout.

Students who leave school without a diploma typically go on to earn thousands of dollars less than their better educated counterparts. A high school diploma can boost an individual’s wage-earning power by more than \$9,000 a year, according to some estimates.

In the San Antonio area, 10,498 students dropped out of the Class of 2008. If just half of them had graduated, their combined earnings would have totaled more than \$56 million in a typical year, resulting in an extra \$5 million in state and local tax revenues, according to a study released late last month by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

“To see a college culture arise out of San Antonio would be a wonderful thing,” said Monica Silva, project coordinator for Communities in Schools.