

'Diplomas Now' Offers Potential Dropouts Lots of Help

The Diplomas Now model, spreading in cities across the nation, uses an early-warning system to identify potential dropouts and offers intensive social support to help students make it through.

by Catherine Gewertz

On a dead-end street in a hardscrabble corner of this city, an experiment to keep students from dropping out of school begins with 11-year-olds.

Even before the first bell rings at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences, and long after the last bell sounds, students are drawn into a web of activities and relationships designed to keep them on track with their studies. From the greeting-and-bonding activity in the school courtyard each morning to the homework help and community-service projects into the late afternoons, students are linked with a team of adults who serve as mentors, monitors, teachers, naggers, and nurturers. Some even follow the neediest students from class to class, offering minute-by-minute help.

The 750-student middle school in upper north Philadelphia is a showcase for a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention. It produced such dramatic improvements in attendance, behavior, and course-passing rates last year that it's being tried this year in 11 more middle or high schools in Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and San Antonio.

Dubbed "Diplomas Now," the model blends whole-school reform with social services and an early-warning system. It uses elements of the Talent Development school design developed at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, which emphasizes structuring a school in smaller units so that teams of teachers oversee manageable numbers of students. Professional development and peer coaching for teachers, customized academic help for students, and added instruction in math and literacy are also part of the model.

The social and emotional supports come from two national organizations: City Year, a Boston-based service corps of 17- to 24-year-olds, and Communities in Schools, an Arlington, Va.-based group that connects schools with local social-service resources. City Year sends cadres of young people to Diplomas Now schools to run after-school programs and team up with teachers to help the students with attendance, behavior, or academic difficulties. Communities in Schools provides social workers to counsel the most seriously troubled students. The national expansion is funded by a three-year, \$5 million grant from the PepsiCo Foundation.

The early-warning system is a pivotal part of the Diplomas Now model. A computerized database, it allows school staff members to closely track three important indicators—attendance, behavior, and course failures—to detect right away which students need help. The idea comes from research by Johns Hopkins and the Philadelphia Education Fund, which found that a 6th grader with serious troubles in even one of those areas has at least a 75 percent chance of never finishing high school.

Johns Hopkins compiles and analyzes data on the three indicators, nicknamed the "ABCs," from all Diplomas Now sites. Each school also has a local partner that helps its staff pore over the data and coordinate the services that will form appropriate interventions for students.

"This model is really about getting the right supports to the right



Mary Sandifer and Ms. Rivera of City Year dance with students during the daily morning ritual.

kids at the right time," said Johns Hopkins research scientist Robert Balfanz.

At Feltonville last year, the approach helped get many students back on track to graduate from high school on time. Of those who were off track because they had failed math or English, eight in 10 brought their grades up.

Of those who were off track because of poor attendance or behavior, about half improved.

The 167,000-student Philadelphia school district has focused hard in recent years on early detection of students who risk dropping out, a task made especially urgent by its on-time graduation rate of 57 percent. Under its last superintendent, Paul G. Vallas, the system began building an early-warning data system and launched a project to make dropout prevention a higher priority. Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman, who took over in June 2008, made the early-warning data available to all schools, added more counselors, and amended school report cards so that they include the number of students on track to graduate. That metric can be considered in principals' evaluations, said Courtney Collins-Shapiro, the district's director of multiple pathways to graduation.

Tomás Hanna, Ms. Ackerman's chief of staff, praised Diplomas Now as a worthy model, but said its cost and the complexity of coordinating its partners makes districtwide adoption a long shot. The district seeks to do something similar, however, by drawing on existing school and city services and creating a single point of contact in each school to coordinate services to help students detected by the early-warning data.

Mr. Balfanz said Diplomas Now costs \$400,000 to \$500,000 annually per school, but represents a comprehensive enough approach to improvement that it could warrant using a good portion of a school's allotment of federal Title I aid for disadvantaged students.

A typical day at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences shows how the pieces of the program interact. Before the day's first bell on a recent November morning, the 15 City Year volunteers, in their standard bright-red pullovers, lead a singing-and-dancing circle for the students. By 7:30 a.m., the students and young volunteers are smiling and bumping hips. Each corps member is assigned to a homeroom—most in the 6th grade, with fewer in 7th and 8th—and follows that same group of students throughout the day, keeping a special watch on five to seven "focus" students most in need of help.

In one 6th grade homeroom, Kimberly Somahkawahho is teaching students how to write "sequence charts" that convey the main ideas of a story. While she does this, corps member Ashley Moffett moves about

the room, squatting down to help one boy start writing an assigned paragraph, gently coaxing another to get out his notebook. She sharpens another's pencil. When the writing boy begins to daydream, she calls out with a smile: "Have you got that paragraph? I'm coming back in five minutes." He grins and gets back to work. The 23-year-old will follow this group of students all day long, helping teachers maintain peace and focus with the whole class, and targeting special help to her "focus list" students.



Christina Rivera, a member of the City Year corps, works with 6th grade students during reading class at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences.

Ms. Somahkawahho said she enjoys collaborating with Ms. Moffett. Each week, they go over lesson plans and decide how Ms. Moffett can help. In return, Ms. Moffett provides her with valuable insights about how her students are doing in other classes, in the after-school program, and in social aspects of school life. The flip side, though, is that the coordination can be taxing.

"It's nice to have Ashley to work with because she tracks [the students] class to class," Ms. Somahkawahho said. "But sometimes it can feel like one more person I'm responsible for. I have to ask if she understands what she's doing, take time to do weekly meetings. But overall, it's a really valuable collaboration."

Ms. Moffett, an aspiring dentist whose City Year training took one month last summer and continues each Friday, said she is glad she took a year off after earning her biology degree from Louisiana State University last spring. "This will have an impact on my life forever," she said. "Some days are tough. But I feel good because I think I'm making a difference." Gabrielle Solomon, 12, said the City Year corps member she worked with last year helped her with more than just schoolwork.

"I had struggles with ratio tables, and Ms. Beth would come help me," she said. "Also, when you have problems, they ask you what's up and how they can help."

The collaboration between Ms. Somahkawahho and Ms. Moffett shows up again later in the day, when it's time for the weekly 6th



Assistant Principal Peggy Klova-Davis, left, meets with teachers and City Year corps members during the grade-level gathering.

grade team meeting. All the teachers and their City Year corps members meet with the principal, the school's instructional assistant, and one of the two social workers from Communities in Schools. They use updated print-outs of early-warning indicators to discuss students' progress. Together with a special education teacher, Ms. Somahkawahho and Ms. Moffett discuss one boy who has been absent a lot because of a death in the family. He scores as proficient on reading tests, they note, but has been getting a lot of D's lately. They sketch out help plans for him, and add him to Ms. Moffett's focus list.

Later in the day, all the members of the Diplomas Now collaborative meet to coordinate their work. These meetings can encompass anything from planning a "family night" to clarifying who is responsible for home visits to a student's family. The walls of the conference area, right outside the principal's office, are covered with laminated charts showing every student's attendance, behavior, and

course-failure patterns, as well as their reading and math grade levels, their state test scores, and their six-week benchmark scores. Big graphics in red, yellow, and green show how many students are off track, "sliding" off track, or on track.

The students with the greatest challenges are supported by the two social workers from Communities in Schools. Todd Milhollen and Staci Hardy do individual and group counseling with students, and jump in with triage when a crisis occurs. On a recent day, a student had to be committed to a mental-health hospital, and the social workers scrambled to support the family and supply transportation. More typical duties include referring students to substance-abuse programs, helping families obtain food stamps, or making home visits to find truant students.

Cases can be complex. One involving a boy with bipolar disorder required Mr. Milhollen to work with the student's doctors and insurance provider so he could get medication, consult with teachers in making a plan to support him in class, and alerting City Year corps members to draw him into after-school pursuits such as a poetry slam to keep him engaged.



Staci Hardy, a social worker with Communities in Schools, moderates a game designed to teach students values.

A key part of the Diplomas Now model is an on-site program coordinator, who serves as what its founders call the "grease and glue" for all the moving parts of the program. This year at Feltonville, that role is filled by Deborah Bambino, who also serves as the school district's instructional specialist at the school. In addition to overseeing professional development, she frames team meetings and collaborative sessions in the "Diplomas Now way," discussing progress and interventions in terms of which students are on track, off track, or sliding.

Ms. Bambino said her staff is "spoiled" to have such valuable resources in the building. One of the challenges for teachers, she said, is in learning to accept City Year corps members as partners.

"Co-teaching is a growing experience," she said. "It's not easy to trust or to delegate. You have to be on top of your game to share your game."

Nelson Reyes, Feltonville's principal, said the program is valuable, but logistically challenging. "The more people you have, the more you need to monitor and meet with everyone," he said, adding that it would be impossible without a site coordinator.

The Philadelphia Education Fund, a longtime partner with Johns Hopkins in the research that led to development of the Diplomas Now model, also serves a key support function at the Philadelphia sites. Its senior program director, Allie Mulvihill, helps coordinate the players and draws on her long resume as a curriculum specialist and school administrator to offer expertise to Feltonville's staff. She's seen many reform models in action, and thinks this one offers the right mix of elements to help disadvantaged children succeed.

"I've been in the education game a long time," she said, "and this particular venture has got the goods."

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