



S.C. project stems 'dropout factories'

Poor 9th-graders get extra attention

By John Monk - McClatchy Newspapers

Friday, Jan. 21, 2011

A sweeping \$350,000 state-funded initiative to prevent dropouts at a high school with one of the Midlands' highest dropout rates is only five months old but already drawing rave reviews.

"This time of the year, we would have had about 15 students in the ninth grade drop out. They get discouraged and don't come back after Christmas break," said Nathan White, 53, principal of C.A. Johnson High School, which serves a low-income area in downtown Columbia.

But as of the third week in January, none of the 97 ninth-graders had quit school.

"Fantastic," said Bob Balfanz, a nationally known Johns Hopkins University researcher who coined the term "dropout factories" to describe schools like C.A. Johnson that have drastically high dropout rates.

Balfanz, 48, was in Columbia on Thursday to assess the C.A. Johnson program, which is his and his colleagues' brainchild. He also made a speech to United Way leaders.

Called "Diploma Now," the program is the result of some 15 years of study, field testing and revisions, he said. It is the only such initiative in South Carolina and one of just 19 in the nation. Balfanz and his Johns Hopkins colleagues have just won a \$36 million federal grant to help expand the program to 60 more schools with high dropout rates over the next five years.

At C.A. Johnson, a 62-year-old high school with 479 students, Balfanz and officials with Richland School District 1 and the state Department of Education found fertile ground to test-drive Diploma Now.

After all, according to state Education Department statistics, C.A. Johnson has by far the highest dropout rate -- 11.8 percent -- of all seven traditional high schools in Richland 1. In South Carolina's some 200 high schools, the annual dropout rate is determined by the number of students who leave school each year and is markedly higher in low-income areas.

Statewide, the median dropout rate for high schools is about 3 percent. Richland 1's A.C. Flora High School has a 2.8 percent dropout rate; Dreher High School, 3.4 percent.

Balfanz's program is, basically, a massive coordinated attack on C.A. Johnson's potential dropouts.

It combines numerous methods to address the ABCs -- attendance issues, behavior problems and course difficulties -- linked to dropouts. Its soldiers are inexpensive but highly educated young people in Columbia's arm of the national AmeriCorps City Year program. It also includes other service programs that can tap into community as well as school resources to target students' individual problems.

Ninth grade is the crucial battleground.

"Studies have shown it's a make-or-break year," Balfanz said.

Here are some of the elements in his Diploma Now program:

Seven City Year workers, all college graduates in their early 20s, spend some nine hours each weekday at the school, greeting students as they arrive. Then, each worker stays with a class of students, attending all classes, mentoring and providing an extra "set of eyes" for the teacher. They make \$180 a week.

Another agency, Communities in Schools, connects schools with social service workers.

The first semester of ninth grade has "closing the gap" remedial work in math and English and how-to-learn classes. One reason many ninth-graders drop out is they can't do the work. In math, for example, teachers make sure students know basic fractions and percentages. Classes are small -- usually about 12 to 15.

Teachers meet regularly to discuss any student with attendance, behavior or academic problems. By this "early warning system," teachers can bring in parents or social workers to work on problems.

Ninth-graders are segregated from 10th-, 11th- and 12th-graders. They take all classes on one high school floor, eat together and do other things together. They are known as the "Ninth Grade Academy."

Balfanz's program is in place in a high school in each of the 19 cities served by City Year.

City Year service workers are a key to the program. These "near peers" are chosen for their dedication, caring personalities and ability to persevere in the face of all kinds of difficulties, Balfanz said. Recently, for example, one City Year worker, Kristen Evans, 23, noticed how a ninth-grader was always copying the notes from a fellow student. Evans learned the girl had an undiagnosed but easily correctable -- with glasses -- vision problem. Now the girl has glasses and can see the blackboard.

It's too early to know if the state money that pays for Balfanz's program at C.A. Johnson as well as other holistically oriented programs in other high-risk S.C. high schools will survive another year. The S.C. legislature, hamstrung with budget problems, will have to decide.

No less than Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott, whose department already spends more than \$1 million a year putting resource deputies in county public schools, spells out the cost of dropouts.

"If they drop out, many will be in drugs and crime. Then, they'll be in the court system and in prison. That gets expensive," Lott said.

Balfanz said statistics show if a kid drops out, he probably won't be able to get a job in those crucial years between 18 and 24. A dropout will find it hard to have a family and get adequate health care, he said.

And having a large class of costly, difficult-to-employ residents directly affects a state's economy, he said.

"This is all really a battle to save futures," Balfanz said. "It just takes people power."

Read more here: <http://www.myrtlebeachonline.com/2011/01/21/1933825/sc-project-stems-dropout-factories.html#storylink=cpy>