



Scaling Up Solutions To The Dropout Problem

Program applies successful Johns Hopkins model to D.C. schools and beyond

By: Kavitha Cardoza // March 8, 2012



A student checks in with his City Year mentors before school starts at Browne Education Campus in Northeast D.C.

Olivia, an energetic middle-schooler at Browne Education Campus in Northeast D.C., is called into the middle of a huddle of her classmates and City Year volunteers. They clap in unison as she starts off the morning's "power cheer," gradually increasing her cadence as the call-and-response culminates.

"I got a school that's hotter than hot," she says.

"How hot is hot?" her classmates yell back at her.

The cheers are a daily ritual at Browne, a struggling K-8 school hosting a group of City Year volunteers as part of the "Diplomas Now" program. The volunteers also interact with students one-on-one.

"I dance around, or I'll make up songs about them, or talk in weird voices," says Anna Gaeckle, an 18-year-old volunteer at Browne from North Carolina. Her goal, she says, is to get students to smile at least twice every day.

"A lot of them are in really tough situations so I want them to know that someone loves them," Gaeckle says.

Researchers and educators continue to design new ways to help improve the success rates of schools like Browne, which has less than 30 percent of its students reading and doing math at grade level. But one of the biggest challenges is translating those one-off programs into systems that can be successful in any school. Diplomas Now is an attempt to do just that, and at Browne, it appears to be working.

Spreading success to more schools

Every problem in education, including poor graduation rates, is being solved in some "extraordinary way" somewhere in the U.S., according to Education Secretary Arne Duncan. But one of the biggest challenges, Duncan says, is "scaling up" those solutions and creating systemic, widespread change.

For example: Baltimore Talent Development High School in Baltimore has a specialized curriculum designed by Johns Hopkins University researcher Robert Balfanz, and has reported impressive graduation results. The school's success challenges the poor expectations typically associated with a high-poverty student population.

'Diplomas Now' is Balfanz's attempt to scale up the program that worked so well at Talent Development. Last year, 'Diplomas Now' won a federal innovation grant of \$30 million to continue its expansion to another 30 schools across the country, including Browne. Balfanz and his program partner with two outside nonprofits, City Year and Communities in Schools to bring in people who function as a sort of "second shift of adults." These mentors follow up on students' many non-academic needs; that way, teachers can concentrate on teaching.

Volunteers aim to be 'stable adults' for students

The problems Browne students face at home spill into school. Truancy is a problem, and on a single November day, there were eight fights police were called in to deal with two.

Unless these children have their needs met, it's difficult for them to concentrate on schoolwork and they will eventually drop out, Balfanz adds.

Gaekle, the City Year volunteer, follows approximately 20 students from class to class every day.

"We do homework check, attendance check," she says. There are the phone calls home, tutoring, and lunch clubs. And then they start on after-school programs.

These City Year volunteers work ten hours a day with students. It can be emotionally exhausting work.

Program requires monitoring every detail

Browne Education Campus was chosen for Diplomas Now because it was one of the lowest performing schools in D.C.

All schools implementing the 'Diplomas Now' program use the same basic strategy. Students are organized into small groups and form close relationships with each other and the adults in the school.

Staff monitors data based on early warning signs of dropping out: attendance, behavior and coursework. Teachers and volunteers get together regularly before school -- at 7 a.m. -- to get status updates on each student. They review absences, grades, and results of any calls home or other outreach.

The challenges of scaling up

Making a difference in an entire school requires this level of detail and attention to be paid to many of the students - not just those most in need. One obvious challenge is the cost. For each student at Browne, this program costs an extra \$500-700. Those costs are currently covered by federal funding.

Another challenge is having enough adults who know how to work with this student population. Balfanz, who created this program, says many existing student support providers aren't designed for the scale of the problem.

"Many great mentoring programs can serve 10 kids, but you have 200 kids that need a mentor," he says. "So if you have a program that serves 10 kids, it's checked off as done. But we have 190 other kids that we don't have a program for."

The third and biggest challenge with bringing an innovative program into an existing school is changing the culture of a school, so all the adults have consistent expectations, Balfanz says.

"It really is about convincing people that there is a better and different way and it's worth the effort," he says. "Because people are used to, 'we're doing it this way, even if it's not succeeding, because it's what we know.'"

Social workers help with neediest cases

A school with a positive culture and great teachers will lead to improvements for 80 percent of the children, according to Thomas Acampora, who is helping implement Diplomas Now at Browne. Another 15 percent need a little more "nagging and nurturing," which the City Year volunteers help with.

The last 5 percent, Acampora says, is "really rough and really tough and has challenges that's outside the normal scope of a school to solve." That's where the third partner, in the support network, Communities in Schools, comes in.

Deon Toon is a school counselor with Communities in Schools who works at Browne Education Campus. She connects students with special services -- everything from food and housing, medical and mental health services.

She teaches students how to disagree agreeably because every day, neighborhood rivalries and cyber bullying spill into school.

"I've seen some of the messages and I'm just blown away," Toon says, listing some of them. "'When I see you, I'm going to pull your weave out, I'm going to stomp you, I'm going to kick you in your stomach.' Wow. I'm sorry, that's a lot ... that's a lot."

It's an uphill climb, but Toon says the relationships she forms with students show her she's desperately needed. Most students want to do well in school, she says, but sometimes aren't sure how.

It takes time and patience, and sometimes even a little liquid therapy. "I definitely need a dirty martini," says Toon, laughing. "You go home, you have your dirty martini, you come back and start all over."

Signs of progress as program takes hold

The Diplomas Now program requires a three-year commitment from the school. One year in, Browne is showing results. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, there were 80 students in grades 6-8 who were "off-track," as it's called, on attendance. By the end of the school year, that number was down to about 12.

Behavior problems were down 40 percent. There was a 20 percent drop in students failing math and a 9 percent drop for students failing English.

School reform is a fancy term for grueling, unglamorous work. Even early improvements like those at Browne can require hundreds of hours from dozens of adults around each child. Multiply that effort by thousands of students in schools across the country, and you get a sense of how big the problem is.