



AMERICAN Teacher

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Diplomas Now nurtures the whole child

Team approach helps Detroit students stay in class and succeed in school



PHOTOS BY JIM WEST

City Year staff like Joel Gullickson are a key part of keeping students at Detroit Prep engaged in learning.

AT DETROIT COLLEGIATE Preparatory High School, if you fall down, someone will catch you.

In fact, a whole team of adults—teachers, administrators, even social workers—will be there to help.

“If it takes a village to raise a child, they actually bring the village to the child,” says Thomas Van Hulle, the school transformation facilitator and a member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

Detroit Prep is a pioneer of Diplomas Now, a school improvement program supported by the school district and funded through i3 (Investing in Innovation) and the PepsiCo Foundation. The research-based reform initiative has as partners three national leaders in supporting schools: City Year, Communities in Schools, and Talent Development (a model developed by Johns Hopkins University that provides a curriculum and professional development).

The DFT initiated Diplomas Now in Detroit after an AFT TEACH conference presentation on its success in other cities. The program, says DFT president and AFT vice president Keith Johnson, gives teachers the autonomy they need to innovate new ways to address “intrinsic cultural inhibitors” like truancy, transiency and lack of academic focus.

Research shows that students in grades 6-9 with poor attendance, poor behavior

and/or failing grades have only a 25 percent chance of graduating. To catch them before they fail, Diplomas Now uses Johns Hopkins’ Talent Development model, with an “early warning” team monitoring system to identify struggling students, and a curriculum that includes “school success courses” such as Freshmen Seminar and Mastering Middle Grades. In addition, young “near peers” from City Year tutor, coach, mentor and inspire students to stay engaged at school. Finally, an on-site coordinator guides high-needs students to everything from anger management to food supplements, transportation solutions and help paying utility bills.

“Other reform models will talk about smaller class sizes that will fix everything, or smaller schools, or differentiated instruction,” says Van Hulle. Diplomas Now actually provides the human capital to address the basic needs of the students.

That made all the difference for one chronically absent student. “She would come maybe three days in a row, and then we wouldn’t see her for three weeks,” says Jada Frank, a Detroit Prep teacher and DFT member. “In your everyday hustle and bustle, you may recognize that you’re not seeing a student, but you may not have time to make a phone call.” So City Year, an AmeriCorps-affiliated federal program that

puts young people to work for a year in high-needs urban areas, kicked in: One of the City Year members called the girl’s home, and learned she was responsible for getting a younger sibling to school. After the school helped her family arrange alternate transportation, the student has been in school, on time, and her grades have gone up.

Another student not only was missing school, but also behaved as if she didn’t care. Staff launched an intervention, showering the family with phone calls—not to report bad behavior, but to praise the positive, letting Mom know when the daughter showed up on time, supported a classmate or did well on at test.

“All of a sudden, the student was one of the first kids here, every day, at school, on time,” says Ricardo Martin, principal at Detroit Prep. “She did a complete turnaround.”

“Our mantra is ‘nagging and nurturing,’” says Van Hulle, reminding students to complete assignments, to tuck in a shirt or remember a change in the bus schedule, for example. And everyone participates.

“It’s completely collaborative,” says Martin. Teachers have a voice, “so that as we move forward, everyone is on the same page.”

City Year workers are especially effective, pulling students out for extra help so teachers needn’t interrupt class lessons, and enthusiastically leading special activities like

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Blue blazers signify academic commitment as ninth-graders complete their first year at Detroit Prep.

Diplomas Now nurtures the whole child

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last year's spelling bee, when they dressed as the rappers "Major Words" and "TheoSaurus."

Proven success

All of this really works. At Walter L. Cohen High School in New Orleans, attendance and course performance improved, and suspensions dropped by 40 percent in just one year, after Diplomas Now was implemented in 2009. At C.A. Johnson High School in Columbia, S.C., it took just one semester for math grades to rise for 60 percent of the students; in addition, literacy grades went up for 44 percent of the students, and 78 percent of them had higher attendance. Detroit Prep, which opened in 2011-12, expects similar results.

Diplomas Now operates in more than 40 schools in urban areas across the country, and Detroit plans on adding around a dozen



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more in the next two years. This year, two K-8 schools (Noble Elementary and Middle School and Clippert Academy) adopted the system, and Johnson envisions a network of K-8 and high schools that supports students throughout the area.

As long as students can find at least one

person in their school who will help them stay on track and in class, someone who can reach out when they start to struggle, says Frank, "that makes a whole world of difference."

Thomas Van Hulle gets to know Detroit Collegiate Preparatory students.

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