

Success Highways Helps Students Stay in School, Transform Their Futures

Urban high schools across the country are recognizing that serious problems call for serious action. As the dropout rate climbs and test scores waver, administrators are in search of solutions that will keep students in school and motivated to learn.

In 2004, North Division High School in Milwaukee took radical steps toward positive change. Faced with plummeting attendance and test scores, and a retention rate below 30 percent, the old North Division High School was phased out and replaced with three small high schools on the old campus. One of those schools, Genesis, incorporated the *Success Highways* program into its freshman curriculum to strengthen student commitment and give them a fresh perspective on the importance of school in their lives.

Based on more than 15 years of research, much of it conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, *Success Highways* is integrated into existing curriculum, seamlessly incorporated into math, language arts, social studies and science classes. *Success Highways* improves academic success by helping students build on six resiliency skills that have been scientifically established to promote their performance in school – increasing academic confidence, setting goals, decreasing academic stress, strengthening connections with teachers and other students, improving health and well-being and strengthening motivation.

Program Helped Define School Culture

Genesis is focused on business, technology and trades. The other two small schools on campus are Humanities, focused on arts and humanities; and Truth, a college-preparatory curriculum with an emphasis on community service.

Genesis participated in a pilot program using *Success Highways* in a workshop format for freshmen toward the end of the 2004-2005 academic year. It was an important step in the creation of the Genesis culture, where teachers are committed to the students' personal well-being as well as their academic achievement. The *Success Highways* program, with its focus on identifying students' personal challenges and establishing goals for the future, spawned a dialogue among peers and gave teachers the opportunity to emphasize the importance of staying in school.

Kathelyne Dye, assistant principal in charge of Genesis High School, said students responded immediately and positively and continued to benefit from it as they progressed through their high school years.

"It gave the kids a feeling that they had a place where they belonged," she said. "It had an immediate impact on the relevance of why they were in school and needed to stay in school."

Utilizing *Success Highways*, teachers led the students through exercises that helped them examine their approach to the personal challenges in their lives, their goals for the future and the path that would lead to the attainment of those goals. Dye said the students responded with enthusiasm, welcoming the chance to talk about their lives in a sympathetic environment. She added that the teachers at Genesis also benefited greatly since it gave them insight into their students and what obstacles they faced.

"Success Highways provides us with a tool for learning more about our students and helping students learn more about how to overcome the hurdles they face."

Changing Student Paths for Success in Learning, Life

Before the creation of Genesis and the adoption of *Success Highways*, North Division had the highest truancy and dropout rate of any high school in Milwaukee. By 2003, student retention had plummeted to 27 percent. The new school's emphasis on creating a more intimate, safe environment for students, together with curriculum support that emphasizes the importance and relevance of education, increased retention to 87 percent in the 2005-2006 school year.

Success Highways has positively influenced the students in many different ways. V. Scott Solberg, developer of *Success Highways* and director of the Wisconsin Careers Center on Education and Work, School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said that two students in the initial session talked about growing up among drug dealers. One said he was stuck in that environment, while another argued that individuals make their own paths, telling him he could break the cycle. "She said that she chooses to come to school," commented Solberg. "A week later, the same student who thought he was stuck asked to go to summer school for math because he knew he could do better."

The second time the program was implemented, students from the first year became the leaders and facilitated the workshop, under Solberg's supervision. "It was an unforeseen benefit," he said. "At one point, a student went around the room asking the new students if they enjoyed being at the school as much as she and her classmates did. She said she felt like she belonged at Genesis and wanted the freshmen to feel the same way. And after they were done asking the students, they asked the new teachers the same question. It was a very powerful moment, seeing the students take over."

Dye commented that the combination of the intimate small school environment, innovative curriculum and *Success Highways* has truly changed the way that students feel about school. "The small school setting allows teachers to get to know students better and develop a better sense of who they are and the challenges they are facing," said Dye. "*Success Highways* provides us with a tool for learning more about our students and helping students learn more about how to overcome the hurdles they face."

Solberg agreed, "The kids are coming to school and staying. There's a more stable environment for teachers, and students have more continuity of learning."

Finding the On-Ramp to Success

Genesis is phasing in the complete *Success Highways* curriculum during the 2006-2007 school year. In fact, the pilot workshop's success led to the school's adoption of the full 15-week program. As the culture at Genesis evolves, other aspects of the program are being introduced, including goal-setting and confidence-building exercises.

With attendance the best it has been in 20 years, Genesis students are on the road to success. "Our students needed to understand why coming to school was important for them," said Dye. "*Success Highways* is helping them develop an understanding of why the concepts they are learning are relevant and how they can use them to be successful in both school and life."

Genesis High School in Milwaukee has developed a comprehensive learning experience focused on the design of a competency-directed and project-based curriculum. With this, all 200 students have the opportunity to advance at their own pace and learning style. In an effort to enhance the educational experience of the students in grades 9-12, educators continue to research the philosophies set forth by following national reform models.

Benefits of Using *Success Highways*

- Retention rate more than tripled
- Highest attendance in 20 years
- Students developing an understanding of why learning is relevant
- Teachers gain a better understanding of the challenges their students face

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