

Denver Public Schools Ninth Grade Academy Gets Results with ScholarCentric's *Success Highways* Resiliency Skills Program

As part of Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennett's 92-page "Denver Plan," the district investigated concrete measures to increase both its graduation rate and academic performance. One cornerstone measure was the Ninth Grade Academy, a two-week, pre-ninth grade program that focused in part on the resiliency skills necessary for their students to stay in school and grow academically: academic confidence, importance of education, connections to teachers, handling academic stress, maintaining well-being, and increasing academic motivation. DPS chose *Success Highways* from ScholarCentric, a flexible, university-researched program that includes professional development, pre-post assessment, and standards based curriculum. *Success Highways* is designed specifically for the "cusp" years when students tend to lose the most academic interest: seventh, eighth and ninth grades. The program has a proven record in improving attendance, increasing grade and test scores, and in building students' academic confidence.

Why Is Ninth Grade So Critical?

Research and common sense demonstrate that ninth graders face greater peer pressure, a sense of anonymity, and more academic challenges than they did in middle school. Common responses for ninth grade students who poorly adapt include failing classes, poor attendance, and subaverage grades. "When the going gets tough, these students feel like failures. Many lack the resiliency skills necessary to bounce back, so they drop out," stated Dr. Scott Solberg, chief designer of the *Success Highways* program. "*Success Highways* works by giving students the empowerment tools they need to face the obstacles that all learners stumble on at one time or another. They essentially learn how to overcome their challenges and become vested in their education."

Building Relationships and School-Life Connections in the Classroom

Denver Public School teachers reported that *Success Highways* gives both educators and students a new perspective on the challenges they face together, and the rewards of staying in school. With a 1:15 teacher/student ratio, the size of the Ninth Grade Academy also encouraged the development of enriched relationships with fellow students and school staff. "It was amazing how honest the students were with one another and me using the *Success Highways* program. The class even made comments like, 'I wish all my classes were this close' and 'we're like a big family now,'" reported Sara Finnegan-Doyon, Ninth Grade Academy instructor from the Denver School of the Arts. Follow-up assessment supports Finnegan-Doyon's statement. Every instructor indicated that the program built stronger educator-student and peer relationships. In *Success Highways*, there is an ongoing focus on the identification and significance of a quality support system, which is acknowledged in current research as beneficial to health at times of stress, and throughout one's life.

Courtney Black, assistant principal at George Washington High School, was pleased to see relationships being built between four of her teachers and 100 incoming GWHS freshmen through the Ninth Grade Academy program. Teachers and students alike agreed that the *Success Highways* curriculum was the best part of their day. Staff found

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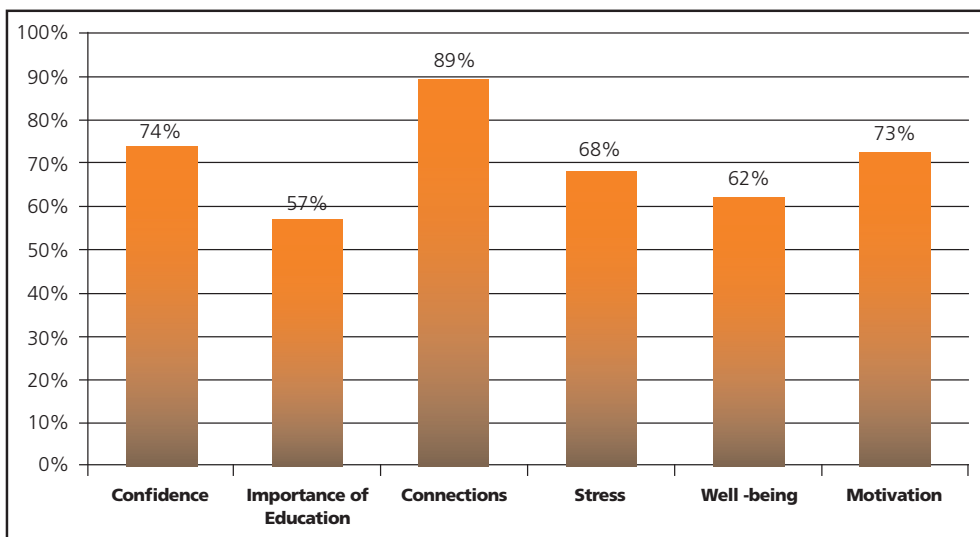
— Wanda Ruven,
George Washington High School

the *Success Highways* teacher materials well-written and easy to use, enabling them to be great facilitators, keeping students engaged and interested. “I knew that many of the kids in the Ninth Grade Academy were ‘on the bubble’ in middle school – just at the ‘unsatisfactory’ line – and could get lost in high school. Through *Success Highways*, we were able to get their attention and show them the connection between future success and doing well in school,” Black related. “Students from every background came out of the program knowing the importance of setting goals, and doing well in school.”

Kara Dennis, also from the Ninth Grade Academy staff, stated, “It was good for our students to reflect on what they want in life, and how school performance and what they do right now affects their future.” Lessons encourage students and teachers to share life stories, and talk about their aspirations, fears, and successes. Educators indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to discuss issues openly with students, and to get them to think and learn about the importance of doing well in high school from the start. To help them chart a course, each student received *My Success Roadmap*, a personal journal containing specific activities for each lesson presented in *Success Highways*. The exercises in the journal ask students to identify their own challenges, and establish a plan for addressing those challenges in order to move toward academic and life success.

Success in all Six Resiliency Skills Categories

Denver Public Schools’ Ninth Grade Academy students and staff achieved outstanding results using *Success Highways*, with the greatest improvement seen in the areas of Connection, Confidence, and Motivation. George Washington High School, which offers one of DPS’ more academically demanding programs, saw a big boost in students’ ability to handle stress, as well. Wanda Ruven, a ninth grade instructor at GWHS, appreciated the opportunity to use *Success Highways* to teach resiliency skills. “I noticed a big difference in my students the last week of the academy. They felt more confident and secure about starting high school,” she stated. GWHS’ scores on the *Moving On* assessment supports Ruven’s statement – the 40 students in her program saw improvements in every category. Armed with these kinds of resiliency skills, the future looks very hopeful for all of DPS’ Ninth Grade Academy graduates.



Analysis of All Students – 719 students completed both *Revving Up* and *Moving On* surveys.

Denver Public Schools Snapshot

- 73,000 students in a metropolitan area with a population of more than 450,000 covering 200 square miles
- 151 total schools: 73 elementary, 15 K-8, 17 middle, 14 high, 19 charter and 13 other
- 7,500 employees, with 95 administrators in the central administration offices

Contact:

Alex Sanchez, Director of Communications
Denver Public Schools
Alex_sanchez@dpsk12.org