

Resiliency Program Supports Successful Graduation Initiative

Sunnyside Unified School District,
Tucson, Arizona

Demographics

- Urban school district
- 18,060 students
- 85% Hispanic
- 5% White
- 4.8 % Native American
- 2.6% African American
- 0.6% Asian
- 76.5% free/reduced lunch
- 13.4% special education

Challenge

In 2007, only about 50 percent of high school students graduated from the Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) in Tucson. In 2008, after the district embarked on a major initiative known as Project Graduation, that number rose to about 60 percent. However, other indicators of student performance remained low.

In the 2008-2009 school year, administrators decided to incorporate the *Success Highways* resiliency assessments and curriculum into Project Graduation. The goal was to improve the graduation rate and increase college and career readiness by focusing on the transition from middle school to high school.

Implementation

In fall 2008, *Success Highways* was implemented in ninth grade. In fall 2009, eighth grade was included, and every eighth grader in the district took the *Success Highways* resiliency assessment. “One thing we noticed

The Six Resiliency Skills

Assessed and taught
by *Success Highways*

Valuing education

Academic confidence

Connectedness

Stress management

Health and well-being

Intrinsic motivation

immediately from the data was that very few of our students were issue-free,” said N.J. Utter, SUSD director of college readiness. “For example, we saw that our focus on academic rigor was causing stress and lack of confidence for some students although they were perfectly functional in school. Other students were simply not motivated and could be doing better.”

SUSD educators reviewed both the aggregated (building and district-level) and disaggregated (student-level) data. They built their interventions based on their students’ resiliency status, also including traditional measures of success such as grades and attendance, available in their student information system (SIS). “We decided to look at all aspects of the data, including resiliency data, and then help each student take control of his or her own success by providing support to aid in their development,” said Steve Holmes, assistant superintendent of instruction.

The *Success Highways* resiliency assessment data identified students with the highest likelihood of longitudinal academic failure, enabling educators to prescribe interventions targeting the issues each student was dealing with. Based on the data, educators probed deeper and found that some SUSD students needed basic wraparound interventions such as food and shelter. Others were dealing with non-academic issues such as body image. Some were disengaging because they were struggling to keep up academically, and others were nervous about the transition to high school.

The SUSD team was surprised to find that the assessment flagged some students as at-risk even though they had exhibited no warning signs in school. “When we looked at the aggregated data for our eighth graders, some students who were identified were doing fine academically,” said Ms. Utter. “But the data showed that these students were not achieving their full potential because they were slowly disengaging from the academic process.” This early warning allowed educators to quickly intervene to address the students’ resiliency deficits identified by the assessment.

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N.J. Utter, Director of College Readiness,
Sunnyside Unified School District

SUSD used part of its social studies and language arts class time to focus on the *Success Highways* resiliency skills curriculum. Students analyzed and reflected on their individual resiliency assessment results. “Middle school students are growing and changing so quickly they are often unaware of or out-of-touch with their own feelings. But the *Success Highways* data provided students with clarity about why they were struggling,”

said Erika Elias, counselor and eighth grade teacher at Apollo Middle School. “The data review and reflection is a transformative process for them.”

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At the end of eighth grade, students took the *Success Highways* summative assessment, which identified students who continued to be at-risk as they transitioned to high school. The middle school staff shared the data with the high school counselors, who developed small interventional cohorts. These groups benefitted from customized conferences, small group workshops, and individual counseling sessions. For example, one group focused on students who were still flagged as being at risk for handling academic stress.

Results

The Project Graduation and *Success Highways* interventions led to immediate and significant improvements in student achievement at SUSD:

- In the first year, the percentage of freshmen requiring the most intensive intervention dropped from 45 percent to 30 percent.
- The high school graduation rate increased by 41.6 percent.
- The number of academically at-risk students fell by 51 percent.
- In 2010, the SUSD graduation rate hit an all-time high, with the largest number of students ever receiving college scholarships.