

Summary: Building Successful Students: Finding Our Way

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board provided funds and time for staff of the secondary schools to develop pilot programs to work with students who struggle with literacy and numeracy. Following the pilots surveys were distributed and follow-up interviews were conducted. A literacy review was also conducted on at-risk youth.

The literature review indicated that there has been a substantial growth in the number of students considered to be at-risk for failure in school. A number of social and familial situations were recognized as contributing to this situation. Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, native, gifted, disabled, and/or impoverished all have unique factors contributing to their likelihood of leaving school before earning their diploma. Even gender can play a contributing role in that males are more likely to drop out of school and repeat grades than females.

The pilot program required each secondary school to develop their own program and to decide on the details of student selection, required materials, time tabling, staff who were to participate, and the focus of their pilot. Each school developed a separate and unique program that best served their school body. For example, Monsignor Doyle CSS targeted grade 10 students and focused on credit recovery for grades 9 and 10 English whereas St. David's CSS began a school to work program for grades 11 and 12 students and later opened it to grades 9 and 10 students. Each school developed a set of criteria that helped them choose which youth would be invited to participate in the programs.

Following the pilot programs, surveys were conducted with students, teachers, and other pilot staff. Among other results from the student survey 86% of students felt that the subjects and support strategies in the pilot program helped them to prepare for the future. To improve the programs, students suggested making the material more relevant, providing more hands-on experiences, and giving one-on-one instructions when possible and when needed. When teachers were surveyed they suggested putting more continuous support in place, keeping class sizes small, and increasing professional development opportunities to improve the programs.

The follow-up interviews were conducted with all the staff from each of the pilot teams. Some schools indicated they had many community resources available to them whereas others schools lacked any. Staff indicated that the smaller class sizes and flexible scheduling allowed more frequent interactions and opportunities for the students and that the additional funding was helpful for purchasing resources and for allowing professional development opportunities. Staff also indicated that the absence of common planning time made it difficult for the pilot team to coordinate.

All pilot staff indicated that the pilot programs met the student's needs to some extent. The staff felt that the roles of each member of the team played an important role. The involvement of administration, special education staff, guidance personnel, educational assistants, social workers, and child and youth care workers were crucial in making the programs effective on all levels.

Based on the outcomes of the pilot programs and the research conducted a number of recommendations were made including:

- A common tracking tool should be used to highlight learning characteristics of students moving from grade 8 to grade 9
- A school level team should be created to determine the students best served by the pilot program
- All schools should use the credit recovery program to help students earn 16 credits by the time they are 16 years old
- Course failure forms should be re-done to include a credit recovery option
- Teachers of the program should be provided with common planning time
- Online communication network should be created for all teachers of the program from all the schools

Each of the schools continues to work to improve the programs for all the students.