

Bloomington High School partners with The American Academy to offer Dropout Recovery program

A Case Study, July 2010

There are students enrolled at Bloomington High School who do not walk the halls; they do not have a locker; and they do not sit in classrooms with their peers.

Instead, they attend classes while they care for their newborn son; they turn in projects after they return home from work; or they complete customized online math lessons to help them advance.

But when it comes time for graduation, they will receive a diploma just like everyone else. All are former high-school dropouts who are now back on track to graduate from both Bloomington High School and The American Academy's Dropout Recovery program. They have been given a second chance to succeed in school and to excel in life.

The Funding Crisis

As the State of Michigan contends with one of the hardest economic periods in recent memory, Bloomington High School, located northwest of Kalamazoo, finds itself in the midst of a devastating funding crisis. Due to the severe lack of economic growth, the state has seen significant reductions in the amount of revenue that is needed to support programs offered to students in public schools.

"There's no question that it is a tough time for schools," said Rick Reo, principal of Bloomington High School. "Budget cuts, teacher shortages, and overcrowded classrooms are just a few of the challenges that school districts nationwide are facing right now. But as we work to meet these challenges head-on, it's important that we do not lose sight of our primary goal as educators – to provide *all* students with an opportunity to receive a quality education."

The Need for Dropout Recovery Programs

Echoed throughout a larger push for high school reform is the need for an education system that addresses student needs on an individual level and gives students the support they need not only to graduate high school, but to become successful life-long learners.

With roughly one-third of students leaving high school before they graduate, dropout recovery – not simply prevention – is becoming a top priority of public school districts.

"It's easy to understand why current problems that are plaguing schools have overshadowed some of the fundamental problems that have always been a cause for concern – such as finding a way to meet the needs of at-risk and dropout students," said Reo. "Unfortunately, these students, for the most part, have always been ignored by the system – that's exactly what caused them to drop out in the first place."

Bloomington Partners with The American Academy

In the Fall of 2009, Bloomington identified a number of students who had dropped out of school or were receiving poor grades due to frequent absences. Unfortunately, severe budget cuts made it fiscally impossible for Bloomington to open an alternative school to address these students' needs.

That's when Bloomington High School found The American Academy (TAA) and began using its Dropout Recovery program.

“For some students –especially at-risk students– a traditional classroom education simply does not address their needs as learners,” said Rick Reo. “The American Academy’s Dropout Recovery Program is a way to provide these students with a flexible learning alternative that meets their needs while giving them the support they need to succeed.”

Getting Former Dropouts Back on Track

To begin the dropout recovery process, Bloomingdale supplied TAA with a list of known dropouts and at-risk students that might benefit from the program. TAA mentors then reached out to these students and their families to provide information about the program and offer support. In just two weeks, 87 percent of Bloomingdale’s dropouts had re-enrolled in high school via the TAA Dropout Recovery Program.

Furthermore, with no financial risk to the school district, and no up-front cost, Bloomingdale was able to launch the Dropout Recovery Program with zero budget impact. And since TAA re-enrolls students who previously were not participating and brings them back into the school district, Bloomingdale benefits from improved attendance and graduation rates in accordance with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, as well as increased funding that will benefit all students in the school district.

With a combination of local mentors, personalized learning plans, and custom pace charts, students in the Dropout Recovery Program learn the required curriculum, in addition to time management, self-discipline and study skills, which will help them to succeed now and after high school.

“Each student that enrolled in the Dropout Recovery Program did so because they were facing a unique set of circumstances,” said Reo. “TAA’s program is effective because it does not ask *who* is most likely to drop out of school – it asks *why* students drop out; and then provides flexible solutions that can help students overcome their challenges.”

The Flexible Classroom

Having just begun her senior year, Ashley Vaughn’s high school career took a turn following the birth of her son. Suddenly confronted with a new set of responsibilities and challenges, the 18-year-old Vaughn struggled to keep up with her responsibilities as a parent while she was enrolled as a full-time student.

Shortly thereafter, Vaughn’s mother received a call from a TAA mentor about a new dropout recovery program that would allow her daughter to continue pursuing her high school diploma while giving her the freedom to continue caring for her son. Vaughn enrolled in the program immediately.

“I feel more motivated now that I take classes through The American Academy than I ever did in any other school,” said Vaughn. “And I’m even getting better grades! The difference is that I can do the work on my own time so that I can continue taking care of my son.”

Recover what’s been lost

Chris Kakarian enrolled in TAA’s Dropout Recovery Program when he was 18, missing a semester’s worth of credit, and struggling to cope with the stress of having a brother that had recently been diagnosed with cancer.

“Going to school was always very stressful for me,” said Kakarian. “I had difficulty connecting with the teachers and the administrators and I always had trouble participating in classes and turning in assignments. The program with TAA lets me work from home and finish assignments when I want. And any time I have a problem, my mentor is always available to help me.”

Together, let's do something about it

Bringing dropped out students back to school isn't easy. By providing at-risk and dropout students with the flexibility they need to attend school on their own terms, The American Academy's Dropout Recovery Program gives them a second chance by addressing both academic and social needs.

These students are not just given a chance to earn their diploma; they are given the self-confidence, skills, and educational credentials they need to enjoy a life that is filled with opportunities.