



Guidance and Advisement Programs Are Proof That Schools Want Their Students to Succeed

Southern Regional Education Board, 592 10th St. N.W., Atlanta, GA 30318, (404) 875-9211, www.sreb.org

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More students are reaping benefits from high schools and middle grades schools that personalize the learning environment through guidance and advisement. These schools have taken steps to establish a guidance and advisement system that involves parents in helping students plan and complete goal-focused programs of study that begin in the middle grades and continue through high school graduation, further study and careers. When teachers participate with counselors in guiding and advising students, the system gives students a greater sense of belonging to something that has meaning in their lives now and in the future.

Advisory Program Boosts Achievement and Career Planning

When the staff at **Lee's Summit High School** (LSHS) in Lee's Summit, Missouri, took a closer look at data, they found things they disliked. "We were a good school with good test scores, good teachers and good students, but the data revealed several disturbing conditions," Advisory Coordinator **Gaye Sharp** said. "Baseline data revealed that student and teacher perceptions varied greatly on several issues, including students' sense of belonging and the preparation of students for post-high school pursuits."

LSHS is in the pathway of urban sprawl from Kansas City, resulting in a need to evaluate the effects of rapid growth and an increasingly diverse student population. The 2007-2008 school enrollment was 1,772, including 83.6 percent white, 10.6 percent black, 3.7 percent Hispanic, 1.4 percent Asian and less than 1 percent other.

To address weaknesses uncovered in the data, LSHS implemented an advisory program. The whole staff joined in conducting research, gathering faculty input and adapting strategies from successful schools to fit the needs of LSHS students. More than half of staff members visited model schools during the planning period. The school benefited from a small learning communities (SLC) planning grant, an SLC implementation grant, and *High Schools That Work* (HSTW) technical assistance and professional development.

Now in its fifth year, the advisory program supports three school improvement goals. In each case, the school has made strides in involving students more actively and effectively. The goals are:

- **Each student will demonstrate growth in academic achievement.** The school began requiring interventions for juniors and seniors with a grade of F on six-week or 12-week progress reports and improved and expanded communication with parents. After the advisory program went into effect, the schoolwide grade point average rose from 2.92 to 2.96 while the number of Fs declined. The percentages of students scoring at the top two levels on state Measures of Academic Progress tests increased from 26 percent to 58 percent in communication arts and from nearly 25 percent to 60 percent in mathematics. LSHS posted its highest ACT composite score — a district record of 23.3 percent — since introducing the advisory program.
- **Each student will explore and plan for post-high school options.** LSHS revised and expanded its enrollment fair, provided job-shadowing experiences for 11th-graders and implemented enrollment conferences with parents, students and academic coaches. Ninety-six percent of parents routinely attend the conferences.
- **Each student will experience an increased sense of belonging at LSHS.** The school added a 30-minute weekly Advisory/Privileges/Interventions (API) period for all students. It expanded freshman transition day, recruited and trained student mentors and began hosting an orientation breakfast for new students twice a year. Freshmen and sophomores meet in advisory groups each week; juniors and seniors have additional opportunities known as privileges and interventions that are linked to their academic achievement.

The advisory period has been the capstone for reconnecting with students,” Sharp said. “Counselors train teachers to be academic coaches and provide the advisory lessons each week for each grade level.” Each student has an academic coach, and each ninth- and 10th-grade advisory group has upper-class student mentors.

After the first year, a team of teachers, students and parents reviewed the advisory program and recommended changes. Review and revision have become a natural part of the advisory program. “We celebrate and share successes and change things that don’t work,” Sharp said.

A central piece of the API program is the enrollment fair, a half-day event to help students prepare for the upcoming school year and beyond. The fair takes place in early February when students are beginning to focus on making decisions about their courses. The fair has two parts: departmental displays and career seminars.

“Enrollment fair activities are tailored for students at each grade level,” said **Vickie Metzler**, fair coordinator. Freshmen follow a schedule with their advisory groups. They tour departmental displays with their advisers and return to their groups at the end of the morning to discuss what they have learned and to participate in a survey about the experience. Sophomores visit departmental displays and take part in two 45-minute career seminars of their choice, during which community leaders describe their professions and list the academic requirements for entering those jobs. Sophomores return to their advisory groups at the end of the morning to complete a survey on what they experienced. Juniors attend career seminars they have pre-selected to match their career goals. Seniors have several options for the morning. They can help with the fair as student mentors, attend career seminars, take college placement tests or participate in an organized field trip to a local business or industry.

The departmental displays cover all of the courses offered in the department. They are engaging, interactive and located where the courses are taught.

After the fair, teacher-advisers help students continue to study their course handbooks to make enrollment decisions. They meet with students and parents during enrollment conferences to finalize requests and discuss students’ plans for the future.

In 2006-2007 the advisory teams completed the first annual all-school service learning project by collecting non-perishable food items to provide holiday dinners for qualifying families. They also raised more than \$1,400 to provide gift cards for perishable items.

“We think we are on the right track,” Sharp said. “Each year we work to improve the API program. We know we must be committed to continuous evaluation and tweaking of the components to make the program even better for our students.”

Contact:

Gaye Sharp

(gaye.sharp@leesummit.k12.mo.us)

Vickie Metzler

(vickie.metzler@leesummit.k12.mo.us)

District-Wide Guidance Program Assists Students at All Levels

Students at all grade levels in **Dorchester School District Two** in Summerville, South Carolina, are part of a comprehensive guidance and advisement program that promotes ongoing education and career planning. The program includes developmental tasks and resource materials for each group of students — elementary, middle grades and high school.

Elementary school — The **career awareness program for K-5 students** is designed to increase students’ knowledge of themselves and others; of collaboration among school, home, community and business entities; and of an array of careers open to students who take the right courses and study hard in school. A student career planner contains a checklist that traces the development of each student and serves as a repository for assessment results, six-year career development records and other materials related to career planning.

Fifth-graders take a career interest inventory known as E-WOW (Exploring the World of Work) and participate in classroom guidance lessons focusing on careers and job descriptions. The guidance department provides a notebook of career lesson plans aligned to academic standards for counselors and teachers to use in the classroom. All elementary schools in the district have a broadcasting program that allows students to sample careers in the broadcasting field, including script writing and on-air newscasting.

Middle grades — Students in **grades six through eight** participate in a **career exploration program** to assess their career interests, learn about career clusters and plan high school programs of study to support their career goals. Every teacher and counselor has access to a career development lesson plan notebook aligned to academic curriculum standards. A middle grades mentoring program makes it possible for students to leave school once a month to spend two hours with a business or industry leader to explore a chosen career cluster.

All eighth-graders take ACT's EXPLORE college-readiness test. Counselors interpret the scores during classroom guidance sessions to help each student begin to choose a career cluster. The new Education and Economic Development Act in South Carolina mandates that counselors, students and parents meet in private conferences to discuss the results of each student's career assessment and choose one of 16 career clusters.

Students begin selecting courses using the new curriculum framework and course guides developed by the district. The materials are aligned to career clusters and courses taught in the district. This activity becomes students' registration for the upcoming school year.

Middle grades students are required to write and present reports on their findings at career fairs. Teachers are given lesson plans to help students get the most out of these events.

High school — Career preparation in grades nine through 12 involves students in matching their interests to their plans for postsecondary education and careers. Students participate in work-based learning transition programs as they prepare to enter the work force.

On career assessment day, every student reports to homeroom for three hours to take an assessment for that grade level. Counselors promote the event through classroom guidance announcements, news articles and letters to parents. The tests are the Holland career interest assessment for ninth-graders, ACT's PLAN assessment of academic progress for 10th-graders, the PSAT for 11th-graders and the WorkKeys job skills assessment for 12th-graders.

Work-based learning opportunities are available for all seniors. Students look at their career majors and choose an internship or a job to earn one course credit.

Career activities aligned to standards are available in English classes. Students fill out job applications in the ninth grade and participate in job shadowing experiences in the 10th grade. They use persuasive writing in a letter to the business or industry where they did job shadowing to ask for work-based learning opportunities in the 11th grade, and complete résumés in the 12th grade. These activities are included in students' career file folders.

This school year, all freshmen and sophomores are meeting with their parents and a counselor in a follow-up conference to talk about each student's individual graduation plan. When these students complete the senior year, the district will have data to follow each student for five years after high school.

The district offers professional development throughout the year to equip administrators, teachers and counselors to assist students in making wise choices related to further education and careers. All certified personnel also have access to graduate courses to build guidance and advisory knowledge and skills.

Janice Jolly, career development coordinator for Dorchester School District Two, describes the four areas of the district's comprehensive guidance program:

- **Curriculum** uses structured experiences such as classroom guidance, small-group meetings and parent education to provide information about students' education and career concerns.
- **Individual planning** uses activities such as individual advisement, consultation and placement to help all students plan, monitor and manage personal growth in educational development, career education and relationships.
- **Responsive services** include individual counseling, small-group counseling, consultation, referrals and crisis counseling to meet the needs of students.
- **System support** includes activities such as program planning and evaluation, staff and community relations, and professional development to promote and enhance the total guidance program.

The district's comprehensive guidance plan includes developmental tasks and resource materials for working with each group of students (elementary, middle grades and high school).

Students are making better career choices as a result of the guidance program. Many are choosing to attend technical colleges for two years, where they are more likely to be successful, rather than enter a four-year college where a larger percentage of students drop out.

The district identified 76 ninth-grade repeaters during the 2004-2005 school year. Counselors met with each student individually to discuss what the student needed to do to graduate from high school. Students had access to summer school scholarships, work-based learning through the local chamber of commerce, credit recovery and early enrollment in two-year career/technical programs. Eighty-six percent graduated from high school, completed high school through adult education or received a GED.

"As we counseled these students, we found that the most important aspect of the program was the fact that students found someone who cared about them," Jolly said.

Contact:

Janice Jolly

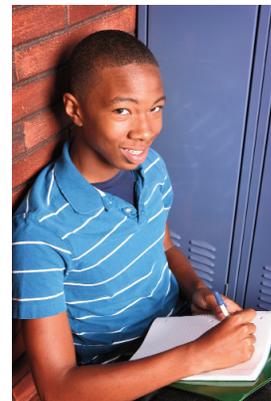
(jjolly@dorchester2.k12.sc.us)

High-Minority School Motivates Students to Take Rigorous Courses

West Point High School (WPHS), a high-minority school in West Point, Mississippi, is working hard to give its students better opportunities for success in further education and careers. The changes have included a revitalized guidance program, more Advanced Placement (AP) courses, an emphasis on graduation and a student recognition program.

The enrollment at WPHS is 1,039 students, with 81 percent black and 19 percent white. Four out of five students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

When **Tim Fowler** became principal in 2006, he began examining school data and asking tough questions: What can a school do when students do not enroll in challenging mathematics and science courses, especially in the senior year? What can a school do to encourage more students to take AP courses? How does a school reverse the trend of declining ACT scores? What can be done about a dropout rate that ranks among the highest in the state? How can a school better connect academic and career/technical (CT) curricula and instruction?



The staff — including 20 new teachers who bought into the concept of motivating students to complete a more rigorous curriculum — joined Fowler in developing a plan to raise achievement and motivate students to stay in school until graduation. They agreed to focus on the following best practices for school rejuvenation:

- **Revive the guidance and advisement program.** Counselors and teacher-advisers in the FUTURES program work together to meet with each student and his or her parents to review graduation requirements, develop a program of study for reaching education and career goals, and become familiar with college entry requirements. They also tell students and parents about student recognition programs and summer enrichment programs to boost academic skills. Counselors and teacher-advisers complete transcript, grade and course credit reports for each student; discuss test-taking skills and making the most of high school; and administer a career interest inventory to prepare students to participate in an annual career fair and job-shadowing opportunities.
- **Add more AP courses.** The school offers AP courses in literature, biology, calculus and U.S. History. It plans to add AP Chemistry and AP English Language and Composition in 2009-2010. Teachers are being prepared to offer AP World History and AP Art.
- **Hire a graduation coach/senior counselor.** The new coach organized a senior success night for students and parents and developed a senior packet containing a timeline for the final year of high school and information on the ACT, college scholarships and financial aid. Other activities include college and career nights featuring representatives of higher education and the business community; graduation audits for fall and spring; interventions for students needing extra help; coaching for the ACT and state assessments; assistance in completing college and scholarship applications; and online courses for credit recovery.
- **Initiate a student recognition program.** WPHS recognizes groups of students for meeting the requirements to be Mississippi Scholars and *HSTW* Scholars. Mississippi Scholars complete an upgraded academic core of four credits in English; three credits in mathematics (including Algebra I and II and geometry), with a fourth mathematics course to be added in 2010; three credits in science, including biology, chemistry and physics (preferred) plus a fourth lab science in 2010; four credits in social studies, including economics; and two credits in a foreign language. Mississippi Scholars perform 20 hours of community service and maintain a grade point average of at least 2.5. A 95 percent attendance record will be required beginning in 2010.

The school based its *HSTW* Scholars program on the *HSTW*-recommended curriculum. Students who receive this award complete four credits in college-preparatory English; four credits in mathematics, including Algebra I and above; four credits in science, including biology, chemistry and two additional lab science courses; four credits in social studies; two and a half credits in fine arts, health and computers; and four credits in a concentration such as CT, humanities or mathematics/science. The humanities and mathematics/science concentrations include AP courses. Beginning in 2010, these students will earn a total of 28 credits for graduation and will be required to have a 95 percent attendance record.

WPHS also upgraded its honor graduate program when it became obvious that students were not keeping pace with higher standards in course taking and academic achievement. Honor graduates now complete four credits in English; four credits in mathematics, including Algebra I and above; four credits in lab science; four credits in social studies; two and a half credits in art, health and computers; and two advanced electives in foreign language, world geography or other courses. They must maintain an average of at least 90 percent, meet the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning requirements and take one AP course in 2008-2009 and two AP courses beginning in 2011-2012. Beginning in 2010, they must earn 28 credits to graduate.

WPHS was identified as one of the 100 most-improved *HSTW* sites from 2004 to 2006 based on students' scores in reading, mathematics and science on the *HSTW* Assessment.

"In spite of pressure to play the numbers game due to *No Child Left Behind* and state testing requirements, we are committed to having students complete a rigorous curriculum — and they are responding," Fowler said. "It is too early to tell, but we believe our ACT scores over the next five years will reflect the curriculum changes and the recognition program."

Contact:

Tim Fowler

(tkfowler@westpoint.k12.ms.us)

Portfolio Project Engages Students at Career Center

Western Area Career and Technology Center

(WACTC) in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, is a shared-time technical high school with 500 students from nine sending schools enrolled in grades 10 through 12. The center has had success with its student portfolio project — a schoolwide effort to deepen implementation of the *HSTW* Key Practice on guidance and advisement. Portfolios have proven effective in increasing students' skills in goal setting and career planning.

The portfolio development process begins when students enter the career center and continues with activities at each grade level. Portfolios are a way to show progress and growth, to document technical competencies and to record accomplishments. The portfolios are stored in binders in students' career/technical (CT) classrooms.

- **Tenth-graders** sign a portfolio agreement and develop career objectives with related short- and long-term career goals, including plans for further education and careers after high school. Students complete career interest inventories and list their CT program competencies, indicating the knowledge and skills they have mastered. Each student writes reflective pieces on selected career-related assignments and accomplishments to include in the portfolio. Reflective entries consist of a description of the assignment or project, what was learned and a performance evaluation.
- **Eleventh-graders** add a completed job application, a résumé, a cover letter and a thank-you letter to the portfolio. They complete and reflect on a mock interview and add more examples of career-related assignments and assessments with accompanying reflective entries.
- **Twelfth-graders** refine their career objectives and their short- and long-term goals, update their résumés and identify awards and/or career certifications they have earned. After adding examples of career-related assignments and assessments, they describe their post-graduation plans.

WACTC developed rubrics and guides for scoring portfolio contents. Written entries must meet the scoring guidelines and conventions of the state standardized writing assessment.

CT instructors and members of the student portfolio committee review the portfolios periodically and make suggestions for improvement. After students meet all requirements, a counselor or a CT instructor initials the portfolio to indicate that it is complete.

Students use their portfolios in a variety of ways, including displaying them in connection with open house events, parent and teacher conferences, career days, job interviews, work-based learning experiences, and college applications and interviews.

"Students see their portfolios as a portrayal of their accomplishments," Director of Vocational Education **Joseph Iannetti** said. "Although many students are hesitant when they are assigned the portfolio project, they express their gratitude and feel a sense of accomplishment when it is done."

The completion of portfolios has increased the involvement of the WACTC career counselor in helping students select academic and CT courses and make plans for postsecondary education and careers. The counselor oversees each student's portfolio development and assists in creating a four-year plan. This involvement enables the counselor to recommend higher-level academic course work.

WACTC is using the school's exit survey and employer survey to collect data on the effectiveness of the portfolio project. Early results indicate that the project is having a positive impact on students. The next steps are to offer course credit and a grade for the portfolio project and to develop an electronic version.

Contact:

Joseph Iannetti

(jiannetti@wactc.net)

Out With the Old, In With the New in Guiding and Advising Students

The adviser/advisee program that began in the 1990s at **Hancock County High School** in Lewisport, Kentucky, had become more of a social time for students and a planning period for teachers than a guidance and advisement session. There was no agenda and no accountability.

Principal **Rick Lasley** turned to his faculty for a solution. He organized a revision committee that met frequently over the course of a year to design a new adviser/advisee program that would improve student achievement and help students plan for the future. The committee was composed of one member from each of the school's seven departments.

The result is the LEAD program — Literacy, Enrichment, Assessment and Developmental Assets. Students meet twice a week to focus on grade-specific activities. One teacher per grade level is assigned to be the leader. He or she is responsible for organizing and distributing materials for teachers at that grade level.

Major revisions to the program have met with success. Hancock County High School is a *High Schools That Work* Pacesetter School for 2008-2010 and has made large gains in achievement on state assessments. The school enrolls more than 530 students, with less than 5 percent minority. The attendance rate is high (over 95 percent) and the dropout rate is low (less than 1 percent).

The new adviser/advisee program is grade-level specific:

- Freshmen practice for the ACT PLAN assessment of academic progress. They acquire study skills needed in high school and work on their individual learning plans (ILPs), course schedules and ninth-grade transitions.
- Sophomores prepare for the PLAN assessment and practice for state assessments. They also spend time on their ILPs and course schedules.
- Juniors practice for the ACT and state assessments and focus on ILPs and course schedules.
- Seniors work on their ILPs and complete career inventories and WorkKeys, the job skills assessment from ACT. They spend time on their required senior projects, add to their senior writing portfolios (where they must reach at least the apprentice level on a scale that includes novice, apprentice, proficient and distinguished) and practice for on-demand testing.

“Students are expected to read when nothing else is taking place in the adviser/advisee period,” Lasley said. This can total 25 to 50 percent of LEAD time, depending on the grade level. “We invested more than \$2,500 in sets of educational magazines devoted to current events, language arts and science.”

The teacher leaders for each grade plan all activities for the period one semester in advance. “These teachers are respected in the building and have been able to get buy-in from the rest of the staff,” Lasley said. “I don't have to hold teachers accountable now, because they hold each other accountable.” Teachers maintain the same level of expectations in LEAD that they do in the classroom. Administrators attend the sessions and help keep the students on task.

Students receive rewards instead of grades for participation in LEAD. Free time is built into the schedule so students can benefit from doing the work. By the same token, there are consequences for students who do not do their best in LEAD. Students who fail to show enough effort are sent to talk with school administrators and may not be allowed to participate in the free time that students earn for doing the work assigned by LEAD teachers.

LEAD is making a positive impact on students. The school's total academic index on the Kentucky Core Content Test (KCCT) rose from 79.2 in 2004 to 92.6 in 2007. The school ranked seventh in the state in overall KCCT scores in 2007. ACT composite scores rose from 20.1 in 2004 to 20.7 in 2007.

Contact:

Rick Lasley

(rick.lasley@hancock.kyschools.us)

Taking Guidance Into the Classroom at a Career/Technical High School

Guidance counselors at **Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School** (Valley Tech) in Upton, Massachusetts, have classroom teaching assignments to deliver their counseling curriculum to students. They have found that it accelerates contact with students and produces useful information enabling them to guide and advise students about the future.

Valley Tech enrolls 1,100 students from 13 communities. In 2007 it was named a *High Schools That Work* Pacesetter School.

In planning the content of classroom presentations, Valley Tech counselors recommend matching American School Counselor Association (ASCA) standards and career/technical (CT) standards with the lessons. The ASCA standards for a guidance curriculum are academic development, career development and personal social development, including goal setting and decision-making. “An effective way to assess students’ understanding or to establish a baseline for understanding is to assign a daily journal question,” said **Penny Downs**, Valley Tech counselor.

The counselors have designed lessons for each grade level, nine through 12. Lessons for **ninth-graders** involve reviewing student portfolio requirements and a freshman portfolio assignment that includes an interest inventory and a CT program placement essay. **Sophomores** study goal setting and careers. Lessons for **juniors** include college and career fair preparation, work-based learning requirements, interviewing skills, work ethics, SAT registration and college procedures. **Seniors** review transcripts, prepare college applications, investigate scholarships and hear guest speakers from local colleges and businesses.

Since counselors are not trained as teachers and are not required to be teachers in most states, it is advisable for counselors going into the classroom to seek support from seasoned teachers, adopt effective teaching methods and learn to use computers and visual aids. “Counselors should request professional development on effective teaching methods,” Downs said. “If it is not available, they should take control of their own success by enrolling in a class on teaching and classroom management strategies.”

Valley Tech counselors begin class by stating the purpose of the guidance lesson and making connections with students’ lives. They may organize students into small groups for the lesson.

The following recommendations from Valley Tech counselors will help other school counselors who are planning to take information and materials into the classroom.

- Start collecting data. Determine the needs of students by recording the reasons they come to the guidance office.
- Develop a classroom program that addresses students’ needs and promotes the mission of the school.
- Collaborate with administrators and staff to offer useful, high-quality lessons.
- Develop a strategic plan before entering the classroom.
- Utilize books and Internet resources to frame and strengthen the lessons. Resources may include *Evidence-Based School Counseling* by Carey Dimmitt, John Carey and Trish Hatch; the Hatching Results Web site at www.hatchingresults.com; and The Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership (CESCaL) at www.cesca.org.

“We advise school leaders who are planning to offer classroom counseling or are already involved in the practice to provide training for their counselors,” Downs said. “Gain buy-in from the counselors, don’t schedule a counselor for more than one class per day, and allow them to move gradually into the classroom.”

Contact:

Penny Downs

(pdowns@valleytech.k12.ma.us)

Counselors Design Events to Personalize the High School Experience

High Schools That Work recommends involving students and parents in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic, career/technical or blended concentration.

Counselors in the guidance department at **Hedgesville High School**, a *High Schools That Work* Pacesetter School in North Hedgesville, West Virginia, make every effort to personalize the high school experience and to help each student plan a program of study to reach academic and career objectives. “The human touch in guidance and advisement is important,” stressed Principal **Don Dellinger**. “Students need attention, acknowledgement and praise as they prepare for the future.”

Counselors work with teachers and administrators to assist in the early identification of students who need guidance and advisement about academics, attendance, at-risk behaviors or personal issues. These students are referred to a student assistance team that helps them develop a plan to overcome their problems.

Hedgesville High School guidance and advisement activities include:

- **Self-assessment for students in grades nine, 10 and 11** — Counselors believe in giving students a clear picture of their unique qualities — skills, values and personality traits — to use in choosing productive and satisfying careers. Freshmen use the Bridges computerized career program to match their interests and skills to careers; sophomores take the Keirseley Temperament Sorter, a personality inventory; and juniors complete a self-directed search based on research about six personality types and their relationship to job satisfaction and career achievement.
- **Focus on freshmen** — Before school begins, incoming ninth-graders and their parents attend an orientation night to meet administrators, teachers and counselors; receive information about school policies and what it takes to be successful in high school; and follow the schedules they will complete in the freshman year. Also, counselors establish study groups and monitor grades on a regular basis to assist freshmen in making the transition to high school. The counselors meet one-on-one with ninth-graders who fail one or more courses in the first grading period.
- **Sophomore technical school visit** — Hedgesville counselors take all sophomores to the local technical school where they visit two programs of interest. Students can then schedule courses related to those programs for their junior and senior years.
- **EDGE program** — Earn a Degree/Graduate Early (EDGE) enables students to earn free community and technical college credit in West Virginia while still in high school. This program makes it possible for a graduate to receive an associate degree in one year or less after high school. EDGE students must pass the end-of-course technical skills exam with a grade of 74 percent or higher and must enroll in postsecondary education within two years after graduation from high school to receive EDGE credits. EDGE courses at Hedgesville High School include a number of business and computer courses as well as human anatomy and physiology; psychology; and speech, writing and oral communications.
- **Junior/senior transition project** — The purpose of this program is to help students make the transition from high school to a community or technical college. Students must be seeking a two-year degree from Blue Ridge Community and Technical College. Preference is given to students who have earned EDGE credits or are enrolled in EDGE courses.
- **College and military opportunities** — Hedgesville juniors and seniors attend a college fair at a local university, where they obtain information, ask questions about requirements and scholarships and can apply for admission. Students who are interested in military service after high school graduation participate in Military Academy Day with their parents. Representatives from all branches of the U.S. service academies are on hand to provide information. In addition, representatives of colleges and military branches make appointments to set up displays at the school so that students can ask questions or apply to enroll or enlist.
- **The Human Touch** — One goal of the Hedgesville guidance program is to provide an “extra-personal” touch from staff to students, whether it is in scheduling, career counseling, scholarships and financial aid, one-on-one discussions, or crisis intervention. The Human Touch program includes a crisis intervention team that visits funeral homes and hospitals; sends notes and cards; makes phone calls; and provides individual, group and classroom counseling.



“Students need attention, acknowledgement and praise as they prepare for the future.”

— Don Dellinger
*Principal
Hedgesville High School*

Contact:
Don Dellinger
(ddelling@access.k12.wv.us)

Saving Starfish: School Cares About At-Risk Students

To make sure every at-risk student is connected to a caring adult at school, the staff of **Henry County High School** (HCHS) in Paris, Tennessee, adapted the Legend of the Starfish. The author is unknown, but the message is clear: Although millions of starfish wash up on beaches around the world, saving just one by tossing it back into the ocean “makes a difference to that one.”

HCHS is a rural comprehensive high school for students in grades 10 through 12; 50 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

The Starfish program at HCHS originated when the staff decided to pair at-risk students with teachers who would keep up with their grades and school activities and guide them to take the right courses, work hard and stay in school through graduation.

Students’ names were written on index cards and taped to a large wall. Administrators, teachers and other staff members took turns scanning the rows of names for students they knew personally. Staff members that had previous connections with students wrote their names on those students’ cards.

If students had no signatures beside their names, they became part of the Starfish program. Each Starfish student was assigned to a teacher or other staff member who made a point to get to know the student and his or her family. The mentor kept up with the student’s attendance, behavior and academic progress and checked with him or her at least once a week to see if help was needed to “stay afloat” in high school. Students needing assistance were guided by their mentors to the appropriate services, including tutoring, counseling and visits to the school resource officer.

The Starfish program entered its second year in 2008-2009 with some modifications. This year, students are assigned to teachers that they have for at least one class. They are also assigned to teachers of the same gender.

Students are unaware of the program’s existence. Teachers are asked to be discreet but to let students know they care about their success. “In a school with 1,000 students, it is easy for some students to fall through the cracks,” said Academy Coordinator **Candi Agee**. “The Starfish program is ensuring that every student has an adult connection in the building.”

Contact:
Candi Agee
(ageec1@tennk12.net)

The Connect Program: A Different Ballgame for At-Risk Students

The Connect program, based in **Horry County Schools** in South Carolina, makes it possible for overage, at-risk students to graduate from high school in three years with the marketable skills employers are seeking. These students meet the same diploma requirements and take the same standardized tests as other students in the state. The difference is that the Connect program focuses multiple resources on preparing a target group of students to become productive citizens after high school graduation.

Connect operates at two high school academies in the county. It began in the 2006-2007 school year with its own director, counselor and 16 teachers. Now supervised by the principal of each academy, the program enrolls 200 students from nine high schools. The 2008-2009 school year is the third year of the program, which is on target to graduate its first class of students.

Students in Connect meet minimum South Carolina graduation requirements, including 17 credits in core academic subjects and seven credits in career-related electives and High School Assessment Program (HSAP) remediation electives. South Carolina end-of-course exams account for 20 percent of course grades. Students must achieve a passing score on the HSAP exam to graduate.

According to Connect counselor **Julie Hardwick** of the **Academy for Arts, Science and Technology** in Myrtle Beach, students choose to enter the program. “Parents are involved in the decision, and there is input from school administrators and counselors,” she said.

New Learning Experiences

Students find Connect to be a different ballgame from the school experiences they have known in the past. Because they are completing four years of education in three years, they double up on English/language arts and mathematics in the second year. By the second semester of the senior year, students have completed 20 credits. The remaining credits required for graduation are one mathematics credit and three career elective courses. The career courses allow students to spend the majority of the day as interns in business and industry in the community.

The classes are small (a student-teacher ratio of 15 to 1), and the instruction is hands-on. In addition to teaching the academic content, teachers create opportunities to instill employability and life skills in their classes. The use of academic scaffolding provides a solid base with layers of integrated and coordinated learning that make sense to students.

Students complete a battery of career assessments to determine their best career pathways. Parents and students meet with the counselor and the school-to-work facilitator to discuss students' individual graduation plans and the types of careers students will pursue. These meetings lay the foundation for in-depth internships that will take place during the senior year.

The Connect program creates a nurturing and uplifting environment for students who have struggled in the past and are in danger of dropping out of school. Students receive progress reports every two weeks. If extra help is needed, they have access to tutoring, credit recovery and summer school. Students participate in a student council, community service activities, sports, field days, student dances, recognition programs and family dinners at the school.

Supporting Career Choices

Dianne Goldfinch, school-to-work facilitator for the Connect program, said local business leaders serve on an advisory board, make career-themed presentations at the school, host career trips to the workplace, act as mentors for individual students, and establish job shadowing and internship experiences. They also provide weekend, holiday and summer jobs. "One of the goals of Connect is to place graduates in high-skill, high-wage permanent jobs that offer benefits," Goldfinch said.

The Myrtle Beach area is heavily invested in tourism, with many hotels and motels, restaurants and golf courses. Good jobs are available also in industry, the medical field and law enforcement.

"We have had an outpouring of support from the community," Goldfinch said. "The chamber of commerce, city government and trade associations all have agreed to help." The strategy is simple: Ask for support. "We explain what we are doing and tell why it is important to students," she said.

Hardwick said students in the Connect program gain a combination of academic success, career preparation, personal growth and pride in their accomplishments. "They receive what they need to graduate from high school, find a good job, enroll in technical education and enter adulthood as contributing members of society," she said.

Contact:

Julie Hardwick
(jhardwick@horrycountyschools.net)
Dianne Goldfinch
(dgoldfinch@horrycountyschools.net)

This newsletter of "best practices" in implementing the *High Schools That Work (HSTW)*, *Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW)* and *Technology Centers That Work (TCTW)* school improvement models is based on presentations at the 22nd Annual *HSTW* Staff Development Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in July 2008.