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Operation Graduation

Teachers stand for students and help them succeed.

Laura Hebert

Once a Skyhawk, always a Skyhawk. The students and staff at Lloyd C. Bird High School in Chesterfield County, Virginia, pride themselves on being a family that never pushes anyone from the nest.

With more than 1,800 students and thousands of passionate alumni living throughout the nearby Richmond area, Bird is a large comprehensive high school that provides many supports for students. With a population that is approximately one-third black, one-third Hispanic, and one-third white, Bird draws from a community that is largely middle and working class.

During the 2011–12 school year, many students were in danger of not graduating for a variety of reasons, several of which were not directly connected to their cognitive ability.

These obstacles, which included poverty, neglect, lack of verified credits, discipline issues, and absences, were being addressed through our GET Connected curriculum (government, English, and technology taught to an identified cohort of students); Read180 (a reading program for students in special education); Parents as Educational Partners (PEP, helping Spanish-speaking parents with the language of school); a double block of geometry; credit recovery;

and much more. Knowing there was still more we could do, the Bird High administrative team took a head-on approach to helping students graduate, thus increasing their likelihood for success after secondary school. And so the Operation Graduation program was born.

Identifying the Obstacles

The program began with a team of teachers, school counselors, and administrators who met twice a month to identify students who were in danger of not graduating. Together, the Operation Graduation team created a data dashboard listing the obstacles that multiple students faced:

- Five or more absences in the first nine weeks of school.

- One or more 10-day out-of-school suspensions.

- Failure in a "gate-keeper" class, such as English or history/government.

- Lack of verified credits earned by passing Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) tests.

- Economic disadvantages.

- Eligibility for special education or English as a second language services.

- Other anecdotal information, such as incarceration of a parent, recent divorce of parents, or involvement in various support programs at school.

We discussed each current senior, and any student who faced even one of the listed obstacles was put on the list. Then, we created a complete list, with obstacles identified, that we projected on the wall so the group could see it in its entirety. The team was dumbfounded to realize that at least one-third of the senior class was on this list. To get a better handle on the situation, the team began to categorize students on the basis of the number of obstacles they faced.

The Green Category

Students who only faced one obstacle were in the *green* category. We then focused our work with those students on the specific obstacle they faced. For instance, if excessive absences were the obstacle, the student and parent were called in to meet with the principal and counselor to explore the reason for the absences, how the

student felt when returning to school after an extended absence, and how certain the student felt of graduating. By talking about their feelings and working with a team of adults to outline options for success, students who only faced attendance as an issue stayed in the green category and eventually fell off the list of students in danger of not graduating.



Other students who had only one obstacle to graduation were also offered one-on-one conferences centered on their specific need. Those who only needed a verified credit met with the testing coordinator to devise a plan for remediation before the next SOL tests. Students who had faced a 10-day suspension met with administrators and teachers to get integrated back into school more quickly. Students who were failing a "gatekeeper"

class met with school counselors and teachers to devise a plan to catch up with class requirements.

The Red Category

Students who faced more than one obstacle and were second-year seniors were categorized as *red*. School counselors and administrators had worked with these students for at least one year, yet it appeared that the students would still not graduate. It was apparent that many of them needed an intervention outside the traditional graduation route, so we helped them move toward GED classes, a Job Corps program, or a similar path.

The Yellow Category

This left the *yellow* category, made up of students who faced multiple obstacles and for whom the usual interventions had not worked. These 46 students had a dedicated school counselor, and those with discipline problems also had an administrator monitoring their situation, but they seemed to need something more. The Operation Graduation team kept returning to the idea that Bird High faculty and staff prided themselves on the school's family environment. Why not use that commitment to help these seniors?

All the students in the yellow zone were asked whether they would be willing to be mentored by a faculty member who would have access to their grades and would communicate regularly with their parent or guardian. The students were surprised that a faculty member would be willing to mentor them, and they seemed grateful for the extra attention. All but one student in the original group agreed to participate in the program, and this student later returned to the administration and asked for a mentor. The next step was to find mentors, which we did through a program we called Who Do You Stand For?

Standing for Students

At the next faculty meeting, the administrative team told the story of an 11th grade student who was suspended for 10 days for creating a "hit list" of students he wished would "just go away." This student, who had never been in serious trouble, had been bullied throughout his sophomore year, and the list was his way of fighting back. The administration had no idea about the bullying and was even more surprised to find out that the student's mother was dying of brain cancer. When asked why he didn't talk to a teacher about his situation, he replied that he didn't

feel a connection to any adult in the building.

After that, one administrator made it her business to keep this student on her radar. She ensured that the student made up all exams missed during the suspension. She made herself available if the student needed to talk and made sure that he had access to a school counselor and the school psychologist the next year. The student later said that without this informal mentor, he would have never made it through his senior year.

The administrators challenged the faculty to be the family they believed themselves to be and stand for the students who faced obstacles that a

the school counselor and rearranging a schedule so the student could pass current classes and retake other courses online. In most cases, it meant giving a student a sounding board when faced with a problem. In all cases, it resulted in a feeling of accomplishment for both student and faculty member.

There were no limits to what teachers were willing to do for their students. One teacher went with her student to visit the student's father in prison. The teacher said that this was the first time she had ever been to a prison, and she needed the support of her student as much as the student needed the teacher. Regardless, this

We've also added a program called O-Tiger for 25 juniors who face the same types of obstacles as the seniors. The juniors, who are monitored more than mentored, attend monthly group meetings facilitated by a faculty member. Several are enrolled in two English or two social studies classes so that they can catch up before their senior year. Our hope was that our work with this group would reduce the number of students facing obstacles and needing mentoring their senior year.

Seventy percent of these students, with O-Tiger support, earned enough credits to be considered "on time" for graduation. They are all being given mentors this fall as they still face other obstacles to graduation. However, we now know early in the year which students need Who Do You Stand For? We do not have to wait until the second semester to identify students who need support.

The Chesterfield County Chamber of Commerce selected our Operation Graduation program for its Champions initiative, promising resources to help put the senior students on track to graduate with their class. Each month, volunteers from the business community will meet with the group and discuss the importance of education for being hired and staying employed.

Although these programs are designed to help individual students, they have also enhanced the culture of Bird High School. We have built relationships among our faculty, staff, and students that will lead to other successes, academically, athletically, and in the community. Now, we have evidence that Bird High School is a place where teachers and faculty care about their students and will go to extremes to help them find success. ■

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mentor could help them surmount. Then, they presented a set of easels that displayed photos of students needing help and invited faculty to choose a student to support. Some teachers identified students whom they had taught in previous years and with whom they felt they had unfinished business. Others chose students they had never seen before, reinforcing the idea that many students are faceless in a large school. When all the photos were chosen, many faculty members were disappointed not to have a student to mentor, so we put them on a waiting list in case other students were identified as needing a mentor.

Within a week, faculty members had contacted their students and begun the hard work of helping them make strides toward graduation. In some cases, that meant calling students at 6:00 a.m. to get them out of bed so they would be on time to school. In other cases, it meant meeting with

student felt comfortable enough, and safe enough, to ask her mentor to make the trip. And the mentor was so invested in the student that she welcomed this opportunity to help rebuild a parent-child relationship.

Building on Success

By June 2012, 42 of the original 46 students in the mentoring program walked across the stage as on-time graduates of Bird High School. The remaining four students graduated in summer 2012, on time by federal standards.

In the 2012-13 school year, 42 seniors were identified for one-on-one mentoring. At the meeting in which their names were to be revealed, teachers arrived early and sat up front so they wouldn't miss the chance to be a mentor. Eighty-one percent of these students graduated in June, with the remaining 19 percent scheduled to graduate in August.