

Alternative Programs for the Non-traditional Student

With the budget cuts experienced a couple of years ago, the Aurora Alternative High School and the Youth Outreach Program at the middle school level were closed. While both of these programs had some outstanding qualities, the time without them gave us the opportunity to examine research of other programs across the nation which have been shown to be successful. A review of MCCSC student data presents evidence that there is a need to provide alternative programs for students who are not successful in the more traditional school buildings.

In the fall of 2011, we opened a new Alternative/ non-traditional Program for 7-12th grade students who were most at-risk of not succeeding in school and eventually not graduating from high school. These are students who have a poor record of school success, and are generally behind their peers in grade level or course credits.

At the 7-8th grade, we served approximately 15 students during the 2011-12 year. They were students who have had great difficulty academically, socially, or behaviorally in their home middle school. Interventions within the middle school building have failed to produce success with these students and it was determined, in collaboration with the parents, that the students needed intensive, urgent, small group instruction to turn them back on to the road of school success. The curriculum continued to be rigorous and there was intensive instruction in the identified areas of weakness and in particular, literacy skills. Good decision making and study skills were also a portion of instruction. During the 2012-13 school year, we expect to increase the number of students served to 25 at any particular time with many staying only for a grading period or two before returning to their home middle school. Students will be identified by the middle school principals and/or referred by their parents.

At the 9-12th grade level, there are several programs available. We enrolled 110 students in the first year of the existence of the Bloomington Graduation School—a Diploma Plus School. The expectation is to grow to 130-150 students in 2012-2013. Diploma Plus (DP) is a research-based nationally recognized model that has been implemented at BGS because of its expected success with the most at-risk students. It is intended for youth who are struggling in a traditional system and are identified as in danger of dropping out of school.

The model combines high expectations for every student, a competency-based and standards-aligned performance-based approach, a personalized learning environment, opportunities to make academic and

real world connections, and challenging post-secondary experiences while still in high school.

The Diploma Plus Program Model

Diploma Plus Schools look and feel significantly different than traditional high schools. Aside from their smaller size that provides for closer peer and adult-student relationships, and a safer and more supportive school community, Diploma Plus Schools are distinct in other important ways.

- One major difference is that rather than grade levels, students are placed into and promoted through three distinct Diploma Plus Phases (*Foundation, Presentation, and Plus*) that allow students to learn content and skills at the appropriate level, regardless of their age or previous credit accumulation.
- Another key difference is that throughout each of these DP Phases, students are involved in transitional experiences which culminate in enrollment in a college course, participation in a high-quality internship, and the development and completion of a Community Action Project during their Plus Phase (or senior) year.

Each of the four essentials is briefly described below.

1. Performance-Based System

Diploma Plus Schools provide curriculum, instruction and assessment that are focused on knowledge, skills, and understandings – on students “uncovering” meaning at their own pace, not on teachers “covering” a set of content standards in a prescribed period of time. In DP, rigorous curriculum, effective instructional practices, and authentic assessments are competency-based and standards aligned, and built into a performance-based promotion, and graduation structure. In addition, the DP model calls for the use of student-centered instructional strategies to engage students in learning and facilitate their skill development.

2. Supportive School Culture

Diploma Plus Schools work intentionally to develop a positive and supportive school culture. This culture is developed through specific relationship-building activities and deep-rooted school norms that nurture the strengths of diversity and inclusivity. Diploma Plus Schools are committed to fostering positive relationship across all members of the school community, engaging youth leadership and voice, and providing a culturally responsive environment.

3. Future Focus

Diploma Plus Schools intentionally provide a focus on students' futures through awareness, exposure, preparation opportunities, providing transitional experiences for students in all DP Phases. This involves a multi-year sequence of career and college exploration activities and services that are embedded in advisories, classroom activities, and out-of-school time. These services include developmentally appropriate and progressively intensive experiences and activities in relation to college and careers in the Foundation and Presentation Phases, in addition to the required activities and experiences in the Plus Phase.

3. Effective Supports

Diploma Plus Schools have external and internal structures that support programs and help ensure student success.

Credit Recovery Plan

A smaller group of students (~30) use Nova Net on-line curriculum to finish their remaining credits toward graduation. This is modeled after the former Broadview Teen Learning Center and the Clark Pleasant Academy. Students are generally in the 11 or 12th grade, over-age, with at least 25 credits. They may also participate in internships, vocational school, and college courses. It is a self-paced program designed for students to complete their high school diploma.

This is a summary of the programs supported by the passing of the referendum which have enabled MCCSC to improve student success using a systematic approach to interventions and proven models of instruction. We expect our success rates to increase markedly with a resulting increase in the graduation rate well above 90%.