

# Preventing High School Dropouts

## Every day

By Sammye Wheeler-Clouse

In the midst of Southern California wine country, four 9<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers at Temecula Valley High School (TVHS) are making dramatic strides to increase the likelihood that incoming freshmen will graduate with their peers. Staff, aware of declining student achievement, decided it was time for a big change. Achievement data made it clear that everything they had tried to date—including efforts to beef up content instruction—wasn't working. Even students who entered the high school scoring well on standardized tests quickly became unmotivated as they transitioned into the larger, more impersonal setting of high school.

After poring through the data, Principal Rani Goyal and her

teachers developed a new vision for the school. They pictured working interdependently rather than in isolation, developing consistent and cohesive expectations for all their students, and aligning curriculum standards in order to provide relevant cross-discipline connections. This was a big order, but it also was the perfect opportunity to communicate high expectations and to set teachers and students on a path to consistency and accountability.

Thus began Delta Academy, a school within a school, where students rotate among smaller, supportive teams of four teachers to take freshman courses, such as Algebra I and English, along with sophomore-level biology and

world history. Re-arranging daily routines to create the academy was a bold move, but it did not, by itself, change student performance. TVHS is seeing results because teachers have seized the opportunity to re-think everything they were doing and find new ways—everyday innovations—to do them better.

### The realities of change

Of course, it is one thing for a district or school to say that it is going to create an academy for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and another thing to recruit, prepare, and train the teachers. Goyal, seeking the best professional development for the teacher-leaders who would “make it happen,” contacted McREL, and I began to provide technical assistance as the four



teachers developed, designed, and implemented their 9<sup>th</sup>-grade transition academy. During the professional development, we studied national high school data; considered ways of aligning curriculum across content areas; looked at methods of coordinating schedules for planning interdisciplinary lessons and teaching content; and brainstormed ways to develop consistent expectations for behavior, homework, and performance.

Working together, the teachers created procedures for students to follow, interventions for success, and systems for consistent parent communication. “With support from home, we have more influence on student behavior and productivity,” said science teacher Neal Skarin. They also designed an interdisciplinary curriculum to support students’ understanding of connections between content areas. “We collaborate on one interdisciplinary unit each semester; in the fall, it’s ‘myth busters,’ and in the spring, it’s ‘tolerance,’” said English teacher Katie LaFontaine. Equally important, they set high expectations for all students and developed a “no excuses” approach, expecting students to take responsibility for their own learning. “We figure out how to give students individual support, and we schedule parent, student, teacher, and counselor conferences to discuss strategies to help each student improve academically,” said LaFontaine.



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### A crucial year

The National High School Center (2007) indicates that the first year of high school, or “gateway year,” is pivotal for many students. Among the alarming statistics are these: promotion rates from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade are much lower than between any other grades, more students fail 9<sup>th</sup> grade than any other high school grade, and high school dropouts experience 25 percent failure of 9<sup>th</sup>-grade courses. Consequently, 9<sup>th</sup>-grade academies aim to decrease the dropout rate.

By their own admissions, most students entering Delta Academy did not expect to successfully transition to high school. But, at the end of their first year, 76 percent of students saw their GPA increase or remain the same, and 16 percent saw a rise in GPA by at least a grade point. “These students would have failed; maintaining a passing GPA is a huge success when confronted with the increased academic and social pressures of 9<sup>th</sup> grade,” said

math teacher Stuart Tucker. “The success of Delta truly is a result of the teachers who bought into this. They meet all the time, they have adjusted their practice and their thinking, and it is because of them that students who would not have been successful found a place in high school,” said Goyal.

Establishing a freshman academy where there had been none might seem like “the answer” to increasing student achievement. But it is really the many small changes taking place everyday that matter most. Grounded in solid professional development on how to support student learning, TVHS staff reconfigure schedules as needed, plan collectively, and adjust instruction. With each everyday innovation, they are a step closer to decreasing high school dropouts and failures, and their students are a step closer to realizing their potential.

### Reference

National High School Center. (2007, March). *The first year of high school: A quick stats fact sheet*. Retrieved October 1, 2008, from [http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC\\_firstYearofHighSchool\\_032807.pdf](http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_firstYearofHighSchool_032807.pdf)

Sammye Wheeler-Clouse specializes in helping schools and districts achieve their improvement goals. She can be reached at 303.632.5626 or [swheeler-clouse@mcrel.org](mailto:swheeler-clouse@mcrel.org).