

BOOSTING GRADUATION FOR MINORITY



RATES STUDENTS



How one Minnesota school district developed its own academic model for success

BY ROBERT METZ

It was 1999, and my Minnesota school district was at a crossroads. Our community had shifted from a fast-growing suburban district to a more urban district with declining enrollment. More than 40 percent of our ninth-grade students were failing at least one class and our graduation rate was dropping.

So, we started at the beginning—by examining ninth grade. We thought if we could help students successfully transition to high school and decrease our ninth-grade failure rate, we could impact their success through graduation. We began testing a new approach that focused on the ability of teachers to create intentional relationships with students and how those relationships could be used to remove nonacademic barriers to learning.

It turns out that most students do not fail a high school class because they are not smart enough. We have many different levels of courses and can almost always place a student in a course that matches their academic level. Most students fail a high school class because of nonacademic barriers. After a few years of trial and error, we developed a ninth-grade



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model that provided the academic results we desperately needed, drove student engagement, provided a social and emotional support network for our students with the most needs, and increased teacher morale.

Our model—Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR)—has had a very positive impact on the St. Louis Park School District for the past 15 years, and is one of the main reasons that St. Louis Park High School now boasts a four-year graduation rate of 88 percent (as of spring 2015). We now have a high percentage of our ninth-grade students (approximately 85 percent) passing all of their ninth-grade classes, which in turn leads to more students graduating in four years. This correlation is so strong that we are able to accurately predict our four-year graduation rate three years in advance just by tracking the percentage of ninth-grade students who pass all of their classes.

Closing the Racial Achievement Gap

In St. Louis Park, we found that race has been a contributing factor in widening the academic gap. BARR has helped

us start to close the achievement gap between black students and white students in regard to graduation rates. By building relationships with our black students and leveraging those relationships to reduce the ninth-grade failure rate, graduation rates for black students have increased dramatically. In spring 2015, 80 percent of our black students graduated in four years, compared to 88 percent for the entire senior class (this compares to the 60 percent statewide graduation rate for black students in Minnesota).

We've experienced a tremendous shift in our ninth-grade class culture. Each student participates in a social-emotional learning activity on a weekly basis. These activities build trust and collegiality among the students and between the students and the teachers. Relationships are especially important for students who otherwise might not bond at school or for students who may be facing personal struggles. Once students form that personal bond, they begin to care about what happens in school. And once they begin to care about what happens in school, their success almost always improves.

We've also seen a substantial increase in staff engagement, specifically for teachers assigned to ninth grade, which had historically been a low-satisfaction position. As teachers work in teams to problem-solve around individual students, the competitive and creative part of teaching is reignited. Experienced teachers mentor younger teachers, and younger teachers share

new ideas with experienced staff. When teacher teams see they are really making a difference, that in and of itself becomes highly motivating. Today, many of our most experienced and well-respected teachers at St. Louis Park High School request to teach ninth grade.

Focus on Ninth-Grade Teachers

It should be noted that we've been able to make and sustain these dramatic improvements with very little annual cost. We have built a schedule that allows for ninth-grade teachers to meet as teams on a daily basis. We also reassign one current staff member to be the BARR Coordinator. The BARR Coordinator is a full-time position and has the responsibility to supervise the program and make sure schedules, reports, and action items are completed. As our ninth-grade failure rate continues to decline, we have discovered that costs have been largely offset as the number of students retaking ninth-grade classes has decreased. We are saving money because we don't need to pay teachers to reteach classes for a second or third time.

I am convinced that BARR will work anywhere. It will work in big schools and small schools, rural schools and urban schools, private schools and public schools. I strongly encourage you to consider using this model in your school district. □

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