

Insisting on

Columbia Heights High School refuses to give students the choice of failing.

Andrew Beaton

March 2006—2:10 p.m.

"I've been trying to get Trina to take this test for three weeks, Mr. Beaton. Today is the last day of the trimester. She cannot pass Algebra if she doesn't take the test after school today."

"I understand, Ms. Jones. Trina is sitting right in front of me. I just got off the phone with her mother. Mom said she must stay after today to make up the exam." I hung up the phone and looked at Trina.

"I could give a sh— what my mom says," was Trina's response. "If she's not picking me up, I'm takin' the bus." She stormed out of my office as the final bell rang, swinging my door open hard enough to knock pictures off the wall of the neighboring office. I followed her as she left the building.

I had just spent the last two hours trying to convince this 9th grade student to take an exam that would give her credit for a required course. Needless to say, I could have found a more pleasant way to spend a Thursday afternoon. As I watched her board the bus, I



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thought about how I would now have to call her mom to let her know that despite our efforts, Trina had chosen to fail. Frustrated, I began to walk away, thinking about the shortsighted and immature decision she had made.

But then I realized that this 15-year-old student was not prepared to make the right choice. By allowing her to leave, I was giving her the easy way out. I reversed direction, boarded the bus, and told the driver that he was not to go

until Trina exited. As the other buses pulled away, Bus 109 sat in the horseshoe, engine running.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, one student began yelling at Trina to get off the bus so he could get home. Others joined in. Trina slid down in her seat at the back of the bus and pulled on the strings of her hood to hide her face, leaving only a small hole where her nose and the steam of her breath emerged. As the tension and

Success

volume on the bus reached a crescendo, Trina finally acquiesced, walking through the gauntlet of students back into the building and up to room 204, laying into me with a tirade of profanity the whole way.

"Here she is, Ms. Jones, ready to take her exam," I said pleasantly. Trina skulked into the room, threw her bag down on the floor, and took a seat. Ms. Jones thanked me and quietly placed the exam on Trina's desk.

The Option to Fail

We've all heard the phrase, You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. That was my attitude early in my teaching career. As a social studies teacher, I believed it was my job to develop creative, engaging lesson plans that would promote students' higher-order thinking skills. My students achieved good test scores; many of them went on to study the social sciences in college and expressed gratitude that my classes had developed their love of history.

But I also failed many students who did not complete assignments or meet standards. I can remember saying, "It's your grade; if you want to fail, that's your business." In hindsight, I feel guilty that I so readily allowed failure as an option. I've come to realize that if we give students the choice to fail, some will.

Schoolwide Academic Intervention

Columbia Heights High School in Columbia Heights, Minnesota, serves approximately 900 students in an

urban/suburban setting. The diversity and poverty of the school's population have increased rapidly in the last five years. We have a truly multicultural environment, with more than 20 languages spoken and a 50-50 split between white students and students of color. More than half of our students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and our mobility rate exceeds 30 percent.

Our inconsistent response to student failure was no longer acceptable.

In 2004-05 and 2005-06, about 50 percent of Columbia Heights's 9th graders failed at least one class, and many were off track to graduate from high school in four years. Although many of our teachers had the creativity and perseverance to succeed with students who had limited skills and a resistance to learning, our school had no collective response to struggling students.

In *Whatever It Takes*, a book about developing professional learning communities, the authors ask a crucial question: "What happens in our school when, despite our best efforts in the classroom, a student does not learn?"¹ Before this year, the answer to that question at Columbia Heights was, "It depends on the teacher."

Following my confrontation with Trina, I began to realize that our inconsistent response to student failure was

no longer acceptable. As a school, we decided to tackle this issue. The school staff considered how we could design a schoolwide intervention plan for struggling students, guided by the recommendations in *Whatever It Takes*. Such programs should be based on early intervention rather than remediation; be systematic and consistent throughout the school, enabling us to quickly and frequently identify struggling students

and get them the support they need; and be directive rather than voluntary, so that students would be required to receive the extra help they needed. In 2006-07, we implemented a schoolwide academic intervention program with three major components.

Advisory Services

The school advisory program changed significantly. Under the old system, students met with their advisory group every Wednesday for 20 minutes for goal setting, team-building exercises, discussion, and academic planning. The new system, like the old one, keeps students with the same advisor throughout high school. But now we use the advisory period to provide students with more consistent, academic-focused communication and intervention from teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Advisory groups now meet three times a month. The first week, advisory topics are the same as in the old system. In week two, however, advisors meet with each of their students individually to discuss grades, missing assignments, and progress. During the third advisory period each month, the advisory program includes a schoolwide *corrective*, a 50-minute period during which students who are not meeting standards report to the appropriate classrooms to work with teachers to get caught up. (Students who don't need this intervention participate in either a study hall in the cafeteria or an enrichment activity.)

The change in the advisory program has increased communication between students and staff by building regular academic conferences into the schedule rather than waiting for the request of an individual student, teacher, or parent. Columbia Heights advisors check their students' grades at three-week intervals. Structuring formal grade submissions every three weeks motivates students to pull up their grades before the *corrective* is scheduled and holds teachers accountable for the accuracy and timeliness of their assessments.

After-School Tutoring

Structured after-school tutoring is available to all students during the second six weeks of each trimester but is mandatory for 9th grade students who are not meeting academic standards. If a struggling 9th grader does not attend after-school tutoring, he or she becomes ineligible to participate in or attend cocurricular activities or events.

We only had to turn a few students

away from dances or sporting events for the word to get around that we were serious about mandatory attendance at tutoring. Coaches roamed the cafeteria where tutoring sessions were held, getting an update on the status of their athletes. Teachers began to use the tutoring program as a centralized loca-



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tion to find students, pulling them from the cafeteria to give them extra help in their classrooms.

Perhaps the most powerful component of the program is the mandatory tutoring list itself. No one wants to be on "Mr. Beaton's list." The day the list is published, students flood my office, reporting that they have made up their test or turned in their paper, pulling up their grade. Parents and teachers call or e-mail telling me that Sam or Sara has indeed improved his or her grade and is exempt.

Credit Completion

Ninth grade students who fail a course but are close to meeting course requirements are given a grade of W (Work in Progress) and have the opportunity to earn the credit during a three-week

extension of the trimester. Students who need credit completion meet in two-hour after-school sessions twice a week immediately following the grading period. Students use an online curriculum that covers the essential outcomes of each course in the four core subject areas (math, science,

English, and social studies). If the student meets course standards, he or she receives credit for the course and a passing grade. If the student fails to meet course standards or any of the other requirements (regular attendance, high-quality work, cooperation), his or her W is changed to an F, and the student must repeat the entire 12-week course.

Although not all students are successful in credit completion, the program works for many students who have come close to passing but need more time and support. Unlike in a credit-recovery setting, which forces a student to start all over, students can continue where they left off in the curriculum.

January 2007—8:45 p.m.

It was my night to supervise the girls' basketball game. The team was not having a strong season, so crowd control was a nonissue on this Tuesday evening. After visiting with a few parents and shooing a group of middle school students back to their seats, I went to my office to get some work done. As I sat at my desk and responded to a few e-mails, I was startled by a sudden knocking on my window.

It was pitch black outside. When the knocking continued, I got up and opened my window to see Reggie, a 9th

grade student. I assumed he wanted me to let him in the office to collect a hat or CD player that a teacher or dean had confiscated.

"What do you need, Reggie? It's cold outside."

"Mr. Beaton, you gotta take me off the tutoring list! Mr. Gapitzke told me that I got a C now in his class since I made up a test today."

"I can't take you off the list until I verify that you don't have a D or F in any class." I began to shut my window.

"You can check! He said he would clear me this afternoon."

"When—now?"

If we give students the choice to fail, some will.

"Please," Reggie begged. "You can't make that phone call to my mom. I promised her that my grades would be better this time."

As Reggie and his friend jumped up and down outside my window to stay warm, I pulled up his current grade information on the computer and discovered that he was correct: one A, one B, and three Cs. Reggie cheered as I told him through the screen that I would delete his name from the mandatory tutoring list. Ironically, during the following weeks he voluntarily attended after-school tutoring sessions.

A Changed Conversation

Our success in 2006–07 is shown by the decrease in the number of Fs per student (failure rate) compared with data from the previous school year. In the first trimester, the failure rate for grades 9–12 fell 48 percent, and the failure rate for grade 9 alone fell 68 percent. In the second trimester, the

failure rate was reduced by 23 percent in grades 9–12 and 45 percent in grade 9. In the third trimester, grades 9–12 reported a 17 percent reduction in the failure rate, and grade 9 reported a 44 percent reduction. In all, there were more than 600 fewer failing grades than in the previous school year. I am elated by these dramatic results, which are confirmed through the anecdotal comments of students and staff, suggesting that we have created a climate of increased expectations, accountability, and schoolwide support.

Conversations have changed at Columbia Heights High School since the inception of our intervention program. Although we still have discipline issues, they do not define us as a school. When our teachers encounter resistance to learning from some students, they now have schoolwide support to meet the challenge. And students say,

"Why didn't we have this program when I was a freshman?"

"Mr. Beaton, I wanted to let you know that I made up that test and my grade is back up."

"Mr. Beaton, I know I'm not a freshman, but you've got to make *me* go to tutoring."

The success of our intervention program shows what happens when student apathy, anonymity, and underachievement meet a professional staff's creativity and collective will. It's no contest. A schoolwide response to struggling learners gets results. **EL**

¹ DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, p. 6.

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