



July 27, 2009

Study pinpoints programs that set some of state's high schools apart

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
The News Journal

Indian River High School eases eighth-graders' transition to high school by busing them in twice a year for visits.

At Sussex Technical High School, a handful of teachers stay after school for two hours to help struggling students.

Students at risk of not graduating on time can take remedial online courses through Dover High School's Twilight Program.

These initiatives were identified as successes in a recent study that analyzed why some Delaware high schools had higher graduation rates and did better on the Delaware Student Testing Program than others of similar socioeconomic status.

"These are schools that are doing better than you would predict based on their student demographics," said Joan Buttram, a University of Delaware educational researcher who conducted the study by interviewing principals, administrators and teachers and holding student focus groups.

The state Board of Education asked Buttram's team to study successful high schools after she completed a similar study last year on elementary school best practices. Board members want other schools that don't already have similar programs to consider bringing such practices to their buildings.

Researchers identified six best practices: a transition program, a ninth-grade academy, extra instruction time both during the school day and after school, a mentoring program and a Twilight Program.

Eighth-graders planning to attend Indian River High visit the school in November to observe a typical school day. Administrators give school tours and explain what it's like being a freshman and talk about extracurricular activities and course offerings, Principal Mark Steele said. Their parents are invited that evening to learn about the school and how to plan for college. Then in January, the eighth-graders and their parents return to schedule classes.

At Sussex Tech, where 23 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, incoming freshmen attend orientation for two half-days before school starts. Students are split into small groups, and each is assigned a teacher and a peer leader. They tour the building, meet administrators and teachers and receive advice from their older peers on staying organized and managing their time.

"Coming into a high school and meeting kids from all over the county can be pretty intimidating at first, so we try to do our very best at helping them feel comfortable right away," Principal Curt Bunting said.

Sixteen-year-old Alice Ogundare, who was a freshman at Sussex Tech last year, said the orientation eased her transition.

"You are leaving your old school and going to a new one and meeting a lot of new people," she said.

"But this helped me make friends."

Rising sophomore Shelly Horshey agreed.

"Sussex Tech is a big school, and I would have been really lost" without the program, she said.

At Dover High, a Ninth Grade Academy helps incoming freshmen make the transition by separating them from the rest of the student body. Students have smaller class sizes and the same teachers for their core academic subjects.

"It gives the students a group of teachers they can identify with on a daily basis. It provides the students with a level of comfort," Associate Principal Tiff McCullough said.

All three high schools provided struggling students with extra instruction.

At Dover High, where 42 percent of students come from low-income families, low-performing students are assigned to a freshman seminar -- where students can work on homework and use instructional software to improve their math and reading skills. Students in the Ninth Grade Academy also use a block schedule -- a system that doubles class time for math and English.

Indian River High, where 24 percent of students come from low-income families, assigns students who scored poorly on eighth-grade state tests to an extra period of reading and math.

At Sussex Tech, struggling math students have algebra daily; peers have it every other day. There is two hours of after-school help Monday and Tuesday. Teachers receive a \$25 hourly stipend for staying after school, and students can catch a late bus home.

"Having the one-on-one help really helped me understand things. I could keep asking questions and not hold everyone else back," Horshey said. "And it brought my grade up a lot."

After analyzing its graduation rate and noticing that few black male students who started as freshmen stayed enrolled in the school, Sussex Tech started a mentoring program that pairs each black ninth-grade boy with a teacher, administrator or other school employee. The mentors meet with the students once every two weeks to discuss attendance, grades, homework and other issues.

A second mentoring program targets low-performing students and students from low-income families. The nonprofit Pathways to Success runs the program Wednesday evenings. Students are paired with teachers and upperclassmen and meet for two hours, getting help on homework and test preparation, and setting career goals.

Both Dover and Indian River offer twilight programs, which give students a chance to retake classes necessary to graduate with their peers. Students use an online instructional software called Ed Options and work on the courses two afternoons a week for six to 14 weeks.

Seven Indian River students were able to graduate last May because of the program, Steele said.

At Dover High, 25 seniors graduated in June after completing courses in the program. An additional 30 seniors who weren't able to graduate in June completed their remaining credits this summer and graduated earlier this week, said Principal Eugene Montano.

"The Twilight Program opens doors for kids who feel like the doors are shut on them," he said. "It's a wonderful opportunity for students to catch up with their peers and move forward."
