

**Connecting Like Crazy:
A Common Sense Approach to Reach
At-Risk Students and Increase Graduation
Rates**

**Presented in partnership with Blair Family Solutions and
The Tyrone Area School District**

Preface

Hanging on the bulletin-board in my office is a copy of my high school transcript. 5-14-85 with the word *withdrew* is written as the day I quit school. However, a quick glance at my transcript reveals that I began to quit much earlier than what the school documented. As with most students who quit school, dropping out is not an event. It's a process; a process that reveals itself as early as elementary school- if people are looking.

When I talked with my mom and dad about my decision to quit, I explained that I just wanted to work. I began working at age 15 and have never been without a job. I saw hard work as my key to success and believed that all through high school. To this day I prefer to build, to create and to get my hands dirty. I'm often amazed I was able to sit, attend and complete six years of college courses.

When I have the conversation today with my mom about my decision to quit, my response is much different than when I was 17 years old. My response today talks about disconnectedness, about not seeing the purpose of school and the monotony of being subjected to an antiquated approach of educating children.

My decision to quit school was just that, my decision. I place no blame on my family, my school or any external influence. My response 33 years ago was that "I did not fit in school," my response today is that "my school did not fit me."

What you will find in this document is our experience over the past sixteen months and the challenges and planning that took almost four years to implement. I struggle calling what we do a program or a plan or even an approach. I'll let others figure out what to call it.

What it is, is a commitment to *Connect Like Crazy* with at-risk students and their parents, to increase graduation rates, and to alter how public education approaches these kids.

VISION, MISSION, GOALS

Most students who drop out are faced with insurmountable challenges including increased incarceration rates, dependency on local, state and federal resources, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol use and the list goes on and on. Every public school in our state is faced with similar challenges and without the proper interventions, commitment of resources both monetarily and staffing, the epidemic will continue.

Establishing our vision, mission, and goals was essential as we started this journey. We needed to be able to convince others that what we were suggesting was valid, relevant, necessary, and had direction.

Our vision is to *Connect Like Crazy* with these students, provide them the hope and support they need to graduate, and challenge the antiquated approach to education that has failed to recognize the needs of at-risk students.

Our mission is to collaborate with families to develop strong, meaningful, and lasting relationships, collaborate with school representatives to develop programming specific to individual student needs, abilities, and goals, and coordinate with service providers, community organizations and families to provide targeted, effective supports and services.

Goals:

- Reduce the number of students who drop out of school
- Increase the importance of education
- Increase connectedness to school
- Implement an Early Warning System (EWS)
- Increase post-secondary success
- Develop and implement data collection systems to monitor the effectiveness of the program
- Disseminate program ideas, implementation strategies, and data to anyone who will listen

Why It's Working

From its inception we knew we needed to gather like-minded people committed to at-risk students and individuals willing to challenge a system that was clearly ineffective. These individuals must possess the desire and passion to actively and vigorously pursue what will work and what options are available. The right candidates are able to overcome barriers and create meaningful relationships based on an Individualized Learning Path, not on status-quo. Effective team members don't settle for *can't* or *not possible*; instead we fight to find what we *can do* and *what is possible*.

It is paramount that what we do is sustainable and systematic in its design. Our goal is not just to ensure graduation but to ensure our students secure successful occupations that will allow them to live, happy, healthy and sustainable lives. Many of our conversations are centered around the premise of *why today matters*, *why showing up counts*, and *how to discover what they are truly capable of*.

We have learned that our work will be scrutinized, dissected, and criticized, but with determination, sound practice, and the right team, we are showing success.

PROGRAMS DON'T CHANGE KIDS--RELATIONSHIPS DO. EVERY CHILD NEEDS ONE ADULT WHO IS IRRATIONALLY COMMITTED TO HIS OR HER FUTURE.

Bill Milliken- The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic

Indicators- Early Warning System (EWS)

We spent the better part of a year creating our EWS/11 indicators as a way to validate our belief that a student is at risk to drop out. The indicators were referenced with 65 school drop outs between school years 2011-2016 and have proven to be reliable.

- 1. 10 or more absences in any year**
 - a. Strong Indicator
- 2. 1 or more failing classes in 9th grade year**
 - a. Strong Indicator
- 3. Retention**
 - a. Strong Indicator
- 4. Significant Discipline (ISS, OSS, Alt. ED.)**
 - a. Moderate Indicator
- 5. Cyber**
 - a. Strong Indicator
- 6. Drug & Alcohol**
 - a. Moderate/Strong indicator
- 7. Mental Health Challenges**
 - a. Undetermined- likely Moderate
- 8. ES/LS**
 - a. Moderate Indicator
- 9. Pregnancy**
 - a. Moderate Indicator
- 10. Ineffective Parenting**
 - a. Strong Indicator
- 11. Drop Out in family**
 - a. Mild Indicator

Developed in part with research from Wells, S., Bechard, S., and Hamby, J.V. (1989). *How to Identify At-Risk Students*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center.

GI School Coordinator & Case Manager Roles

Establishing specific tasks and responsibilities helps to ensure accountability, fidelity, and efficiency of services being delivered. In our case, some tasks are only accessible to the Coordinator, i.e. school records. Adjustment of roles are made as necessary.

School Coordinator (SC)

- Meet with school team to evaluate EWS data
 - Determine candidacy
- Connect with families about EWS data
 - Offer interventions and suggestions
 - Establish on-going communication with families
- Coordinate with school team and Case Managers (CM)
 - Weekly meetings
 - Coordinate school based interventions
 - Behavior plans
 - Schedule changes
 - Credit recovery
 - Credit acceleration
 - Goal setting
- Collect, evaluate, and distribute data
- Generate and present weekly updates
 - Attendance, behavior, grades, plans
- Monitor progress and make adjustments as necessary

Case Manager (CM)

- Meet with school team and SC to review EWS data
- Connect with families to determine best interventions
- Process referrals
- Monitor student/family
 - Participation
 - Attainment of goals
- Meet regularly with families
- Coordinate with SC
 - Provide updates
 - Participation
 - Attainment of goals
- Secure community involvement
 - Obtain work experience for students
- Secure, schedule, and support post-secondary visits
- Monitor effectiveness of interventions and make adjustments as necessary
- Track down kids and get them in school

Administrative Involvement

Early in our first year we were faced with numerous challenges that surprised us and came close to derailing us. We expected challenges from the students and the families we were working with, after all that is why we chose them. What we were not prepared for were challenges in altering an antiquated approach to educating at-risk students.

We often found ourselves defending our mission and spending too much physical and emotional time away from our students and their families. It was not until we made specific requests from the administrative team that we were able to shed those challenges and refocus our energy on the students and their families. Active support from the administrative level has been vital to our success.

*Please note that administrative involvement must be *active* and not *passive* support.

Active Administrative Support

1. All requests for student planning/programming be presented to GI Team either at weekly meeting or via email.
 - a. This allows all parties to be aware of requests
 - b. This allows all parties the opportunity to respond to and challenge the request(s)
 - c. This allows the opportunity for alternatives and options
 - d. This provides a record of and the decision related to each request

2. Administrative leadership will
 - a. Recruit a team of teachers who
 - i. Will advocate for and promote the GI program
 - ii. Will offer suggestions to better meet student needs
 - iii. Will improve and expand the variety of opportunities for GI students
 - iv. Will implement, research and develop strategies to increase GI students success
 - v. Will dedicate 1 hour per week to meet and discuss GI students and the GI program

- b. Publically “take the lead” on disseminating information related to the issue of Drop-Out Prevention, including but not limited to:
 - i. Faculty meetings
 - ii. Newsletters
 - iii. Board meetings
 - iv. In-service sessions
- c. Publically embrace & promote the GI program
 - i. Share (district wide) Superintendent’s investment
- d. Publically promote and support the “menu” of GI strategies
 - i. Participate in the creation of such menu
- e. Publically promote and support
 - i. Movement of education, *changing* times
 - ii. TASD statistics
 - iii. County, state and national statistics
- f. Actively pursue community partnerships for
 - i. Internships
 - ii. Mentorship
 - iii. Funding sources
- g. Actively pursue TASD partnerships
 - i. Create a “learning lab” where GI students can work directly with TASD staff
 - 1. Custodial, grounds, professional staff
 - i. Teacher-helper (3 buildings)
 - ii. Custodial
 - iii. Grounds
 - iv. Office support
- h. Superintendent and Administrative team will
 - i. Meet weekly to review students and the GI program
 - ii. **Challenge the challenges and challengers** in an effort to develop understanding, accuracy, and legitimacy in what the GI program is all about

Goals and Celebrations

With the help of our students we have implemented attainable but challenging goals that are part of the driving force in what we do. Academic and behavioral goals are identified as well as how to celebrate when a student achieves their goal(s). Establishing goals helps to reinforce the importance of “why today matters,” one of the founding premises of what we do. Celebrating our students’ goals with them helps to solidify the relationships we are building-and it’s fun.

You will find that the simplest goals and equally simple rewards provide the best results.

Examples of Goals

1. Increase attendance
 - a. Reduce tardy minutes by _____
2. Specific course completion
 - a. Specific percentage of work completed by _____
3. Reduction or elimination of disciplinary referrals

Examples of Celebrations

1. Donuts with a friend
2. Lunch
3. Morning coffees

Post-Secondary Explorations

During my high-school years I don't remember a time when I discussed post-secondary options with anyone. Like most at-risk students, I was unable to make the connection of why school mattered, determine the purpose of attending, or explore what was available for me after high-school. One of our goals is to explore with students and their families post-secondary possibilities that are meaningful, attainable, and lead to a self-sustaining life. We connect and partner with post-secondary providers to schedule visits and advisory sessions with their representatives. Presenting a variety of possibilities serves as a motivator and provides our students with hope that they too can become successful.

- Various post-secondary visits
 - Wyo-Tech
 - Triangle tech
 - South Hills- Altoona and State College
 - Penn State Altoona
 - Altoona GACTC

Challenges

We believed from its inception that most challenges would come from the students and their families. It is our belief that when genuine, sincere and committed help is offered, it is rarely refused. In fact, it is appreciated and accepted without hesitation. Most of the students and their families that we are connected with are actively supporting and implementing our philosophies and strategies.

What we encountered in our first year was a system of education and its collective belief that looks very similar to what it did 50 years ago. Although our world is rapidly changing, our education system seems to be sluggish at best. Emphasis on standardized test scores, teacher evaluations, and the belief that education can be a “one size fits all” approach does not consider at-risk students, nor any student for that matter.

It was not until we asked our administrative team to take an active lead in challenging the challenges and challengers that we were able to focus all of our time and energy on our students and their families.

Challenges to Plan and Prepare for

- Resistance from influential and non-influential staff members
- Resistance to change
- Resistance to not personalize beliefs regarding students
- Resistance to consider an Individualized Learning Path
- Resistance to deviate from the “one size fits all” approach to education

Menu

When we started, we had a loose idea of interventions we would implement, but in an attempt to communicate with others we formalized a menu of options. This menu serves as a checklist as we initiate work with students and their families and as a reference as our planning continues. This menu was created with and supported by our administrative team.

1. Walk and Talks
 - a. This is the *bread and butter* of what we do
2. Credit acceleration via cyber courses
3. Use of PA graduation requirements when necessary
4. Pursuit of mental and behavioral health support
 - a. T ASD currently has in-house outpatient services
5. Creative scheduling to suit individual needs
 - a. Later start
 - b. Working away from regular classrooms
 - c. Multiple periods in preferred teachers room
6. Utilization of our Alternative Education program
7. Pick up and drop off
8. Locating and returning students to school when they are absent
9. Supporting students at hearings
10. Exploration of post-secondary visits, tours and advisory sessions
11. Transcript monitoring
12. Scheduling
13. ***Connecting Like Crazy*** on a frequent, often daily, basis
14. Advocating for students
 - a. Hearings
 - b. Administrative involvement
 - c. Staff challenges

Schools as Learning Labs

Outside of the typical labs, classroom activities and extra-curricular activities, it is my belief that public schools are resistant to explore the variety of work experience opportunities available in our own buildings. We are not talking about paying students; instead we maintain a focus on identifying needs and utilizing students to fill those needs. State requirements require students to earn a determined number of elective credits. Aligning those elective credits with work experiences that are in line with future employment opportunities could prove beneficial to all.

Some suggestions include:

1. Grounds-keeping
 - a. Mowing, raking, clearing snow, planting, mulching
2. Classroom opportunities
 - a. Reading groups, student support, classroom preparation
3. Clerical
 - a. Answering phones, filing, running errands
4. Janitorial
 - a. Floor maintenance, cleaning, painting, trash removal
5. Cafeteria
 - a. Food prep, washing dishes, set up, tear down

The Good Stuff

Year One - 2016-2017

- 3 of 4 possible graduates did graduate
- William R. first in his family to graduate
- Increased connections with students and families
- Secured active administrative support
- Several post-secondary visits
 - Used to provide future opportunities, motivation and hope
- Formalized menu of options
- Public advocacy for program
- Increase in attendance
- Increase in academic performance

Year Two - 2017-2018

- Of 27 current GI students only one is in *critical stage*
- Kyra M.
 - Made high honor roll first time ever
 - Actively planning bible study group for peer
- Café providing work experience for 6 GI students
- Connecting with Borough officials to provide work experiences
- Connecting with Career Link
 - Employment skills training
 - Possible summer employment
- Scheduled and participated in several post-secondary explorations
- Successfully expediting courses for early graduation
- Café up and running showing strong signs of success
- Outpatient services being provided to 8 GI students (in house)

Summary

Since its inception, our Graduation Initiative has begun to effectively and efficiently address behaviors responsible for one of the highest dropout rates in Blair County. We have seen an increase in attendance, a reduction in disruptive behaviors in school, as well as an increase of post-secondary explorations. Students in our program are beginning to show an increase in connectedness to school and see the value of why today matters. Don't get me wrong, this is not the solution to the dropout crisis, nor is it a guarantee that what we are doing will save every at-risk student. What it is, is a script to prove that *Connecting Like Crazy* can, will, and has changed the lives of many of our students.