



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Jon Terrones, a sophomore at Jackson High School, says after-school study sessions helped him make up missing work.

Everett School District intervenes to help failing kids

By Lynn Thompson

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No school likes to publicize the number of students who are failing, but in the Everett School District, focusing on students with a single F grade has allowed teachers and counselors to get more teenagers on track to graduate.

Last year, district administrators presented each high school with lists of students failing a single class. Principals and teachers were surprised to learn that 60 percent of students with F grades were failing only one subject.

"The staff was shocked when they looked at the data," said Terry Cheshire, principal of H.M. Jackson High School in Mill Creek.

The reasons for student failure are often complex and include poor attendance, lack of academic skills, a family crisis or drug or alcohol abuse. With most high-school teachers seeing as many as 150 students a day, trying to solve any of those problems for even a single student can seem overwhelming.

Making a difference

But Cheshire said that when teachers saw that their failing students were succeeding in their other five classes, they saw a chance to make a difference.

"Suddenly teachers with 150 students could take ownership. They said, 'I'm going to do everything in my power to get these kids to graduate,'" Cheshire said.

In 2004, alarmed by figures that showed that 47 percent of students had dropped out of high school the previous year, Everett set about creating a safety net to keep kids in school. Success coordinators, added to each high school, developed graduation plans for students who had failed courses and needed to make up missing credits. A number of options were offered, including online courses and summer school.

But over the past year and a half, district administrators said they realized they'd help more kids if they could intervene before the students left school. To do that, they said they needed to get current data into the hands of teachers and counselors and to devise intervention plans.

"Once students get in that hole, it's much harder to get them out," said JoAnne Fabian, director of instructional support.

Fabian likened the district's shift, from analyzing dropout data to real-time intervention, to the change in medicine from diagnosing illnesses to preventing them.

"It's meant a whole shift in culture," Fabian said. "We started to ask, 'How do we keep kids from failing in the first place?' "

The early-intervention approach is working. Everett High School cut its number of F grades by 17 percent in the first semester compared with a year ago. Cascade High cut its F's by 20 percent. Jackson High saw a 33 percent drop in failing grades from midway through fall quarter to the semester's end.

Across the district, the on-time graduation rate last year rose to 67 percent, up from 53 percent.

Kelly Campbell, an English teacher at Jackson High School, used the schoolwide silent-reading time to give one-on-one or small-group tutoring to students who were falling behind. Other students stayed after school for an hour several times a week.

Campbell said that knowing some of her struggling kids were succeeding in other classes allowed her to ask what wasn't going right in hers. At the same time, Jackson's success coordinator, Bobbie Bawyn, phoned parents to enlist their help and talked to students about how the class fit into their overall on-time graduation progress.

Jon Terrones, a sophomore, had failed to turn in 10 papers last fall when the school intervened. He was sent to Campbell's after-school study sessions, which he said gave him structured time to make up the missing work. And studying in small groups under Campbell's supervision encouraged him to ask questions and learn from other students' ideas.

"She really wants students to understand and not fail," Terrones said.

Campbell said the intervention is more than a Band-Aid. Students who are getting F's or who are at risk for failing the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) — another graduation requirement — get discouraged about school and their prospects for success.

Passing grades

When their daily work improves and they earn passing grades, she said, "The result isn't just a change in attitude, but a new belief in themselves that will affect them over their remaining years at school."

Chase Faulk, a 10th-grader who last week sat for the writing WASL, said he spent silent-reading time with a group of students improving their reading and writing skills.

Faulk said that he was such a slow reader, he'd fall asleep. When he tried to write, he couldn't get his ideas down on paper. The study sessions gave him daily writing practice.

For the WASL, he wrote an essay about a photo of him and his dad, holding up two 30-pound king salmon they had caught in Canada last summer.

He said the fish were so heavy, his dad had to help him hoist them for the picture. For him, that was an image of his dad as someone nearby, ready to offer support.

Faulk said the words came more quickly than they had in the past.

"I felt more confident this time," he said.

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