

Educational Leadership

November 2006 | Volume 64 | Number 3

NCLB: Taking Stock, Looking Forward Pages 88-89

Leading to Change / Preventing 1,000 Failures

Douglas Reeves

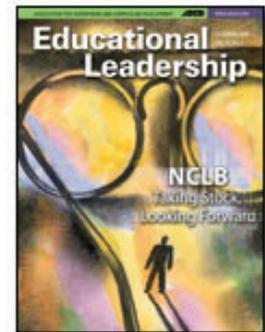
What would preventing 1,000 course failures mean for your school system? For administrators, it would mean 1,000 fewer repeated courses that have to be worked into students' schedules. For teachers, it would mean hundreds of students who are more likely to be motivated and engaged instead of angry, disengaged, and discouraged. Most important, for students, it would mean an opportunity to learn that persisting, listening to teacher feedback, and working hard do make a difference. It would mean the chance to say with confidence, "I am a successful student."

The teachers and leadership of Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, engaged in a "no failure" campaign in spring 2006 and reduced the number of course failures by an astounding 1,006 compared with the previous year. This comprehensive high school serving more than 3,000 students has a student population that includes 43 percent minority students, 9 percent English language learners, and 45 percent students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Student mobility is on the rise, and the number of low-income and second-language students is growing. The teachers are dedicated and hardworking, but they had those characteristics long before the school's dramatic reduction in student failures. How did teachers and school leaders prevent student failures? According to Principal Joel McKinney, seven strategies were the key.

Early, frequent, and decisive intervention. "Every three weeks throughout the school year, teachers give us the names of students who are at risk of failure," explains McKinney. "We use this information to give students personalized assistance and avoid failures." Teachers, counselors, and administrators meet with the student and parents to arrange support, ranging from assistance with homework to basic literacy tutoring to instruction in time management and guidance in keeping an assignment notebook.

At Ben Davis, teachers identify students' reading challenges immediately. All incoming students receive a reading assessment. It takes less than one half-hour and tells counselors immediately whether a student needs help in reading.

Personal connection with struggling students. Within weeks of the beginning of each semester, teachers at Ben Davis know which students are at risk of failure. The faculty of this large high



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school has learned to “think small” as teachers, counselors, and administrators meet with students individually and enter into learning contracts with them. Students meet regularly with counselors and academic coaches who provide support, guidance, and most of all, the clear signal that adults in the school care about them as individuals.

Parent connections. Rather than wait for a course failure to meet with parents, school officials contact parents or guardians as soon as a student has been identified as at risk of a course failure, and they schedule individual meetings to plan for additional support.

Tutoring, both personal and electronic. In addition to providing personal connections with teachers, paraprofessionals, and peers, the district has enjoyed some success with Web-based programs that score student writing. Such programs take advantage of what Jeff Howard of the Efficacy Institute has described as the “Nintendo Effect”: Kids respond to feedback from electronic games because that feedback is immediate, accurate, and incremental. When students receive a rating of 2 on their electronically scored essay, they are as eager to submit a revised essay as they would be to get to the next level in a video game. Computerized scoring will never replace teachers, but education leaders can leverage teachers' time by making maximum use of technology.

Managing students' choices with decisive curriculum interventions. Although educators' respect for students and parents is evident, this high school has put into place the radical notion that the adult professionals are in charge of the curriculum. Principal McKinney insists that students “can make a lot of choices, but we won't let them choose to fail.” Administrators change student schedules in the middle of the semester if necessary to provide additional instruction, intervention, and assistance to students in need.

In-school assistance. Many high school students have jobs, and some live in homes where parents are distracted and exhausted at the end of the day. Even when parents are deeply committed to the education of their children, by the time students are in secondary school they are largely making their own choices about homework, commitment, planning, and follow-through. Therefore, Ben Davis does not rely exclusively on after-school or summer school programs to intervene with students in danger of failure; instead, the school provides daily intervention and support.

Reformed grading systems. The Ben Davis staff is well versed in the research on student feedback, grading, and motivation. This research provides abundant evidence that grading systems are only effective if they are accurate, fair, and timely (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000; Reeves, 2004). At Ben Davis, teachers have largely eliminated the use of a zero grade, the inappropriate use of averages, and the assignment of poor grades as punishment. They know that it is not how students start each semester that counts, but how they finish.

Ben Davis is hardly alone in grading reforms. In Douglas County, Colorado, for example, the middle school grading policy explicitly states that later grades have more weight than earlier grades. A growing number of schools differentiate between academic proficiency and work habits because they recognize that students can be proficient in math and deficient in work

habits; and students can be delightful, compliant, and sociable, yet deficient in math.

The literature on high school reform is full of exaggerated claims and breathless enthusiasm for the latest silver bullet. In contrast, educators at Ben Davis—and at many other schools—are developing solid, comprehensive programs based on research, hard work, and the determination that no student will slip through the cracks. As Principal McKinney notes, “It just works.”

References

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Author's note: Your stories of leadership for change are always welcome. Please e-mail your contributions to DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com.

Douglas Reeves is the President of the Center for Performance Assessment in Englewood, Colorado; 800-844-6599; DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com. Principal Joel McKinney can be reached at Joel.McKinney@wayne.k12.in.us.

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