

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY TIES

The P-TECH 9-14 model leverages research that demonstrates the clear relationship between student performance and family and community involvement. Putting this into action, Kevin Rothman, Principal of Excelsior Academy in Newburgh, New York, began shoring up dedicated familial support immediately after the first students enrolled in the school.

School: Excelsior Academy in Newburgh, New York

Partners: Newburgh Enlarged City School District, SUNY Orange Community College, IBM

Launch: September 2014

Standout Fact: 100% of students and their families met individually with Principal before school began.

THE CHALLENGE

A P-TECH 9-14 model school is significantly different from a traditional high school. For one, high school and college classes are integrated, and students have significant exposure to career experiences such as mentoring and worksite visits. In order to earn their two-year postsecondary degree, students also are attending a longer school day and school year, and will be attending school for as many as six – rather than the traditional – four years.

According to Rothman, “For students to succeed in this rigorous academic environment, we need to do everything we can to build a support system around them that includes families.”

But in order for families to provide that support, Rothman knew that students’ families needed to be clear about – and on board with – the expectations of the school. Even after families had attended one of three open houses during the student recruitment process, Rothman was concerned that misconceptions about the school existed.

“Even after students were enrolled, my sense was that families still had unanswered questions and doubts,” recalls Rothman. The school’s focus on graduating students with a postsecondary degree had left some students and their families believing that the model was an honors program, while others thought it was only for struggling students.

Even for those families who understood Excelsior, Rothman saw value in meeting with them. “I wanted the chance to meet with each family in a personal way that would energize them about their child’s participation,” says Rothman.

MEETING EACH FAMILY ONE BY ONE

Rothman dedicated time to meeting each family, one by one, before the start of school. Rothman notes, “I made clear to every parent that their child’s success depended, in large part, on their support and involvement.”

He also used the meetings to help students and families understand the benefits of the structured nature of the program. “The reality is that we are asking families to make a decision about their child’s future in ninth grade,” Rothman points out. “Many parents I met with struggled with the fact that their children wouldn’t have the same high school experience that they had.”

Rothman highlighted the positives of having this unique opportunity for the families, “This not a one-size-fits-all approach where all of their experiences over six years are pre-determined,” he says. He focuses on the flexibility of the experience. “They will be able to craft their own experiences, their own benchmarks, and their own celebrations. Ultimately, every student will earn an AAS degree at no cost that will put them ahead – whether they choose to continue their education, move directly into the working world, or pursue a combination of both.”

As an added benefit, through the meetings, Rothman got to know the students themselves. “The data we are given on each student before school begins only tells part of the story,” says Rothman. He began to understand the academic strengths, interests, and anxieties of each student. Rothman continues, “I took note of potential issues that might arise once our summer program began, and set expectations and supports individually right off the bat.”

FAMILY MEETINGS SPARK NEW IDEAS

The meetings with the families helped Rothman develop school policies that would foster greater family engagement. An absence policy was created that requires each student or parent to contact Rothman before the first bell rings on the day of their absence, mirroring how the workplace functions.

The staff also actively seeks ways to engage families in school work. For example, families were invited to attend Excelsior’s first “Project Day” of the year. Excelsior student Alejandro Juarez agrees, “Having parents in attendance was great because they learned we meant business and are serious about this program.”

SMALL VICTORIES

Although still early in the school year, the emphasis on family engagement is already beginning to have an appreciable impact. The attendance rate is over 98% through the first month of school. Excelsior’s first parent open house also saw a much higher than average turnout compared to the rest of the larger high school.

According to Rothman, “The successes we’ve had thus far are small victories, but ones we can certainly celebrate and build upon throughout the school year.”

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For more information about a Diverse Student Body in the P-TECH 9-14 model, please visit ptech.org