



Education

Diploma Plus approach specializes in educating dropouts

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A class of Charlestown (Mass.) High School students are riveted to their teacher's lesson about plotting negative slopes. And smiling, to boot. With long dreadlocks pulled into a loose pony tail, Hayden Frederick-Clarke talks to the kids with a fascinating blend of rich, well-educated vocabulary and street syntax. He's cool.

Gesticulating effusively at the slope on the white board, he says, "When I've got a negative slope, I'm riding my bike down the hill, DOWN the hill. Make sense?" The kids are with him. "Cool. Now, how do we read?" "Left to right" is correct, but a few kids elaborate to show they're really getting his point. He exults, "Thank you! You have been here. I am actually your teacher." The kids laugh and assure him he's the teacher. The lesson is information-rich, but it's work to keep every kid engaged.

A girl, heavy with the end of a pregnancy, enters the room and drops hard into a chair. She's not the only one. And actually, most of these kids seem older than typical high-school juniors and seniors. Which they are.

They attend the Diploma Plus Academy, one of five small learning communities at Charlestown High in Boston. Diploma Plus' 29 schools and programs, dotted around the country, specialize in educating recent dropouts or those who are over-aged and under-credited, meaning they're already 17 with maybe a couple of ninth-grade credits.

The principal, Margaret Bledsoe, fought to get Diploma Plus into Charlestown High because about 30 percent of her school's 1,000 students are at least one grade level behind. "A kid comes in and says, 'If you put me in the ninth grade again, I'm out of here.' We wanted to have a program that was not just another year to fail. Diploma Plus has high rigor and challenging class work. If a kid wants an easy way to get out of high school ASAP, it isn't that."

Charlestown identified 50 students who were beginning to age out. "Project Reconnect," a Boston drop-out initiative, sent 10 more students who had already dropped out. Enrollment will double next year, and top out at 180 students the year after.

Nationally, America's 70-percent graduation rate often drops to 50 percent or below in urban areas. As early as middle school, kids start losing grades when their family moves a lot, or they just blow off school. In high

school, kids leave to take care of a sick family member, or get pregnant, involved with drugs, or just bored. And one day a kid realizes there's no way he can graduate while still in his teens.

Diploma Plus offers these kids options.

A student, Vlad, says, "Here it's flexible. Most of us have jobs, and work is not easy with school and stuff." Never mind adding a baby to the workload.

Betsy Roter, the Academy's coordinator, explains, "We don't use the language of grade levels. Here we use skills and products of mastery," to determine when a student matriculates.

The students in the "Foundations Phase" have literacy and numeracy skills at the sixth to eighth grade level. By the "Presentation Phase," they've improved to ninth to 11th grade levels. The "Plus Phase" gets them ready to transition into the world beyond high school. Some Diploma Plus programs are on college campuses, where kids finish high school and are supported through the beginnings of college itself. "Plus" students enroll in college courses, participate in internships, do major projects and participate in seminars geared toward applying to college or developing a plan for the future.

"Personal competencies" count for 35 percent toward each phase. So a kid who's soaring academically but not showing up on time, with a civil tongue in her head, doesn't matriculate.

Roter says, "We have students who passed the MCAS (the Massachusetts state tests) and did really well, but who have never passed a class. So they have the content, but school didn't work at all well for them. The kids tell us they feel connected to the adults here, and that was what was missing in their earlier education."

The Diploma Plus Academy's discipline system is "restorative," meaning only rarely do they use traditional suspensions and detentions to control kids' unwanted behaviors. On Friday afternoons, and some Saturday mornings, errant students sit in circles with adults and peers to discuss their behavior. Sometimes the group helps them make a plan to make amends for their rude ways.

Roter says, "With these kids, traditional discipline has created a really negative history with authority. So we use conferencing and restorative justice. The kids say, 'No, Miss, give me the days of suspension, I don't want to come in on Saturday or do a circle.' The circles hold kids accountable for the specific behaviors," which is a whole lot more effective as a teaching technique for "personal competencies" than suspensions.

On average, across the East Coast sites, Diploma Plus graduates 90.2 percent of their kids. These are all kids who would have dropped out. The reality of kids' chaotic modern lives today is that a ton of them fall behind. Diploma Plus has figured out a way to reverse the course of sure failure.

See www.diplomaplus.net for more information.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults for government agencies and schools; she is co-director of Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at juliasteiny@gmail.com, or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.