



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

Youth Transition Action Teams Initiative Leveraging Community Resources to Ensure Successful Transitions for Foster Youth

Nova Academy Offers Early College Experience for Disadvantaged Youth

Submitted by: Nova Academy Principal, Dennis Eastman

Community: Orange County

Key Partners: Nova Academy, Santa Ana Community College, Olivecrest, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Marion I. and Henry J. Knott Foundation

Subject: Education, Career Preparation

All Youth – One System Element: Academic Achievement, Career Preparation

Function: Improve Program Practice

The Challenge:

Don Verleur, the founder and President of Olivecrest, a non profit serving disadvantaged youth and their families, recognized that foster youth often struggle in high school and are underrepresented in colleges. He also understood this to be true for other disadvantaged youth, including the large population of Hispanic youth residing in Orange County (many of whom were from homes with low socioeconomic status). Verleur believed as well, that foster youth especially needed to have a greater sense of control over their lives and their futures.

He felt that an early college high school could provide the small class size and individualized attention these youth needed to avoid slipping through the cracks while giving them a head start in college and empowering them to be involved in their futures. Dennis Eastman, the principal of Nova Academy, notes that there are about 167 early college high schools in the United States, but less than one percent of them are public schools, and even fewer (if any) specifically serve at-risk youth. He also points out that while larger schools are able to offer more resources on campus, some teachers have 240 students per day which leaves little time to understand and address the needs of these youth.

Nova Academy was designed to address the following challenges:

- Foster youth and other disadvantaged youth are underrepresented in college and struggle in high school.
- Foster and other disadvantaged youth need personalized attention and a sense of control over their own futures, which is difficult to provide on larger public school campuses.

- There are a very limited number of schools already in existence to provide early college experiences, especially within the public school system for foster and other disadvantaged youth.

The Practice and Evidence:

The practice:

Nova Academy is a public charter school which partners with Santa Ana Junior College to provide a broad array of academic and vocational education opportunities to youth while maintaining a small school campus. Youth attend school on Nova's high school campus and also attend classes on the Santa Ana Junior College campus. Students have the opportunity to earn an AA or vocational certification and their high school diploma by the end of the five year program at Nova Academy. The academy emphasizes academics, accountability, and personal relationships with each student. It began with 9 students in 2005, and now serves 84 young people. Dennis Eastman summarizes his work by explaining that both Olivecrest and Nova Academy are, "dedicated to the vision of creating a learning environment where students are empowered to develop self sufficiency and a sense of pride in their academic success."

The Details:

The process for establishing the program:

The community was eager to support Don Verleur's idea because Olivecrest had developed a reputation for reliability and good practice within the community; community members felt confident that with the leadership of Olivecrest, Nova Academy would be able to provide an academic environment wherein foster youth could be successful. Verleur gathered letters of support from reputable community members who were also school board constituents. These constituents agreed to support the charter application by speaking at school board meetings as well.

Verleur also built relationships with the school board by speaking with the Charter Division of the Santa Ana Unified School District School Board. He openly welcomed the Charter Division to assign a member of their team to oversee Nova Academy. Additionally, he obtained commitments from high profile start-up donors such as Bill Gates and Marion Knott. By gathering strong community support, building relationships with the school board, and establishing reputable funding sources, Don Verleur was well prepared to present his charter application to the Santa Ana Unified School Board.

The charter passed easily not only because of Verleur's preparatory work, but also because the school filled a unique niche which was not controversial. One challenge in getting a public charter school approved is the perception that the charter school will be taking students away from existing public schools, which results in decreased funding for other public schools. Foster youth often move to new schools (and new school districts) during the school year, so public schools were likely to "lose" those students to other schools anyway. Not only would Nova Academy offer important opportunities to students with special challenges and traditionally poor educational outcomes, the charter school also would not be taking steady funding away from public schools.

After being approved by the school board, Nova Academy opened its doors to nine group home youth in 2005. They experienced difficulty with the group dynamics and realized that they needed to create an environment which offered a more diverse social setting. The school invested money into the development of high quality brochures and flyers, and offered the promotional materials in both English and Spanish. Next, they began taking students with them into the community to talk about Nova with prospective students. They went to local boxing and soccer clubs, after school hang outs, churches with programs serving young mothers, and low income housing developments. They also depended on word of mouth spread by current students who encouraged their friends to try attending Nova Academy. By the 2005/2006 school year, the academy had grown to 38 students, and now in its third year Nova boasts 84 students with more expected to attend next year.

This expansion has required that Nova Academy hire more teachers and has allowed them to begin considering the addition of more campus based programs, such as sports programs. Because 95% of their students are now Hispanic, their focus has evolved to include hiring staff who understand the Hispanic culture and who relate well with students and their parents. Additionally, Nova has used its association with charter school affiliations to obtain grant money which helps support the increased number of students.

The strategy and practice:

Dennis Eastman tells his students, “begin with the end in mind...this school is not your future, it is a vehicle to your future.” He also emphasizes that, “this is not a continuation school.” Eastman’s philosophy refers to three of Nova Academy’s priorities: academics, accountability, and student empowerment. Students regularly meet with a school counselor dedicated to helping students plan their course schedules according to their personal goals, and meet with their homeroom teachers to discuss their current grades weekly. These homeroom classes are called “family.” Additionally, all teachers stay after school to conduct study hall sessions and students attend these sessions as needed. Study hall attendance is required for students who need help catching up academically and helps them to develop good study skills. Many teachers review each student’s daily planner before the end of the day to ensure that assignments have been recorded accurately and effectively.

The school hopes that by providing this level of accountability and support, teachers and other staff will be able to help provide some of the academic skills and values missing in students’ homes. Eastman now focuses on hiring interns who are earning their teaching credentials because they bring the energy needed to work with these challenged and sometimes challenging youth. Oftentimes they are able to better relate to the students at Nova Academy on a personal level as well. Teachers with experiences similar to the youth help explain the importance of academics to parents and students who do not understand the education system and the impact of an education on their future.

The academy also addresses the more tangible needs of students, such as transportation within the context of supporting academics, accountability, and personal empowerment. Nova Academy purchases bus passes for students so they are able to attend the academy without relying on caregivers and others. In fact, 85 percent of Nova’s students ride the bus

to school, many of them taking three busses in order to arrive by 7:45 a.m. If students have too many tardies or absences they are either offered a scholarship for only half the cost of the bus pass, or lose all of their bus pass scholarship. Eastman explains that this sends the message that students can be independent and use public transportation to attend school, but they have to behave responsibly for the school to continue paying for this privilege.

Nova Academy's five year program has flexibility built in to meet the needs of students who are behind academically and/or need academic support for more than the traditional four years offered at most public high schools. Dennis Eastman notes that this is especially helpful for foster youth who need the extra time and flexibility to catch up after losing ground from moving through several school placements. The extra year built into the program allows these students to graduate on time, and to experience actual college courses with the support of high school staff.

The academy has a contract with Santa Ana Community College which is located two miles away from Nova's campus. Nova shuttles students to and from campus during the school day and provides academic support to students attending college courses. Additionally, Nova ensures that students attending college are prepared for college classes by insisting that students can only attend college if they are performing responsibly in classes on the Nova campus. High school classes taken at Nova follow the school district's required curriculum, but the college courses Nova students attend are regular college courses offered to the community at large. The college does not charge tuition for Nova students up to a certain number of credits, and Nova is responsible for the cost of books and other materials.

As a result of this partnership, Nova students have the opportunity to participate in any of the academic and vocational programs offered by the college, as long as they meet prerequisites. Some students are currently on track to earn both their associates degree and their high school diploma by the time they graduate, while others will have a vocational certificate and high school diploma. Santa Ana Community College also provides some of the classes needed for high school graduation that Nova does not offer such as language courses.

Evaluation:

As a public school, Nova Academy complies with all state and federal standardized testing requirements. They have benchmarks to meet under the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, and STAR testing. Nova also has a School Site Council Board who reviews testing results. The board is made up of parents, teachers, students, and community representatives. Additionally, the school is going through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation process which involves in depth evaluation by an outside agency.

Eastman especially appreciates the standardized testing which helps to break subject areas down into specific skill sets. He says this testing has shown that many of Nova's students are lacking fundamental skills, such as the use and knowledge of vocabulary. In fact, some of these students are unable to attend certain college courses before increasing their skills in these areas; in this way testing has helped teachers to assess student readiness and prepare for college courses. Test scores have also prompted the school to send teachers to special

seminars and is part of the reason for weekly check-ins with homeroom teachers, after school study halls, and choosing to hire interns who are enthusiastic about learning new techniques and helping students build fundamental skills.

This testing began in 2005, but because Nova only had nine students and the school has grown so significantly, the first round of test scores were not used as baseline data. They will be able to assess changes in scores after testing is completed for the 2007/2008 school year. In the meantime, Eastman notes anecdotal evidence which shows success. One student, for example, said she didn't have any friends or feel at all affiliated with schools she previously attended, but that she feels a sense of belonging here. She is now setting personal goals with the school counselor and working hard to improve her grades.

Lessons Learned:

Eastman says that some of the greatest lessons he would share with others working on a similar project are, "a smile invites attempt," and "begin with the end in mind."

- The personal connections and sense of belonging youth feel at Nova encourage them to work hard and achieve academic success where before they have failed.
- Understanding the end vision of the school to empower, inspire, and prepare students for a successful future drives programmatic elements of the school and helps everyone to work together in supporting students.
- Building a relationship with the school board and the community prior to drafting the charter was a key component of opening Nova as a public charter school. It was especially important that Olivecrest had an excellent reputation for reliability so people believed Don Verleur would follow through with his plans as they were laid out.

What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

Eastman expects that if Nova Academy continues to grow as it has, they will have to start looking for a larger space for the Nova campus. He would also like to add extracurricular activities, such as sports teams to give students more of a "normal high school experience." These activities, however, will be guided by student interest. In keeping with the priority of empowering students, when a group of youth approached Eastman about starting a soccer league he encouraged them to research their idea and come to him with a proposal. The students provided him with information and ideas not long after and Nova will likely soon join a soccer club and eventually start playing other high school teams. Eastman emphasizes that while he looks forward to having more on campus extracurricular activities, "the most important thing at Nova will continue to be academics."

Where to go for more information:

www.olivecrest.org

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