



Summer Success with At-Risk High School Students

Greeley Central High School Implements Promising Summer Program Greeley, CO

In the spring of 2008, educators at Greeley Central High School in the city of Greeley, Colorado, implemented a program that they hoped would put their school on the road to big changes.

The challenges that Greeley Central High School — often shortened to “Central” by locals — faces would sound familiar to educators across the country: too many students requiring resources beyond those available in regular classrooms, and far too few dollars allocated to the problem. So when a member of the Greeley business community proposed investing in a pilot program that could help the school’s at-risk students improve their academic performance, former Greeley Central principal Mary Lauer leapt at the chance. “CompassLearning was being used in a program at Montbello High School in Denver called Save Our Youth,” explains Suzette Luster, Student Recovery Program Coordinator and special education teacher at Greeley Central. “Bob Tointon, a local entrepreneur, was friends with a man involved with the Denver program.” After hearing about the Montbello program, which combined mentoring

and education software to improve students’ overall language arts and math skills, Tointon considered donating the funds to launch a similar program at Greeley Central. That’s how CompassLearning became involved in the Student Recovery Program, or SRP.

Designed to span nine weeks over the 2008 summer break, the pilot launched with 20 Hispanic, male students who had just finished their ninth-grade year but who were performing far below grade-level standards in reading/language arts and mathematics. “We sent out 30 invitations, met with each interested student, and then picked 20,” explains Luster. The program offered the students credit recovery and skills recovery as well as a monetary incentive for participation, which included attendance and activity-completion requirements. “Once we had the applications, we talked individually with the parents to answer their questions about the program and to reiterate the importance of it for their student’s future.”

Getting parents involved is critical to the students’ success, Luster says. “The biggest barrier we face is the lack of parental involvement. What we found when we talked to these parents was that they wanted

to be involved, but they were intimidated by the school setting or lacked the literacy skills to look up their student's grades online. Many parents admitted to never attending a parent-teacher conference due to monolingual barriers." To address this, Greeley Central partnered with Realizing Our Community (ROC) and hosted special classes to help the parents at the school. These classes assisted parents with computer skills that enabled them to look up their child's grades online, provided explanation of progress in the SRP, and brought in outside resources to educate parents on gang-related concerns. "Out of the 20 kids," Luster says, "18 are actively involved in gangs, which is another big barrier." Add to that a high rate of poverty — over half of Central's 1,300 students are on the free or reduced lunch program — and you have a group of students with high needs and insufficient funding to meet those needs.

That's why Central wanted to implement a summer program that would help students recover skills and credit in a way that enabled them to progress at their own pace. The first step was assessing each student's beginning performance level. After diagnostic assessments, Central educators found that the average performance level of SRP participants in either subject area was third grade. "We used those results to build [Odyssey] learning paths based on their weaknesses," explains Luster. Teachers set a pass requirement of 75% on Odyssey activities and monitored students' scores as they went through each activity and formative assessment.

Students responded well to Odyssey's interactivity and personalization. "What they really liked was that they had a folder that was built for them. They liked being able to put the headphones on and have the computer talk to them, like it was one on one." Luster adds that the headphones eliminated distractions and enabled students to concentrate on activity and concept explanations. "We were excited about the fact that we could find out where the skill gaps were and develop lessons around that. It was the perfect model of differentiated instruction," Luster says. "It was a very easy way to track student performance and set

up folders of activities that were designed specifically for their needs."

By the summer's end, students had made marked progress. "They were able to move up an average of two levels consistently in reading and math," says Luster, adding that several of them were well into their third level when the program ended. So students who started the summer at a third-grade math or language arts level finished it at a fifth- or sixth-grade level. The school also conducted MAP testing in May and September of 2008 and found that the SRP students showed a year's growth on average between the two tests. The students who finished the program at a sixth-grade level are able to function successfully in their regular classes.

Central's educators worked hard to create a transition program so that the boys wouldn't fall back into their previous patterns once the school year started. In conjunction with the University of Northern Colorado, they created a mentoring and tutoring program that supports SRP students with three days of mentoring and tutoring per week. Out of the 20 students who participated in the summer program, 15 are still involved in the tutoring and passed all of their classes the following semester. The teachers and UNC volunteers are also working to keep the parents involved, implementing monthly home visits and even going so far as to offer GED and ELL classes geared toward students' parents.

Suzette Luster and the rest of Central's teaching team have big plans for the future of the SRP, including Phase II during the summer of 2009 for the remaining 15 students from the original program, as well as Phase I for a new group of at-risk students. They want to implement CompassLearning Odyssey into students' year-round curriculum and install a portable computer lab using donations from members of the Greeley community. With a dedicated staff, good planning, and the active support of the citizens of Greeley, Central educators aim to teach more than academic skills — they're out to teach students the importance of education itself.

