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## Newport News wants to meet or beat state graduation rates

**Newport News officials say they focus on data and support, one student at a time**

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Newport News Public Schools is using ABC's to boost its graduation rates and slash its dropout rates.

Superintendent Ashby Kilgore said the district looks at each middle and high school student's attendance, behavior and course completion. If students have problems in one or more of those areas, they are assigned to a graduation team tasked with finding ways to help the student improve.

Kilgore said, "Students sometimes ask, 'why did you pick me?' We tell them, it's the data."

The efforts, launched over the past four years, are showing results.

For example, Warwick High School posted an on-time four-year graduation rate of less than 65 percent in 2008 and more than 90 would-be members of the graduating class dropped out.

Last year, the Warwick Class of 2011 posted a 73 percent on-time graduation rate. The number of dropouts decreased by almost half.

Similar gains were posted by five of the district's six high schools, with corresponding decreases in dropouts. The sixth school, An Achievable Dream Middle and High School, graduated its first class in 2011 with a 100 percent graduation rate.

But only two of the district's high schools exceeded the state's average on-time graduation rate of 86.6 percent. Kilgore said her goal is to have all of the district's high schools meet or exceed the state rate in the near term.

"The pattern has been a 2 percent increase per year," she said. "If we continue to impact more and more young people, I anticipate more dramatic results."

'Whatever it takes'

The district has been focusing on dropout prevention and recovery efforts since 2008, installing graduation coaches at each high school and assembling teams to keep track of students at risk of not earning a diploma.

Cynthia Cooper, the district's executive director of youth involvement, implemented several of the district's strategies to find dropouts and re-enroll them. She has been joined at the district level by Susan Tilley, executive director of secondary school leadership, and Vanessa Stephens, supervisor of the graduation coaches assigned to each high school.

The district developed the graduation coach program in 2008 to focus on seniors at risk of not graduating. Since then it has expanded to other grades

Stephens said academically students are assigned to a graduation coach, who works with the students and their parents or guardians to develop an individual education plan. The students and their parents sign onto the plan. Coaches work with assistant principals, attendance officers and counseling staff to form a graduation team that meets weekly to discuss the students they are tracking.

"The coaches have the attitude, 'Whatever it takes,'" Stephens said.

The aim is to have the largest number of students possible graduate four years after they enter high school as ninth-graders. But some students need more time, and the district has increased the ways a student can earn a diploma.

To that end, Cooper said the district has worked to keep students on a diploma track, even if it takes them five or six years to earn it.

"The little incremental jumps (in the graduation rate) are because of the persistence of people who say, we're not finished until you're finished," she said. "You have to figure out how to fix it for one child at a time."

More options for staying in school

On-time graduation remains the first goal and the district has expanded options for taking high school classes, including online courses, credit recovery, tutoring and evening classes offered at the Point Option campus.

Schools are also helping students find day care for their children or their siblings, arranging transportation, enrolling them in online classes if needed and customizing their schedules.

"Staying in school is a more viable option now," said Tilley.

Cooper offered an example of a student who moved to Virginia Beach and needed a half-credit of English to graduate. The district set up a distance learning station at a public library near the student's home so he could complete the class and earn his diploma.

The district also uses Facebook and other social media to track students who have disappeared and to reconnect with students and offer them options for returning to school or making up missed credits.

Stephens said the graduation coaches also work with middle school students. Kilgore said educators look at student data from the seventh grade on, watching for attendance, behavior and academic problems, and coaches work with students deemed at risk.

"We've found if we start early in middle school, that's the key," said Stephens.

The increased vigilance has decreased the number of ninth-graders who are held over a year, and the number of freshmen F's has dropped as well, Stephens said.

Students are enrolled in credit recovery programs as soon as possible to make up grades. They don't wait until summer school.

Stephens said the district also has stepped up support for its English language learners, most of whom attend Warwick and Denbigh high schools. The district has hired Spanish-speaking tutors and developed programs and activities for those students, again, reaching down to middle school.

Stephens said students' attitudes are changing at the high schools, particularly Warwick and Denbigh, because of the efforts to connect them with adults.

Fewer GEDs, more diplomas

The focus on graduation has affected students' pursuit of other completion options. In 2010, 137 students chose to earn GED certificates, rather than diplomas. In 2011, the number was down to 87.

"There are more ways to get a diploma," Cooper said. "That's what we wanted to see."

The district also works to engage students in sports, clubs and activities at every school. Not all are after school. Tilley said the schools have flexible schedules so students can get involved in activities even if their after school life does not allow it.

"What this allows is to build different kinds of relationships with adults," said Cooper.

Based on their work, Kilgore expects Newport News to match or exceed the state on-time graduation rate sooner than later. Can they do it within four years, the time it takes a class of students, known as a cohort, to move from ninth to 12th grade?

"I don't think it will take as long as a cohort" would take to complete all four years, Kilgore said.

And she expects the districts' and high schools' dropout rates to continue falling. Currently, the district's 6.9 percent dropout rate is lower than the state average. The number of dropouts decreased from 290 in 2010 to 157.

"That's 157 more high school graduates on the streets," Kilgore said.