



UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

How One School District Ensured
Acutely At-Risk Students Would
Graduate During The Global
Health Crisis

GRADUATION ALLIANCE CASE STUDY





Background

By now, the story is familiar to every school leader in the United States: As the growth of COVID-19 threw districts into a period of rapid change in the spring of 2020, educators and administrators did everything they could to ensure students could continue their studies in the most effective way possible given the unprecedented circumstances.

There's not a school district in the country that did everything perfectly — as there were no perfect answers in the midst of a pandemic that required the closure of schools, in many cases with less than a day's notice. But emanating from this moment in our nation's history are examples of courageous, inventive and sometimes surprisingly effective interventions. These models not only helped sustain students through chaotic times, but may help point the way to a future of improved student support, both in times of acute crisis and in response to systemic socio-educational challenges.

Among these models is a program launched by Dayton Public Schools, with the support of the Montgomery County Educational Service Center and in partnership with Graduation Alliance. Together, leaders from these organizations developed a rapid-response plan and intervention support program to address the needs of senior-year students who were already acutely at risk of not earning a diploma — and for whom the events of the spring of 2020 created nearly impossible odds for the prospect of graduation.

These were students who were often already behind in credit attainment, already facing severe social-emotional challenges, and already disadvantaged in

myriad intersecting ways. For these students, several Dayton and Montgomery County school leaders said, the COVID-19 pandemic was “a perfect storm.”

And under those circumstances, Montgomery County Educational Service Center Superintendent Shannon Cox said, as the program was being conceptualized in March of 2020, the very notion that any of these students might still graduate felt aspirational, at best.

“It's not that we didn't believe in them,” Cox recalled. “It's simply that we knew their worlds were upside down.”

But Cox said the stakeholders who built the program never so much as considered not trying — and the result was a program that exceeded her most optimistic hopes. There were 20 students who graduated from the program, earning 31.5 credits during a very tumultuous time. And even those who would not go on to graduate, program leaders said, were in a tremendously better position to earn a GED or access additional adult-learning services.

“These were the most at-risk students, the ones who were critically in need,” Cox said. “To have so many of them make it, under these conditions. There's almost no way to quantify what this means.”

There is, however, a way to explain how it all came together. That's what we will seek to do in this report.

“Whether you were a principal, a superintendent or a curriculum developer, and no matter how long you’d been doing that, all the experience you had behind you didn’t matter. There had never been a time like this.”

The Challenge

On the morning of March 12, 2020, it seemed that there was still hope that students across Ohio would be able to finish the school year as scheduled. By that afternoon, however, schools across the state had been shut down.

At the time of Ohio Governor Mike DeWine’s order, the statewide closure was set to last “for a period of several weeks.” Within days, however, it was clear that schools would not be coming back in any sort of way that resembled a traditional educational schedule.

But the promise DeWine made when schools were asked — to take “extraordinary efforts... to continue offering services during this time of national crisis” was the standard that school leaders from Dayton and Montgomery County were determined to meet.

That didn’t just mean finding new ways to “do school,” Cox noted. “It was about a week in, I think, when I realized that every school leader was actually a first-year leader,” she recalled. “Whether you were a principal, a superintendent or a curriculum developer, and no matter how long you’d been doing that, all the experience you had behind you didn’t matter. There had never been a time like this.”

Cox called the experience “surreal.”

“All you could do was start moving through the hierarchy of needs, but it was like a complete reassessment of those needs, because the systems we have in place to meet those needs, in normal circumstances, were no longer there,” she said.

In Montgomery County, about a third of students qualify for free or reduced lunches — and in Dayton,

it’s greater than three-in-four — “so food was obviously one of our first concerns,” Cox said. “But then we started moving through the hierarchy, and the totality of needs is just overwhelming.”

As part of the effort to capture as many possible needs as possible, Cox hosted a virtual gathering with all of the leaders in her service district. “The first step in triage is to assess the casualties,” she said. “And so that’s what we did. We asked “who needs our help the soonest? The fastest? The most?”

Cox and Dayton Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Lolli immediately focused in on one group of intense need: high school seniors approaching graduation.

“We had all of these students who weren’t going to make it without major support, and then all of a sudden so much of that support just went away,” Cox said. “A lot of people at that time were talking about making sure kids would get to have a graduation ceremony, and I understand that’s important, but these were kids who weren’t going to graduate unless we did something and did something fast. And when students don’t graduate, their whole lives are disrupted.”

“What we were talking about,” Lolli added, “was the ability for these students to move onto the next stage of their lives — to a job and into schools, and that’s just so important. But the obstacles were tremendous. We had a credit recovery program, but what was needed was so much bigger than that.”

The Solution

The relationship between Montgomery County and Graduation Alliance began in 2017. Since then, more than 115 students from nine districts have earned their high school diploma through Graduation Alliance's dropout recovery programs.

Not all of the educational service center's districts had used the program, though — and Dayton, which had several other initiatives to prevent and recover dropped out students — was among the districts that hadn't yet opted into the partnership.

But when Lolli called the service center to ask about remote learning options for students with exceptional needs, Cox was quick to mention the other districts' experience with Graduation Alliance, which provides curriculum, technology, teaching, mentoring and social-emotional support services for at-risk students in hundreds of additional districts across the nation.

“As we talked about it, it was clear that I didn't have the technology and coaching to support these students,” Lolli said. “After talking through the possibility with Superintendent Cox, I determined DPS was going to try Graduation Alliance for seniors.”

But could Graduation Alliance handle an influx of students from Dayton at a time when it was standing up programs across the nation to help school districts and state departments of education deal with the crisis?

To answer that question, the two superintendents turned to Carolyn Taylor, Graduation Alliance's vice president of program development.

“At that time, the totality of what this crisis was going to mean for students across the nation was coming into focus,” Taylor said. “School leaders everywhere were beginning to see that at-risk students were no longer a subset of the total student population. Practically overnight, almost every student in the country had become an at-risk student in one way or another.”

Taylor nonetheless assured Cox and Lolli that her team was ready and willing to take on the challenge of helping Dayton's most at-risk seniors.

“We knew it was a very big request,” Lolli said, “but at that point, we were just hoping to be able to see some students graduate.”

In a matter of just days, Graduation Alliance enrollment counselor Juli Keller and her team were working the phones.

“At first, a lot of the students were confused and apprehensive,” Keller said. “Everything was changing for them all at once, and so that's completely understandable, but we did everything we could to reassure them that we were going to be here for them every step of the way.”

De'jah was among the students who were skeptical, at first.

“In fact, to be honest, I was a little bit mad,” De'jah said. “I just got a call one day and they said ‘well, you're in this program now’ and at first I felt like I'd been kicked to the side.”

Then Graduation Alliance enrollment counselor Atakeli began to describe the program. Atakeli explained that she already had a list of the courses De'jah would need to graduate and had already ordered her a wireless-enabled laptop

computer on which to work on those classes. She also introduced De’jah to her academic coach, Takwa.

Even before the pandemic hit, De’jah said, she simply hadn’t been doing the work she needed to be doing to stay on track for graduation. “As soon as I started to not understand something, I felt discouraged and was just giving up,” she said.

But as she listened to Atakeli, something clicked. “At that point, I told myself that I needed to take advantage of this opportunity,” De’jah said. “I had to get this done.”

De’jah wasn’t alone. Dozens of Dayton students were receiving calls, emails, letters and text messages.

“When we explained the program — that it was all online, that students could work on it at any time, and that they’d have all this support, the buy-in was pretty immediate,” Keller said.



In many ways, though, getting to that initial “yes” was the easy part.

“You really have to have tremendous patience if you are going to work with students who are living in the kinds of situations that these students are facing,” Graduation Alliance academic coach Ericka Wilcock said. “And all that patience and understanding needed to be doubled during this crisis, because these students are going through so much more than just school.”

Wilcock noted that Ohio’s unemployment rate had been as high as 14 percent the month after schools were shut down.

“A lot of their parents were out of work, so many of them were out looking for ways to support their families,” Wilcock said. “And even if their parents were still working, in a lot of cases these high schoolers were taking care of their siblings at home, because the younger kids’ schools had been shut down, too. They had to step up and be a parent in a lot of ways.”

Wilcock said she and other advocates spend a lot of time getting to understand the challenges each student was facing — the problems they were having before the pandemic and the problems they were having as a result of the crisis. “That’s the starting place,” she said. “School is important. Classes are important. Lessons are important. But the first thing is that students need to feel like they are being seen.”

Once some trust has been built, Wilcock noted, it’s easier to see and address the chronic challenges that had long been festering for each student — and identify the ways in which the pandemic had made things even more complicated.

Addressing those challenges is the job of local advocates like Adrian.

“The pandemic was gasoline on a fire,” she said. “We got computers into these kids’ hands, but then what? When parents are out of work and electricity gets shut off, what good is that computer? Crime went up during the pandemic — can you believe that? Well, when crime is on the rise and neighborhoods are getting shot up, how can we expect them to focus on school? You obviously can’t come to those kids and say, ‘I don’t care what’s happening in your life, can you just take your exam today?’”

As she built relationships with the students in the program, Adrian, a certified health care social worker, went to work connecting them to services that would help reduce the obstacles that were preventing academic engagement.

“Sometimes you know exactly what to do, and sometimes it’s more of a puzzle,” she said. “But I just keep telling them, ‘it’s OK. We’re going to make it through this together.’”

20

Students Graduated

31.5

 Credits Earned

The Results

Before she was Dayton’s chief of schools for secondary education, Erin Dooley was a principal. “Some of the kids from my previous school were in the program,” she said. “And so, I was very familiar with them. I understood their challenges. I knew their work habits. I knew what their attendance looked like.”

But when Dooley would check in on the initiative, she said, she was constantly impressed by the students’ engagement. “I think that the constant monitoring — from a kid’s perspective, knowing that someone is really paying attention, even in the midst of everything else that’s going on — was really a difference-maker,” she said. “If you think about it, the coaches didn’t know these kids. But they kept calling and checking in, again and again, sometimes I’m sure to the point of being annoying. That’s really a sign that someone cares.”

And student by student, all that effort was paying off. On May 20, 2020, the program had its first graduate, a Meadowdale High School student named Courtney. The next day, a Dunbar High student named Di’Andre completed the requirements for his diploma. And the day after that, two more students — Alazae and Savon — joined the growing list of Dayton grads.

When Savon was first contacted about the program, he was worried that he was going to lose the support he had been getting in school. “It really caught me off guard,” he said. But the Stivers School for the Arts student had been struggling to finish his final few classes even before the pandemic, and he soon realized that, rather than losing out of support, the program was giving him exactly what he needed to succeed.

“It was a boatload of support from the start,” he said. “There were constant check-ins. People were constantly asking me how I was doing. And whenever I had a question, there was always a quick response. It made me feel like I was never alone.”

Several of the graduates were students who counselor Trischelle Campbell had worked with at Dunbar High.

Campbell said she was initially skeptical about the program. In the midst of the pandemic, she said, she was worried about having another set of students in a separate program that she would have to monitor and keep up with.

Program manager Abby Perkins quickly put Campbell at ease. “It soon got to the point where I wasn’t worried at all,” she said. “We’d have our monthly meeting, and Abby would give me an update on the students’ progress, and that was that,” Campbell said.



The Future

The success of the program prompted many of the involved school leaders to consider what lessons could be gleaned for times in which there was no longer a global health crisis at hand.

“I think these abnormal circumstances have kind of forced us to look at things differently,” Dooley said. In particular, she noted, when students were enrolled in the program they were presented with “a new kind of reality.”

“It’s a new beginning and a new set of choices,” she said, “but it’s also someone who cares. There’s no history with that person, and yet they care.” The “care” part of that equation is key, Campbell said.

“From my perspective, it really is the personal connections,” she said. “It wasn’t just the tech and the curriculum. That’s the easy part. That personal touch really helped. When you’re a student, and you’ve got Graduation Alliance in your ear, so to speak, with coaches reaching out all the time, that really helped.”

Campbell said that’s not so much a surprise as a confirmation that students are best served when they are surrounded by support — a situation she will continue to strive to create for her students in the future.

Lolli agreed. “Supporting student learning is so important. Understanding the needs of the student and being able to support the student is vital. It is even more important in a remote environment.” she said. “I think the coaching model is really the key to success.”

For her part, Cox believes the program’s success emphasizes the importance of not making assumptions about what students are capable of in difficult circumstances – and that, she said, will be especially important as more schools adopt online options in the future.

“We will never not have remote learning,” she said. “There will always be a fraction of the public that says, ‘I want the remote learning option’ and it’s important for us to understand how to do it and how to do it well.”

And doing it well, she agreed, requires a commitment to truly support students — no matter the challenges they face.

“We have hovered our proverbial mouse over the 21st Century for two decades and not really clicked the button. It shouldn’t take a pandemic to make all of the social inequities so undeniably clear,” she said. “And to me, it’s clear. Remote education needs to be part of alternative education.”