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Program gets Pittsburgh students ready for Promise

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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

Jordan Helterbran, a ninth-grader at Pittsburgh Langley High School, works on his resume in a room filled with "stickies" of comments by students about others' essays.

Pittsburgh Langley freshman Jordan Helterbran isn't likely to miss doing an English assignment again.

He knows teacher Jennifer Wright will call and email home to say he missed work or just to provide an update.

The teen has improved his English grade, and at the end of the first semester he was "Promise ready."

That means his grade point average was above 2.5 on a 4.0 scale and his attendance was 90 percent or better. If he stays in city public schools and keeps that up, he'll qualify for up to \$20,000 -- more if he meets other requirements -- in college scholarships from the Pittsburgh Promise.

Or as Jordan puts it, "It means I'm going to be able to get somewhere in life and into 10th grade too."

Chalk one up for the student and the Promise Readiness Corps, a team of high school teachers who take a group of ninth-graders under their wing and work to make sure they don't fall through the cracks.

"We're really a support structure for their success," said Ms. Wright, team leader.

The corps is being piloted this school year in eight city schools and will roll out this fall with full or partial teams in five of those schools -- Allderdice, Brashear, Carrick, Langley and Oliver.

As participants in one of the district's new career ladders, corps teachers in the fall each will be paid \$9,300 extra a year for their additional duties, which include starting a scheduled day that is 44 minutes longer and working five extra days. The pilot teachers were paid a smaller stipend.

For this fall in the five high schools, 48 corps teachers have been selected plus 12 others who will have hybrid roles that include the corps. The fall cadre was competitively chosen via applications, interviews and classroom observations.

Ninth grade is one of the most critical points on the road to graduation.

Nationwide, more students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, according to the National High School Center at the nonprofit American Institutes for Research.

Yael Kidron, a senior research analyst at the National High School Center and co-project director of the U.S. Department of Education's Doing What Works initiative, said research shows the transition from eighth to ninth grade is a time of stress, with increased academic requirements, decreased parental connection and greater influence of negative peer pressure.

School districts are trying various strategies, ranging from early warning systems to academies just for ninth-graders.

At Langley, early figures for this year's ninth-graders show academic performance and attendance are up.

In 2009-10, 26 percent of the ninth-graders at the school were considered Promise ready. At the end of the first semester, 33 percent were.

The gains were most dramatic in attendance, from 52 percent of ninth-graders attending at least 90 percent of the time in 2008-09 to 68 percent doing so in the first semester this school year.

While high school teachers traditionally work independently or with colleagues in the same subject area, the Promise Readiness Corps is centered around a group of students instructed by the same team of teachers.

The team will work with the same group of students in ninth grade, and, beginning with next fall's corps, each team will follow the students to 10th grade, a practice known as looping and designed to provide students with teachers who know their needs.

When the students become juniors, the teachers will return to ninth-graders.

At Langley this school year, one team teaches all of the school's 67 first-time ninth-graders. Team members include teachers of English, algebra, biology and civics as well as a special education inclusion teacher and a behavior intervention liaison. Their experience ranges from just a few years to 25 years.

Langley principal Lou Ann Zwierzynski said the teachers also taught ninth-graders last year, but this year the corps has enabled them to know the students better.

"The relationships between the teachers and the kids are so much more powerful," she said.

In the room where the team meets daily before or after school, one of the walls is covered by frequently updated charts of each student's progress on academics, behavior and attendance.

Color coding reveals at a glance which students are in good shape academically, are most in need of academic improvement, are disengaged or are disruptive.

Meetings and support offered to students are documented in a notebook.

The teachers also share their own instructional strategies and provide more consistency across classrooms, such as in standards for class participation.

During first period on two mornings a week, the team meets with students or parents. One morning, four students who had been picking on each other were called in for a chat, and the behavior changed that day.

In an advisory period two or three times a week, each team member meets a small group of students. The students set individual goals, and the teacher helps them track their progress.

The Langley advisory classes are using the "Roadtrip Nation Experience," which is a curriculum that helps students explore their aspirations. Occasionally, the ninth-graders take field trips, including visiting local colleges and doing job shadowing.

After the first semester, each student received a report showing whether they were Promise ready or not. Those who weren't had to compute how much their grades would have to go up to clear the bar. That was coupled with a visit by seniors who talked about mistakes they'd made.

Teachers are noting changes in students.

One student, who was doing poorly academically and was disengaged, met with the team, which found help for some of his personal issues.

"I've seen a real improvement in his academics," said English teacher Lauren Hanzel.

As a result of various interventions by the team, one student, who had amassed numerous absences, now is attending every day. Students who miss just one day get a call to their home.

Algebra teacher Sharon Mihalich, in her 21st year of teaching, said she thinks the teaming makes a "big difference" for students, adding, "They realize we're here to help them."

Students say they have noticed too.

Ninth-grader Lara Potenziani said the teachers "understand you more and push you toward your grades."

Lara, who had a 4.0 at the end of the first semester, said, "I've always been good with my grades, but I've never had 4.0s before."

Ninth-grader Bobby Evans, who also is Promise ready, said the corps "really shows they care about us and they care about what we want to do when we grow up."

Across the district, the main elements of the corps are advising, teaming and looping, but the details can vary by schools, depending on the needs of students and teachers, said Sam Franklin, executive director, district office of teacher effectiveness.

In addition to the Promise Readiness Corps, other programs help ninth-graders.

This semester, the district began offering "Period 10" for struggling ninth- and 10th-graders at five high schools, including Langley.

If freshmen or sophomores fail a course the first semester, the students receive an incomplete for the first semester and are required to attend a two-hour after-school class twice a week to catch up as they continue in the course.

If they pass Period 10, the grade from Period 10 appears on their record, not the failing grade.

That enables them to both earn credit and preserve their grade point average.

The district also offers Ninth-Grade Nation, a program started in 2007 to help students make the transition from eighth grade to high school. The program has been adjusted over the years, but this school year's program included orientation before school began, a trip to Camp Guyasuta for rope climbing and team building, and a rally at Heinz Field. Later this month, ninth-graders will do community service for a civics class that emphasizes "Be the Change."

"We're intensively wrapping supports and care around our ninth-graders and making sure every step of the way -- behaviorally, socially and academically -- they are on track to take advantage of our great gift, the Pittsburgh Promise," said Jeannine French, district chief of school performance.

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