



Arkansas City High School

A Lifetime of Learning

By James Rourke and Marlene Hartzman

A partnership with a local community college and a career training program helps a high school prepare students for postsecondary education... and beyond.

Everyone knows that school is supposed to help students become responsible adults, but how can high schools encourage students to accept responsibility for the learning and behaviors that they will need to become responsible adults? One answer is School Counts, the work ethic certification program at Arkansas City (KS) High School.

Through a partnership with Cowley County Community College and the Arkansas City Area Chamber of Commerce, the school's career center has begun a program focused on building the "soft" skills (e.g., dependability, effective communication, and friendliness) that are essential to workplace success.

For each year that a student meets the program requirements—being on-time for classes, earning a 2.5 or better GPA, attending monthly skill-building workshops, creating a portfolio of experiences, and participating in community service—the student earns a one-semester tuition scholarship

to Cowley County Community College. The program initially was for juniors and seniors, but it was so successful that it has been extended to all students. Any entering freshman who enrolls and successfully completes the program can expect that four years later, he or she will be able to take any degree course at the college for free.

Arkansas City is not a wealthy community. It is a farming community that also has a large General Electric plant and a meat packing facility. Located in south central Kansas, it has a population of a little more than 12,000. More than 50% of the families with school-age children qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and more than 100 students are considered homeless. Mobility is high—during the 2007–08 school year, 130 students transferred either to or from the high school.

That the community came together to offer access to higher education for every student is a testament to the leadership in the school, the district, the board of education, the commu-

nity college, and the chamber of commerce. Those leaders view students as a community resource. Assistant Superintendent Jan Voss summed up the beliefs of this leadership group when she condemned the low expectations that prevent educators from helping students achieve. "We have a moral obligation to take care of our students," she said. A recently passed \$36 million bond issue is evidence that the citizens of Cowley County agree.

The belief that students are at the center of the community has resulted in other opportunities to help students overcome barriers, including an after-school program, a summer school program, and extra learning time for math and reading during the day. It has also led to strong academic performance: on the 2008 state-mandated standardized exams, 81% of students met expectations (or better) on the 11th-grade reading exam and 76% met expectations (or better) on the 11th-grade mathematics exam (state targets are 72% and 64.6% respective-



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ly); 87% of the students graduate from high school in four years. The school and the community have worked together to ensure this success.

Collaborative Leadership

When Principal Marci Shearon—who is also a *Breaking Ranks* trainer—arrived at Arkansas City, a feeling of mistrust lingered in the air. She said that in her journey to build trust and help turn the school into a positive, hopeful place, the small things—such as having an open-door policy, seeking teacher input, truly listening, and keeping her word—have had the greatest collective impact. “You can talk all you want, but it is putting those words into action

that truly makes the difference,” Shearon said. “Our building has gone from a very negative place to one of hope.... There is a feeling of mutual respect, and oftentimes we find ourselves agreeing to disagree, but never do we find ourselves not seeking to do what is right for our students.”

Sometimes that mutual respect can be productive and humbling simultaneously, said Shearon. Just ask her after she has solicited feedback on a draft of something and it comes back swimming in a sea of constructive “red” advice. It is all part of admitting that change that is focused on the success of students is difficult, ongoing, and extremely messy. Shearon said, “It is not always about taking

the path of least resistance. It is about creating a family—what family agrees all the time? [The] key is changing the conversation and focus to students.”

The school’s attention to student achievement and the small things has resulted in a complete change in mind-set. “Our conversations are different than they used to be; they are very focused on student achievement,” said Shearon, who credits the school’s embrace of teacher leadership for improvements. After all, she says, developing leadership potential at all levels should not be threatening to principals. In fact, good leaders make a principal’s job easier. Instructional coaches, internal experts, job



embedded professional development, and a shared focus on content literacy through use of a common vocabulary are some of the ways in which teachers have assumed leadership roles. "None of us teach in isolation today," noted Karen Cornejo-White, an academic coach. A component of breaking down the walls of isolation is recognizing teacher excellence and sharing ideas. One way this is done is by identifying teachers who demonstrate best practices or who go above and beyond when helping a particular student.

Further, teacher leaders have implemented professional learning communities to create a positive learning environment. Those communities not only give teachers leadership opportunities but also help teachers hold their colleagues to high standards. Shearon believes that student growth and faculty member growth go hand in hand and lead to the best results. Arkansas City's model relies on every teacher participating on a committee. All ideas, programs, and activities


that the committee designs go before a steering committee for review, then to the entire faculty for adoption. The communities and committees "gave teachers an outlet—people got involved—teachers now have choices," said Darren Wegner, a coach. One important committee—composed of student leaders, community members, and faculty and staff members—aims to improve school spirit, the often-forgotten "it factor" in the school environment.

The community has a vested interest in the school and is actively engaged on the site council and the school improvement team. Discussing investments can be a perilous endeavor these days, but the community has high hopes that collaboration will produce outstanding long-term results. The community launched a partnership to study community needs and arrived at the consensus that retaining highly skilled youth was the best way to ensure the growth of the community. In fact, the partnership with the chamber of commerce

and the community college stemmed from the need to build a workforce by keeping students involved in the community. The students had academic skills but needed soft skills, thus the Work Ethics program was created. Currently, 381 students are enrolled in this program.

"There are lots of spokes to this wheel," Superintendent Ron Ballard proudly said to emphasize the demise of top-down autocratic leadership. "In working with the community to devise a five-year strategic plan, the board of education set high expectations. We then looked at the brutal facts. Everyone in the community expected more than what we were delivering. This is about lives! We had to change." It is that emphasis on community expectations and collaboration that also helped a \$36 million bond for education to pass recently. School board member Janet Carroll characterized the collaboration and support as "neighbor helping neighbor."

And these neighbors back their call for improvement with resources. In



addition to the bond and other support, community members established the ACE (Arkansas City Endowment) Legacy Fund three years ago. The fund supports student scholarships (academic and need based) as well as grants of up to \$500 to teachers to support individual classroom projects. “The staff works so hard” said parent Christy Rogers. “The community must do its part.”

Personalization

“I absolutely hated high school!” Sounds like a quote from a recent graduate or a student who didn’t make it through high school, right? Actually, that was the sentiment expressed by Shearon, and her goal—her calling—is to make certain that none of her students feel the same way she did. She pursues that calling with vigor by preaching the importance of building relationships and using data to benefit each student.

Promoting student progress through a supportive web of adult interaction and interventions begins with the freshman academy. Housed

in a separate wing of the school, the academy emphasizes early intervention and the transition to high school. Academy components include after-school and summer school programs, a learning strategies class, mathematics labs, and seminars. Arkansas City also began an informal mentoring program two years ago that matches juniors and seniors with freshmen who are struggling to make the transition to high school. The older students receive training and meet regularly with their faculty sponsors and protégés to discuss a variety of high school issues, including relationships, grades, school involvement, making good choices, organization, and study skills.

Every student is also involved in a three-tiered system of support monitored by staff members. The formal response-to-intervention program details assessment data, academic progress, and effective strategies and interventions to aid each student and is updated approximately every six weeks (every one to two weeks for students who require the highest level of intervention).

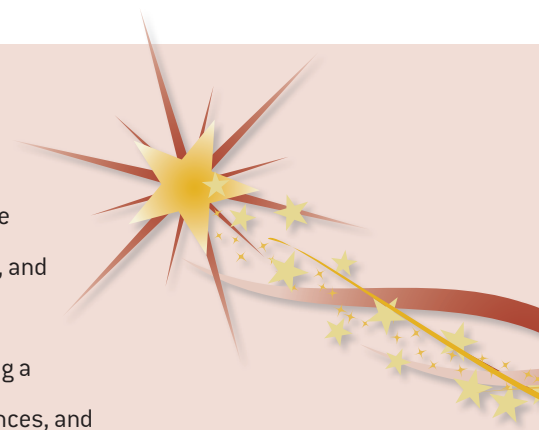
To prevent students from dropping out and to address the needs of high-risk students, the school instituted the Learning Strategies program, which includes teaching study skills, counseling students, and monitoring grades. The goal of the program is to find a hook to keep the students in school—to break their cycle of failure and provide a safety net so that they will graduate. Every at-risk student has an adult advocate (a teacher or a paraeducator), who gives the student support, and staff members make home visits—especially to freshmen. In talking about the web of support that is available to each student, one student leader said it best: “We can always get one-on-one help.”

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Collaboration and professional development have been key to Arkansas City’s instructional improvement. Two academic coaches work with teachers daily to support instructional efficacy and data use in the classroom. “There is leadership potential in every class-

Work Ethic Certificate

School Counts is a work ethic certification program that focuses on building the skills that are necessary for success in the workplace, such as dependability, communication, friendliness, and language. A partnership with Cowley County College and the Arkansas City Area Chamber of Commerce enables students who meet the program requirements (i.e., being on time, earning a 2.5 or better GPA, attending monthly skill-building workshops, creating a portfolio of experiences, and participating in community service) each year to earn a one-semester tuition scholarship to attend Cowley County Community College.





room, but we had no way to tap this resource before we had the coaches," said Ballard. "These coaches are a major investment in the school improvement process—they present a rubric for school improvement—a way for staff to enhance professional practice."

Hands-on daily coaching support is complemented by a three-tiered professional development model that emphasizes bottom-up professional development (e.g., collaborating on data and using internal experts and, as necessary, outside experts). "Eight years ago, professional development was 6 or 6 1/2 days per year on varying topics," said Ballard. "Today it is 123 days of focused, embedded professional development." According to the staff, this change has had a tremendous impact on school climate and teacher preparation. As Voss said, "We're not into programs—the processes [are the focus]."

Coaching and professional development have enabled the faculty to prepare students to meet increased graduation requirements and study a more rigorous curriculum. The school

has increased the number of AP courses it offers to nine (the district pays for AP exams) in addition to four pre-AP courses. The staff works closely with staff members at Cowley County Community College to support students who are in dual-enrollment classes. This collaboration allows Arkansas City to offer extensive career and technology programs to students, including a class that functions as a publishing company for the school, the district, and the community. "Every student has incredible opportunities and support," said Sandy Randel, the community college's director of career and technical education and workforce development. "This school provides options for students individualized according to their interests."

The emphasis on improved curriculum has been coupled with efforts to differentiate instruction. "We must find a way to reach every student," said Shearon. "Students must be at the center of every lesson." Teachers are given early-release days throughout the year so that they have time to collaborate and develop differentiated lesson plans, student rubrics, and common assessments. Paraeducators from special education and ESOL classes and the Learning Strategies program provide student support and assistance within general education classrooms.

In addition, each staff member is responsible for an "extra learning time" group, which meets for 30 minutes after the first block (Arkansas City has four blocks per day). Students are assigned to those small groups to receive academic interventions in reading and math, homework support, or enrichment reading on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays; a structured counseling program on Mondays; and clubs or special activities on Fridays.

To encourage a high level of student-centered instruction, administrators observe classes every day (six to eight classes per day on average) and review lesson plans during classroom walk-throughs. Students are also taught how they can use assessments to help them set, monitor, and reach their goals. They receive results of all assessments; track their personal progress; and engage in counseling activities that are designed to make them aware of their skills, areas for improvement, and appropriate interventions. Although state assessments are currently required for 11th graders, Arkansas City also requires 10th graders to take them so that the school can use appropriate interventions to help students improve their scores, if necessary. (Students who test proficient or higher do not need to retake the test in 11th grade.)

Conclusion

"It's all about high expectations for students and staff and the relationships," said Shearon about the efforts she and her staff members have made over the last several years. She talked passionately about how the school is part of the community and about how that partnership is essential to student achievement. She "loves the climate in the school and especially relishes the conversations about what's best for the student in front of you."

The success of the work ethic program is just one indicator that climate and community collaboration are an unbeatable combination for Arkansas City, leading to high expectations for a lifetime of learning. As one student leader said, "[It's] amazing—everyone can go to college!" Clearly staff members' high expectations for students' success have been passed to the next generation.