

on Michigan's Communities

April 13, 2012

BUILDING A BRIDGE TO SUCCESS: THE OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL

The goal of this publication is to profile child advocacy efforts of one or more of Michigan's communities to encourage networking and sharing of advocacy strategies. This issue highlights The Opportunity School, a partnership between Marshall Public Schools and Kellogg Community College.

"Education is for all who can benefit." - W.K. Kellogg

THE NEED FOR OPTIONS

Too many young people in Michigan aren't making it to high school graduation in 4 years. More than 32,000 Michigan young people did not receive a high school diploma in the spring of 2010 – nearly one-quarter of the students who began high school four-years earlier. In 2007, 155,000 young adults aged 18-24 did not have a high school diploma in Michigan. Young people of color or those from economically disadvantaged families remain the least likely to graduate "on-time" with their peers.

The economic consequences of dropping out are high. Adults with no high school credential have significantly less earning power, and much higher likelihood of unemployment, substance abuse, incarceration and poor health. Communities, which lose tax revenue and take on higher monetary and social costs, can be economically vibrant only when their residents are engaged in life-long learning beginning with a high school diploma. Employment rates of high school dropouts 16-19 years old in Michigan are substantially below their peers who graduate from high school. Their annual earnings will be less than half of what their peers with just some college can expect, and they will not be in the labor market for as many years.¹

Many young people need more time or different paths to reach a diploma. Of the students who failed to graduate in 2010 within four-years in Michigan, fully 16,700 were still on a path toward high school completion. The share of students in this group who are not getting through in the traditional time-frame has increased more than 50 percent since 2007, illustrating the need for increased attention to programs that serve young people who may need more time or different paths to graduate.

Michigan is poised to make great strides in improving the educational success of all children. The unprecedented attention and engagement of the private sector, supporting research, innovation in Michigan and around the nation, and renewed public sector attention provide an opportunity. It is in everyone's best interest to succeed in graduating more young people from quality high schools, and we have many models of this success around the state and nation.

OPTIONS THAT LEAD TO EQUITY

There is strong research that allows us to predict which students are at-risk of dropping out. Young people who fall behind in credits are much more likely to not complete school, yet there are very limited options for credit recovery for these students. Once young people fall behind in school, or when they face significant personal and educational obstacles, a traditional high school setting is not always successful in reengaging them, yet few alternatives exist. In addition, school discipline policies often contribute to disengagement and lost credits.

¹ Sum, A. (2008). Center for Labor Market Studies, Boston, Mass.

Once students have left school before diploma, for whatever reason, they need different options to re-engage. Program models that seek to recover dropouts are being developed to meet students' needs across Michigan and the nation. The barriers to success vary for students across Michigan depending on their circumstances, and communities are best positioned to formulate options that address local needs.

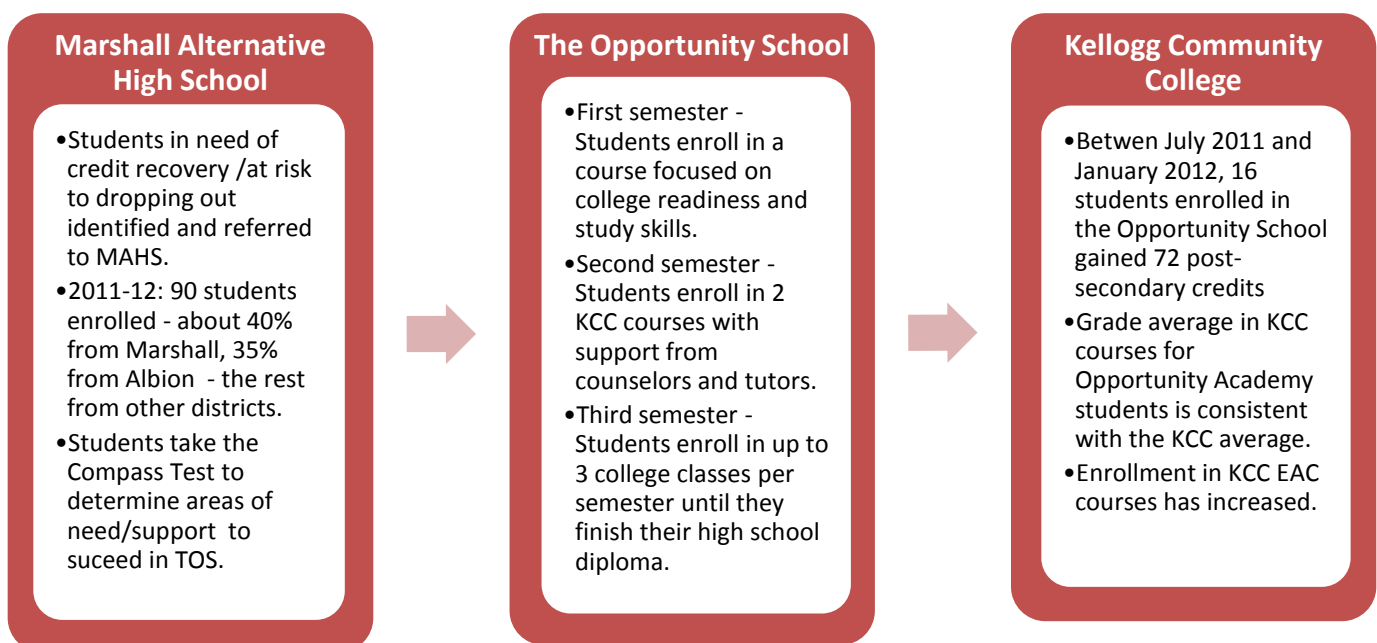
Innovative programs seek to work around the barriers students encountered in the traditional school setting by including options like flexible scheduling, online courses, smaller classes, mentoring, and career and workforce training options that include a path towards a high school credential. Although program structure varies, a common goal remains consistent throughout programs: all students should have the opportunity to enter adulthood ready for post-secondary success in either college or a career.

Additional time and varying strategies improve equity – programs that encourage students to stay in school until they graduate – often with a 5th and 6th year of high school – is more important for low-income and students of color, improving their overall graduation rates significantly.

A COMMUNITY COMING TOGETHER

Marshall Alternative High School opened in 2003 with the sole purpose of helping students get back on track and recover credit in order to obtain a high school diploma. As the program grew from 36 to 90 students during the first 5 years, it became evident that students needed to be better prepared for college or career after graduation. Many students were the first in their families to graduate from high school and had never considered themselves college material – nor had they considered being able to attend college.

The Opportunity School, located at the Kellogg Community College Eastern Academic Center in Albion, was conceived at a Marshall Chamber of Commerce visioning retreat, by a group discussing ways to increase success in the community through collaboration. Meeting attendees included administrators from Marshall Public Schools (MPS) and Kellogg Community College (KCC) and they discussed the need for a program where non-traditional students attending the Marshall Alternative High School (MAHS) could see themselves as furthering their educational pathway beyond high school graduation and attending college. The Opportunity School would act as a bridge between the Marshall Alternative High School and Kellogg Community College – allowing students to step slowly into the college experience while continuing their high school courses and still receiving the support of counselors and tutors available through the Marshall Alternative program. With generous support of a 3-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Opportunity School started with its first round of students in the summer semester of 2011.



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL

- Goal 1: Students considered “at risk” will successfully complete high school.
 - Objective A: Retain “at risk” students in secondary education through partnership with local school districts, Kellogg Community College and Marshall Alternative High School.
 - Objective B: Each Student will have an Educational Development Plan (EDP) that includes college-level coursework during their secondary education.
- Goal 2: Students will successfully complete college-level coursework prior to completing high school.
 - Objective A: All students will take a college readiness pre-test identifying areas of need.
 - Objective B: All students will earn a minimum of 4 credits through KCC but *may* earn as many as possible while completing their high school requirements.
- Goal 3: Students will improve their participation in post-secondary education and/or vocational training. (Students will participate in a survey three and 6 months after high school graduation)
 - Objective A: All students will take a post-test to determine growth in college-ready skills.
 - Objective B: Following high school completion, students will continue college coursework at KCC or another college/university.
 - Objective C: If not enrolled in post-secondary education, students will have post-secondary viable and sustainable employment.

The Opportunity School has filled a need, not only for area students, but for Marshall Public Schools and Kellogg Community College as well. The Marshall Alternative High School program was housed in a former elementary school – which was slated to be torn down – and the Kellogg Community College Eastern Academic Center (EAC) was underutilized. Moving the Marshall Alternative High School program to the EAC meant that students are in an environment where they take their academics seriously and the EAC now has a feeder program, assisting KCC with enrollment.

The Opportunity School provides access to tools, often unavailable in traditional schools, which mitigate barriers to success:

- Tutoring – Regularly an expense incurred or foregone by students’ families, tutoring is offered through a partnership with Albion College’s School of Education, which eliminates finances as a barrier.
- School Counselors – Oftentimes unable to work on academic issues due to other responsibilities in traditional school settings, the counselors at the school are able to utilize students’ Educational Development Plan and Compass test results to guide their High School and Kellogg Community College course selections – as well as assisting them with family-life issues that could impact their success through traditional counseling and connections to other community resources.
- Credit Recovery – Traditional high schools provide limited opportunities for credit recovery, and do not serve the needs of many over-age or under-credited students. Removing time toward completion of subject mastery as a barrier keeps more students on a diploma and post-secondary path.
- College Access – The opportunity to slowly transition into college allows post-secondary education to be part of a path, instead of a giant leap into an unknown.
- Transportation – Moving the Alternative High School from Marshall to Albion caused transportation issues for Marshall Public School students - they are now bused directly from Marshall High School to the EAC.

For more information about The Opportunity School, contact Marshall Alternative High School Director, Bob Vaught at 517-629-7549 or bvaught@marshall.k12.mi.us. For more information about the Kellogg Community College Eastern Academic Center, contact Director Colin McCaleb at 517-630-8169 or mccalebc@kellogg.edu.

If you would like to find out how your community can be profiled for your innovative work in any arena of child and family services, contact Michigan’s Children VP for Programs, Michele Corey at 517-485-3500 or michele@michiganschildren.org.