



Boards Making a Difference

West Burlington Supports Struggling Students, Helps Them Overcome Odds

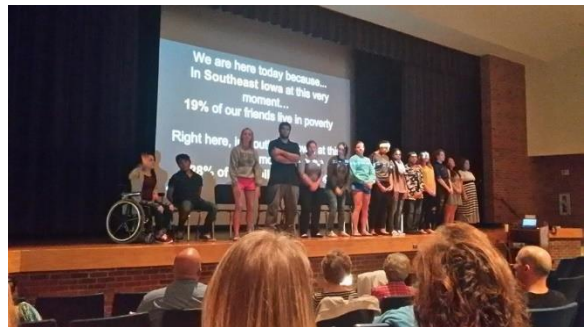
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In some Iowa districts, the effects of generational poverty on students may not be evident, or resources are insufficient to adequately address the issue. But for one school board, the issue impacted so many students that they knew they could no longer stand by and do nothing. They were seeing problems like decreasing graduation rates, student-teacher communication problems and behavioral issues. And the district was struggling to provide resources and support that these students needed, with students ultimately paying the price.

“We could see the data trend and how poverty was taking grip in our school. We were beginning to see the effects of that poverty in our grades, in our attendance, and ultimately in our graduation rates. It became time where our teachers and administration said—we have to fix this,” said Andy Crowner, board president of the West Burlington School Board.

The decision to approve additional funding and shift resources was not taken lightly—the board and administration spent several hours looking at current and historical data, including graduation rates, eligibility for the Free and Reduced Lunch program and other student data.

Crowner shared, “So, after two hours of deciding it was an issue and that we need to stand up and do something about it, I thought—why is this a school board’s issue? Why should the school board stand up and lead this charge? Because we are the elected leaders. We’re the ones our citizens told to go take charge of this, to help. As a board we get so bogged down in the day-to-day issues, from putting on a new roof to buying a new bus to sports issues, this was a real way to make a difference.”



The data they reviewed was alarming. Trends were not going in the right direction. In 2013, more than half of their students qualified for free and reduced lunch rates—30 percent more than in 2000. Graduation rates were declining. The board and administration knew that action needed to be taken. “We are here to graduate and educate kids, help them in their future. Not graduating is the worst-case scenario,” said Dave Schmitt, West Burlington superintendent.

“We had this sense of urgency. We were learning about the realities of these kids’ situations. We thought—if we don’t do something, we’re going to lose a lot of kids and it’s not fair to them,” said Vern Reed, at-risk coordinator for the school district.

FOCUSING ON GRADUATION

The board approved funding to reimagine the existing at-risk program and remove the stigma that it was only for at-risk students. Renamed the Corners Program, the purpose was and is today to let all kids know they are welcome in the program and help each student achieve success, whether a student is a valedictorian, receiving special education services, living in poverty, or they simply want extra help with classes. The program offers services including online learning, study hall, scholarship help and assistance for seniors and at-risk youth.

Since the program’s launch, 48 students have entered their senior year unsure they would graduate. Thirty-seven of those 48 graduated on time. Of those that did not graduate on time: three returned to finish coursework during the Summer Academy; one returned to finish two classes to graduate; and a sixth-year senior returned after dropping out and graduated. The Corners Program also helped one student complete their GED, and helped four students enroll into Job Corp. Thirty of those students in danger of not graduating transferred into the West Burlington district as high school students.

Additionally, the board approved funding for training and professional development. Educators participated in professional development courses to better understand research, improve communication with their at-risk students, and interact and learn from students living in poverty.

“We brought at-risk students in to participate in the professional development for teachers. Students discovered that teachers really did care, they wanted them to learn and be successful. Teachers realized that class assignments weren’t the only things going on in their lives. For students living in poverty, there are physical changes that occur to the brain. We have to understand how they think about certain situations, have a clearer understanding of what these kids are going through,” Schmitt said. This professional development helped deepen understanding and improve classroom instruction.

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE COMMUNITY

In an effort to reach not only students and educators, but to tackle the issue at its core—parents—the board also approved funding and resources for a community outreach initiative, “Bridges out of Poverty,” to provide sustainability training for impoverished adults and teens, as well as classes for community members to better understand poverty. While it may be difficult for a school board to buck the trend and try something new, knowing there will be risks, this board knew that if they supported administration and teachers in this effort, that students would benefit.

“As board president, the feeling of handing a diploma to a kid who dropped out two years ago and through these efforts we got him back and he graduated, what a huge boost for that kid’s future,” said Crowner.

But it’s not just about graduating kids. School boards are entrusted with the job of preparing students for both college and future careers. The district has partnered with a dozen local businesses to help students learn employability skills and find jobs both during school and after graduation.

The board believes that the Corners Program and Bridges initiative has been and will continue to be incredibly impactful for their students and community. “We are helping students in the school system and beyond. They’re not just leaving school and being dumped into nothing. They have a track they’re on, thanks to business partnerships. We’ve partnered with the community to set a better future for students—not just to graduate them,” said Crowner.

SUCCESS BY THE NUMBERS

To date, the board has allocated approximately \$25,000 toward the Corners Program and Bridges initiative. The results they are seeing far outweigh the cost. In 2017, four years after the Corners Program launched, West Burlington’s graduation rate is now at 98 percent, up from 88.3 percent in 2013. The district’s ACT scores are improving and are above the statewide average. Achievement scores have steadily increased. Nearly 50 percent of students are open-enrolled, showing that the district has a positive learning environment that students and families seek out.

“This is out of bounds of what most schools are doing today, especially in southeast Iowa. These are new concepts and it’s easy to continue with the norm and not shift resources and teachers toward these kinds of things. But as a board, we’ve allowed that to happen and watched graduation rates climb and seen firsthand how it’s improved our school and set kids on the path to success,” said Crowner.

Meet the West Burlington School Board