

Using data to help students graduate



CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS KELVYN PARK HIGH SCHOOL

School administrators at Kelvyn Park High School recognized a few years ago that something had to be done to address the low graduation rate. A significant number of students were not graduating, but administrators had few tools to help them identify the students who most needed help. Teachers might recognize that particular students were struggling, but only after months of having the student in class. If there was an issue to be addressed, teachers were tasked with trying to address the issue alone without the help of other teachers who might have also noticed the child falling behind. Meanwhile, a significant percentage of Kelvyn Park students were failing to graduate and enter the real world with a diploma in hand.

Before 2008, there were few effective tools to give teachers real-time reports on their students' performance on tests. No central system that provided insights into student behavior in previous years. No mechanism for teachers to work together to address issues with their students.

Things at Kelvyn Park High School have changed over the past year. In the past 12 months, Kelvyn Park utilized a program developed by the Department of Graduation Pathways at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to keep the school's freshman on track to graduate. Two data and information specialists (also called On Track Coordinators) were assigned to the school to help build a repository of information that could be used by the faculty and restructure the way the information was being used at the school.

The goal within Chicago Public Schools was to take a data-driven approach to identifying and intervening with freshmen who are at risk of dropping out or falling behind in class. Prior to the school year, Kelvyn Park was provided with a "Freshmen Watch List." The reports are available on the CPS Principal Dashboard, an interactive, performance management tool accessible by principals at all Chicago Public Schools. The Watch List, populated with each student's 8th grade grades, attendance, test scores, and discipline actions, assigned a color code to each student with risk factors.

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For example, a student with nine absences in 8th grade was flagged for attendance intervention in 9th grade before the school year started. Principals, counselors, and teachers used the reports to develop interventions with the Watch List students. As soon as ten weeks into the school year, principals had access to the current year's updates via a "Freshmen Success Report" on their Dashboard. The report identified the freshmen with too many unexcused absences or grades of D or lower in core subjects. Additionally, the On Track Coordinators supplemented the information on Watch List by creating a database, accessible by all teachers, with detailed biographical, behavioral, and academic information for each student.

Ninth grade students were divided into three "houses" or groups, each with 120 students. The teachers assigned to each house were then trained how to understand and use the data and information provided by their principals, counselors and information specialists, recognize trends, and create interventions to deal with issues they uncovered with their students. Utilizing the insight provided by the Freshman Watch List, Freshman Success Report, and school-developed database, school staff could give students the support they need.

At the beginning of the year, data available to the teachers included attendance, performance in previous years at feeder schools, and biographical information. Throughout the year, teachers and counselors could use the database developed by the On Track Coordinators to record notes related to behavior issues, the number of times a parent has been contacted by the school, and previous interventions attempted with the child. Each student's performance in all of their classes was recorded in the centralized dashboard. Teachers held weekly meetings to discuss students' performance and address issues as a group.

Teachers could now look at a student's profile and see that a particular child — who lives with his grandparents, has two siblings who didn't graduate from high school, and had previous behavior issues — was scoring consistently low in all of his classes.

Because they were sharing information, Kelvyn Park teachers could take action such as adjusting class schedules when they recognized a group of students who were distracting one another. Groups of three or four teachers — one always being a teacher with whom the student was comfortable — would have in-person interventions with students to address concerns and help the students understand how they could improve their own performance.

Parents also became involved. Working with the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Kelvyn Park utilized parent mentors to make home visits for students who missed three or more days of school to share information about the effect of poor attendance on graduation rates. Because the parent mentors were members of the community and often acquaintances of the families requiring a visit, the mentors were successful at addressing concerns raised by the school. They were also successful at bringing the families of the at-risk students to the school campus so teachers could speak directly to them. The parent mentors made over 1,000 home visits.

After just one year, the school's administration were thrilled with the impact the program had on their freshman class. After the end of the year, 69 percent of 9th graders were on track to graduate on time, a 10 percent increase over the previous year. Kelvyn Park also saw the annual attendance rate increase by 4.2% over the previous school year.

Teachers and administrators at Kelvyn Park are determined to continue their good progress toward increased graduation rates. They know it could mean the world to their students.