Giving High School Students More Time

By David Vange

A large Indiana high school is saving credits and improving its graduation rate by extending the semester for students who make the effort to pass a class.

A recent Web search returned more than 1.1 billion hits for the phrase "time management," a concept that school leaders hear in seminars, read about in books, and are trained in during professional development. But it isn't only principals who need the advantage of a little more time. One high school in Indiana is giving students the advantage of extra time to enable them to reach proficiency and earn credits toward graduation.

Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis is one of the most comprehensive and diverse high schools in Indiana. More than 3,000 students attend grades 10, 11, and 12, and grade 9 is housed in an attached but distinct school. The population at Ben Davis has become more diverse in the past decade. The number of students who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch increased from 15% to 53%; the percentage of minority students and English language learners also increased significantly during this same time period. The graduation rate has been just above 70% for the past seven years when calculated using a cohort formula that allowed students to be counted with that cohort even if they took an extra semester or more to graduate. In 2006, when Indiana created a new method for calculating a strict four-year completion rate for cohorts, the graduation rate at Ben Davis was 65.8%. This change and a belief that students should be given opportunities and encouragement to stay with their cohort and graduate in four years prompted the “failure challenge” to help students avoid falling behind.

Changing the Course

Although there are many reasons for students to decide to walk away from high school, one prevailing reason is the hopelessness of falling so far behind in credits that they see
no alternative. In an age when schools compete for students’ attention with video games and MP3 players and students’ financial situations force them to work, falling behind only further influences their decision that finishing high school is not for them.

During their first few years of high school, many at-risk students develop English, math, science, and elective deficits from failing classes and enter a cycle of repeating courses. The thought of repeating an entire 18-week course—one they may have been very close to passing and may have missed by only a few percentage points—is enough to make any borderline 17-year-old student not see the purpose of continuing. Ben Davis has attempted to diminish this problem by attacking the credit deficiency cycle.

The Failure Challenge

Principal Joel McKinney began to make significant efforts to reduce failures at Ben Davis when he arrived in January 2006 and introduced the “failure challenge.” It was estimated that 1,006 credits were saved in the first year by implementing the failure challenge (Reeves, 2004), the first part of which identifies exactly why students are failing by asking teachers to implement preventive measures at specific points throughout the semester and before progress reports are issued. The most common reasons for student failure are poor attendance and missing work, so teachers contact parents or guardians and even make home visits for the absence issues. For the missing work, teachers may implement “amnesty days” when any missing assignment can be made up for full credit. Grading practices are also flexible so students are not excessively penalized for missing work if they later demonstrate the skill or knowledge. Finally, when skill gaps and deficiencies are identified in such areas as reading comprehension, problem solving, and so on, differentiated instruction is provided in small groups.

The second component of the challenge gives students opportunities to prove their proficiency or demonstrate their mastery of essential skills to avoid failing a course. During the second year, students who were still failing by a small percentage were offered a chance to earn their missing credits during the first weeks of the second semester. Full credit in all courses at Ben Davis is 65%; so students whose scores fall in the 59%-64% range receive an incomplete for their semester grade and a letter stating that during the month of January, they will have the opportunity to complete the course work and change their grade to a D with full credit. If they do not participate, the grade reverts to an F.

By reviewing each student’s grades, teachers are able to identify the reason for the deficiency and failure. For many students, failure is due to zeros for missing or incomplete assignments or missed tests or assessments. Reeves (2004) wrote that “just two or three zeros are sufficient to cause failure for an entire semester, and just a few course failures can lead a student to drop out of high school, incurring a lifetime of personal and social consequences” (p. 324). For other students, the problem is that they have not mastered a particular skill or concept, although they do not completely lack the skills or knowledge that would necessitate repeating the course.

For example, in language arts, there were several cases where a student’s final essay was scored at a proficient level or higher, but the zeros and low point scores awarded on some of the earlier drafts brought the average grade for the paper well below passing. In math, many students had high scores on common assessments that are directly linked to specific standards and achieved a very high score on the cumulative final exam, but the students missed several homework assignments, which drastically lowered their grades. In chemistry, many students demonstrated through exams, common assessments, and quiz scores that they had the essential skills to enroll in subsequent chemistry course, but their missing homework or other items penalized their scores to the point the combined average was a failing grade.

Students are counseled in groups or individually to ensure that they and their parents are aware of what they need to do to earn back their credit and understand that they will have to make up the entire 18-week course if they do not complete their work or demonstrate proficiency. Each student receives an outline that details specifically what he or she needs to do to earn a D in the course. (No grade higher than a D is given unless the students repeat the course.)

Students must attend at least one after-school session that is facilitated by teachers in the content areas of the courses they received an incomplete in. Many students have the opportunity to complete work online through the school’s standards-based extended day courses—courses that are directly matched by standard to the work they missed or were not proficient in. Once
they are made aware of the assignments or assessments they need to do, students can complete the work at home if they desire. Students may simply be issued the actual test assessment, or essay that they missed or given a chance (online or otherwise) to prove proficiency in a deficient area, such as algebra or chemistry.

During the first three or four weeks of the spring semester, students can stay after school for help or to use the school’s computers. The first time this option was offered, in January 2007, 169 students earned or recovered 212 credits. (Some students had multiple Incomplete grades.) As a final push, teachers again contacted the parents of any students who had not fulfilled the requirements to let them know that their child still had a chance to earn his or her credit but that the window of opportunity was closing. Within a week, an additional 89 credits were recovered. This opportunity was extended throughout the rest of the semester to any student who was progressing and continuing to make effort in demonstrating proficiency and recovering their credit.

Reteaching the number of credits—312—earned in core classes require the equivalent of two full-time teacher positions. (See figure 1.) Earning credits this way also enables students to select more advanced classes to prepare them for college or postsecondary advancement, as well as elective courses that may interest them and increase their desire to stay in school—which positively affects attendance as well.

One challenge that McKinney faced was changing the mindset of his staff members. Efforts to give students as many opportunities as possible to prove proficiency and earn credits were interpreted by some as watering down the standards and didn’t seem fair considering that the majority of other students who completed their course work in the traditional semester time frame. But working together, the leadership team, the administrators, and the teachers are solidifying the core belief that students deserve multiple opportunities to demonstrate their proficiency.

The students and staff members at Ben Davis have achieved tremendous results. By using time as a variable and frequently monitoring progress, the school has begun to drastically shift its culture by having teachers look for ways to help students prove proficiency and earn credits outside of adult-created time lines.

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Figure 1: Credits Recovered

A summary of the credits recovered in the core classes alone in spring 2007:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>91</th>
<th>58</th>
<th>33</th>
<th>81</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*59%–64% range at the end of the fall semester in number of possible lost credits