

Supporting Students' College Dreams

By [Tami Wegener](#)

In 1957, Sputnik appeared in the sky for everyone around the world to see. Its light motivated a young boy named Homer Hickam to dream of a way out. Back then, after high school graduation, most of the young men in Hickam's community would work in the coal mines. Maybe a lucky one would get out by receiving a football scholarship. The incredible influence of one teacher, Miss. Riley, inspired Homer Hickam to pursue a career in space.

Today, 55 years later, many things have changed, yet many things have remained the same. Educators are passionately working like Miss Riley, preparing students to be launched towards new opportunities. Today they believe in all students, not just the lucky ones obtaining scholarships to pursue a college education. This article outlines a plan of action that educators can use to ensure that we are providing opportunities for all students.

Engaging and connecting with all “dream makers” is vital in creating a college-going culture for all students. Consider these suggestions for preparing the children of today with a chance to attend college and ultimately, to live their dreams.

Community Engagement

The community must be dedicated to providing educational opportunities for its youth. The motto “A Community Is Known by the Schools It Keeps” is the foundation of a small rural school district in the Midwest, York (NE) Public

Schools. The community's service groups, businesses, foundations, and other organizations work to raise funds for scholarships. In 2012, this community raised more than \$80,000 in college scholarships to be awarded to the graduating seniors, making it possible for 68% of the graduating seniors to receive at least one scholarship.

The York school system and the local parochial schools work together to create a K-12 program in which teachers tell their story about college to their students. Each teacher hands out pencils with college logos to their students and displays a college banner in his or her classroom.

The York community works closely with the school district on other projects as well. Examples include donating for building improvements, activity calendars, textbooks, pride pack, financial literacy programs, and the "Great Books for Great Kids" program; mentoring; providing speakers; and so on. And not a day goes by without some kind of public education coverage appearing on the pages of the local paper. As you can see, this community believes in and supports the hopes and dreams of its youth.

Family Engagement

Family includes everyone who is significant in a child's life. This may include parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives, guardians, and even mentors. The economic downturn in our country has affected our families, and many families have limited knowledge concerning financial aid for college tuition (Chan, Cochrane, Gallegos, & Irons, 2008). Therefore, now is the time to reach out to families and help them realize possibilities for their

children. Developing these family relationships will increase students' college aspirations (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007).

Programs that have been developed for families in York include the Junior Jump Start and Senior Year 101. Both are designed to cover such information as types of colleges, college admission requirements, college testing, transcripts, dual credit, financial aid, and scholarship opportunities. After implementing these programs in 2010, scholarships received by the seniors in the district hit a record high of \$2.2 million compared to \$1.3 million the year before—an increase of \$900,000.

Other family programs include eighth grade orientation, college fair, college visits, and financial aid meetings. Individual Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) meetings are also available for families with seniors. Attendance is crucial, starting programs after the family's work day, providing child care and a light meal, meeting at a community site, and making individual contacts or home visits to families that have scheduling conflicts are all options to making sure everyone receives this valuable college information. Family engagement is necessary because it is an important reason why students attend college (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007).

Teacher Engagement

It is important to introduce college to students at an early age. The York school system and the local parochial schools work together to create a K–12 program in which teachers tell their story about college to their students. Each teacher hands out pencils with college logos to their students and displays a college banner in his or her classroom. The teachers wear T-shirts with college logos for one day during the college week so that students

witness the different colleges attended by the teachers in their school.

Ultimately, the goal is a college-going culture. This gives teachers opportunities to stress the importance of learning. All teachers address the importance of postsecondary education and the advantage of taking rigorous courses. At the same time, dual-credit college classes are introduced as well. Dual-credit classes help the rigor of the curriculum and are good predictors of college success (Adelman, 1999). After completion of dual credit classes, students recognize that they have the ability to do college work--and that is a key ingredient to help them realize that they are "college material."

Student Engagement

Student engagement is the most important component in creating a college-going culture. Introducing kindergartners to college with the planned college week and continuing the activity every year until the students become seniors makes an impact. Before the students enter high school, they have learned about colleges and what they need to do to become college bound. Information about college is reemphasized at eighth-grade orientation.

Once a student becomes a senior and commits to a college, we have a College Commitment Celebration Day for that student. The student's name, along with the college he or she committed to, is announced over the intercom and his or her senior picture is placed by the college banner for all to view.

In addition, every year each student participates in an individual registration process with his or her guidance counselor to address future educational and

career goals. The college planning process continues to grow by providing students with more information about college during the school day with the Junior Jump Start and Senior Year 101 program. All students are encouraged to attend the college fair, which is held at the high school. Visiting with college representatives, collecting brochures and view books, and finding out about college application and financial aid are crucial elements in helping students determine their postsecondary plans (Kronish, 2008).

In 2008, York Public Schools partnered with a college and started our dual credit program. The students completed 318 college credit hours the first year. Since then, our dual credit program has exploded: an amazing 810 college credit hours were earned by our students during the 2012–13 school year. Once a student completes a dual credit college class, he or she is one step closer towards realizing that he or she is college material.

Testing is essential in the college-going process; therefore, community college testing coordinators are invited to the high school to proctor the community college entrance exam. This enables the students to have entrance scores for college without leaving the high school. Test prep sessions are offered to students during lunch to help students learn about test taking strategies and improve their scores on college entrance exams.

One more tool to help break down the barrier is the College Club. During College Club, guidance counselors are available to help students fill out college and scholarship applications and answer questions concerning financial aid. Even if students aspire to go to college and are qualified, some are still unlikely to fill out a college application (Vargas, 2004). College Club makes it possible for all seniors to fill out at least one college application.

Most importantly, high school students have the opportunity to go on college visits. Seeing is believing! During the visits, students interact with college students, learn about the college admission process, experience eating in the college cafeteria, and view a dorm room. The experience of the college visit removes barriers and provides students with essential information when choosing a college (Hesel, 2004).

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The aforementioned activities help to break down barriers and reinforce the point that college is an expectation and a reality for all students.

College Success Team

The college success team is made up of dream makers. They include students, family members, educators, teammate mentors, business, and community members. The purpose of the college success team is to fine-tune current programs and generate new ideas to continue to increase the college attendance rate. Providing students with the chance to pursue a college education is their goal.

The dream makers are vital! Teamwork among the dream makers involves engaging the community, families, teachers, and students and is essential in preparing all children for a college education. Providing the teams with accurate information and starting early in a child's life are key ingredients in creating this college-going culture. Dream makers, like Miss Riley, are

necessary to inspire all students with the belief that they can attend college and ultimately live their dreams.

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