

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Building a Personalized Environment Through Small Learning Communities

Western Hills University High School, Ohio • February 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Practice: Learning Environment

Highlights

- The mission of Western Hills University High School is to prepare students upon graduating to attend the college of their choice or to enter the world of work.
- The team-based learning approach at Western Hills helps teachers and staff to get to know students and focus on their academic needs.
- The grade-level teams at Western Hills consist of four academic core teachers and their students.
- Western Hills personalizes the school learning environment by providing flex-block scheduling, student help nights and student-teacher team meetings.

About the Site

Western Hills University High School

Cincinnati, OH

Demographics

72% Black

22% White

3% Other

2% Hispanic

56% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

3% English Language Learners

25% Special Education

Western Hills University High School focuses on preparing students for graduation through a rigorous and relevant academic curriculum and through programs that help students understand and prepare for postsecondary options.

The school implements programs that:

- Offer classes and opportunities for students to develop stronger social and emotional skills
- Organize students into teams with teachers who provide extensive academic support to ensure students are adequately prepared to be successful on the Ohio Graduation Tests
- Provide students a disciplined and personalized learning environment
- Exposes students to postsecondary options that include college, the workforce, and other training programs

Full Transcript

I'm Stephanie Harden Morton. I'm the Principal of Western Hills University High School, ninth through twelfth grade, in Cincinnati, Ohio. We are part of Cincinnati Public School District. The mission of Western Hills University High School is to prepare our students upon graduating to attend the college of their choice or to enter the world of work. Western Hills has a mantra that guides our students in a direction that we want them to be in. It tells them about what our expectations are for them, that we want them to be on time, to be prepared for their classes, to just be successful all-around students. And the mantra is up around the building just to remind the students of what our expectations are for them.

The small school concept came about for Cincinnati Public Schools about seven years ago. Western Hills University High School became a small high school with a grant that the district achieved. On our campus, we have three small high schools, we have Western Hills University High School, on the other side of the building is Western Hills Design and Technology High School, and the very back of the campus is Dater High School. A number of high schools in our district had the same concept, but I think that Western Hills University High School is one of the high schools that really embraces the team concept. The small high school helps us to be able to really get to know our students, to focus on what their strengths and weaknesses are, and to be able to help them to be successful high school students.

Team Meeting, Teacher: Most of the students who need help are going to need it in more than one subject.

Team Meeting, Teacher: Absolutely.

Morton: In the team-based high school, we have a team for each grade level, and on that team is your four academic core teachers; we have English, science, social studies and math. And those core teachers work with their team of students to help them learn whatever their particular academic focus is, to get to know them. They have team meetings on a weekly basis. They also bring students in for team meetings. Like if they see a student whose grades have drastically dropped, they bring that student in and talk to them to try and find out what it is that has gone wrong or what that team can do to work with that student. The teams also have the opportunity to have a flex block schedule. They can have a longer bell period depending on what type of activity they are doing, they can have a shorter bell period, or they can have an academic period where they work on credit recovery. They have "Help Nights" on a daily basis. Mondays are set aside for staff meetings. Tuesdays through Fridays are Help Nights. Each team has a specific night or day of the week that a teacher stays to work with students, but a lot of the teams, the teachers stay more than one night, so they can go from teacher to teacher to get assistance as they need it.

Teacher to students: ... mantle, and it lies right over this round hole. See it kind of stuck in the shell?...

Morton: Cincinnati Public School has what is called "Schools of Choice." And Western Hills University is a school of choice, which means when students leave the eighth grade, they have an opportunity to select the high school of their choice to attend. I think that students select Western Hills University High School to attend because they know about our reputation of teaming. They know that we work very closely with the students and the parents. They know that we're very structured and consistent. Some may say, we're strict. I think we are more structured than other high schools, and I think that helps students. I think they also select us because they know that we try to keep students in school. We have activities and things here on campus that makes students want to be here like the Key Club, our choir, our Help Nights. We also have an Ohio Graduation Test Help Night that goes on from January through March for any eleventh or twelfth grader that has not passed any sections of the Ohio Graduation Test.

I think that over 50% of the students, when they come to Western Hills University High School, have no idea that they're going to attend college. A lot of them they just think, "Oh I can just go to high school, and I'll get a job, and I don't have to worry about anything else." And a lot of them think that they won't have the grades, they won't have the money, that they are not just college material. A number of our students that do attend college are first time high school graduates, first time college students. So, we encourage them. We let them know right off that our goal is for them to graduate, attend college or get some type of training to enter the world of work. We want them to be successful independent citizens and to be able to take care of themselves and their families.

Student: And then you're going to do the same thing for this one.

Morton: Whenever a student is transferring out of our school, they have to fill out a withdrawal slip. We look at the reasons for them leaving our school, and if we can try to talk a parent into staying, we do. And if we have a parents or students that come in and they want to drop out, we try to counsel them not to drop out. I have not had any students this year drop out of school. I've had students who transferred to other schools but not drop out. So we really, the staff tries to help them. The support organizations that work within our building try to assist them. Our whole goal is to make sure that they just don't stop in the beginning, that they stay here, and if they can't stay here at least go to another school, but don't drop out.