DOINGWHATWORKS

Sleepy Hollow High School

210 N. Broadway
Sleepy Hollow, NY 10591
Carol Conklin, Principal

Sleepy Hollow High School, in suburban Sleepy Hollow, New York, serves an ethnically and economically diverse population, including students with low socio-economic status and English language learners. The school operates a broad range of programs to support its diverse population and help them reach the high academic and graduation standards of neighboring schools. Approximately 780 students are enrolled in the school.

- ♦ **High (9–12)**
- ♦ **51% Hispanic**
- ♦ **37% White**
- ♦ **9% African American**
- ♦ **2% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander**
- ♦ ♦ **24% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch**
- ♦ ♦ **28% English Language Learners**

Sleepy Hollow has identified groups of students with unique needs and developed targeted programs to help each group succeed in high school and beyond. For example, an adult advocate works with pregnant and parenting students. A ninth and tenth grade Humanities Team works with students struggling to make a successful academic transition to high school. Another program focuses on helping teachers and coaches work together to improve student athletes' academic performance. A series of staged classes—organized to provide greater initial content and language support and gradually becoming more demanding—help non-English speakers master content required to pass the New York State (NYS) Regents Exams. There is no single program across the school to prevent dropping out; rather, there is a patchwork of targeted programs that, together, address the needs of all students.

Making a Connection with Every Student

School staff do not let any student slip away unnoticed. For example, the principal and her colleagues personally make daily "wake-up" calls to chronically late and truant students, cheerfully telling them, "I'll see you in school soon." Students commented that the principal and teachers "don't give up on you." According to the principal, "If we can keep people coming to the building—and coming in—we can work with them."

Keeping Pregnant and Parenting Girls in School

In the Young Parents Achieve program, a mentor works with each girl to help her retain a connection with school. The mentor meets individually with each girl to better understand her interests and needs and to build trust so that the girl feels she has a safe place to go and an adult who understands her. When the baby is born, the mentor arranges for in-home tutoring during the young mother's "maternity leave." The mentor also provides referrals for medical services, helps arrange childcare, and acts as a liaison between the student, family, and school staff. According to the program coordinator, "I clear away obstacles [on] the path of graduation."

Connecting with Athletes

According to the principal, many students would have left high school except for their commitment to high school sports. The school builds on this interest with the Play It Smart program. An advisor works with student athletes, their coaches, and their teachers to identify academic challenges and ensure that all athletes complete their schoolwork on time and master the content. For example, the advisor might help students with their homework. The advisor communicates with the coach, who reinforces the focus on academics.

Helping Non-English Speakers Master Required Content

More than one quarter of the students at Sleepy Hollow are non-native English speakers. Many of these students spend part of the school year in their home countries, with limited exposure to English or to the content required in New York high schools. For example, these students might not have been learned some aspects of American history in elementary or middle school, yet they will be tested on this history in the NYS Regents Exam. Sleepy Hollow has developed a series of "bridge" classes designed to simultaneously accelerate students' English and ensure content mastery. In science in ninth grade, the Applied Physics bridge class is taught by bilingual teachers and covers basic science concepts such as how to do science labs, as well as more advanced physics concepts. In tenth grade, the Living Environment bridge class uses two periods to provide students with time for extra teacher support. By the end of this series of classes, most non-English speakers are fluent enough in English to transition to the general education science program and have covered the science content they may have missed in earlier grades.

Additionally, the school shifted the history course sequence for these students. Global Studies and American History are both required courses in New York State and are two of the subjects assessed on the NYS Regents Exams. In the standard social studies course sequence, American History is taught in twelfth grade followed by the Regents Exam. However, the school found that students without a background in American history struggled with basic concepts (e.g., American politics, voting) and did not do well in the class. Therefore Sleepy Hollow shifted the classes to first teach American History (with a focus on citizenship knowledge) followed by Global Studies (which involves a Regents Exam) and then the general education course, United States History. The school also provides support for non-English speakers for the hardest parts of the English Regents Exam, such as focused instruction on how to write essays.

Providing After-School Support

Sleepy Hollow offers three afterschool homework programs, and numerous students stay after school hours to take advantage of them. The library maintains a quiet study space, while bilingual teachers staff a program for English as a second language (ESL) students, and teachers with special education experience staff the 21st Century Homework Center. Although students tend to go to the center designed to best meet their individual needs, a mix of students shows up daily at each center. Teachers take turns working in these homework centers, providing one-on-one academic support to the students in a warm and welcoming environment. The ESL Center is decorated with artwork from students' home countries to show the students that their own experiences are valued, and teachers post their own college degrees on the walls to help model their expectations for all of their students.

Ensuring Successful Transitions

Research shows that ninth grade is a critical year for students at risk of dropping out. Several years ago, Sleepy Hollow staff noticed that approximately 30 students failed ninth grade every year and that it is possible to predict which students would fail. The students generally have low English skills, poor attendance, and similar indicators. Sleepy Hollow identifies the most at-risk students from reviewing middle school records and talking with middle school teachers. These students are enrolled in a two-year Humanities Team program, characterized by very small classes, strong student-teacher relationships, active and engaging instruction, explicit instruction in behavior, and close monitoring of the students. The Humanities Team is composed of an English and social studies teacher and an assistant, who work with the same students in ninth and tenth grades. The team works with two cohorts of approximately 15 students per year. The assistant talks with the students' non-humanities teachers, as well as guidance counselors and other school staff about strategies that work for each student across classes and settings. The Humanities Team provides explicit instruction in behavior, including how to study, listening skills, interpersonal interactions, and similar topics. The class celebrates successes (e.g., movies and pizza, medals) and has a dress-up in-school "restaurant" event at the end of the year in which they dine in to celebrate their accomplishments and practice their manners.

Addressing Problem Behaviors before They Escalate

When the principal first came to Sleepy Hollow, she noticed that many students were spending the day in in-school suspension. She abolished the in-school suspension and worked with the vice-principal and counselors to develop a more positive way of addressing student behavior. Staff were trained to identify challenging behavior and explicitly teach and reinforce positive behavior. They were also told to write more—hundreds more—behavior referrals. The vice-principal reviewed the referrals and other data daily, identifying students who would benefit from counseling and those who need more of an administrative response. Over time, fewer students fell in the second category, and severe behavior problems occurred less frequently. For example, before this program was instituted, there were daily fights in the school. Now, fights rarely occur. The principal and vice-principal attribute this to catching and addressing potentially problematic behavior early.

Counseling Students to College Enrollment

The Upward Bound program in Sleepy Hollow provides one-on-one college counseling and support to approximately 50 students per year. Students can come to the Upward Bound workroom to identify colleges, complete applications, plan visits, and otherwise focus on how to move from high school to college. Upward Bound helps students visit colleges. Several students noted that the program opened the possibilities of attending college to them or exposed them to a college they might not have considered otherwise. The program is operated through and in close collaboration with nearby Mercer College.

Sleepy Hollow offers a mix of programs that, together, support students at risk of dropping out for various reasons. Chronically truant students are personally called by the principal and her staff to encourage them to come to school. Pregnant and parenting girls receive the academic support they need to stay on track despite their family commitments. At-risk students are indentified before they enter ninth grade and placed in humanities classes where they receive close attention and support. Students

who struggle with English and the content required for graduation can enroll in classes that provide language and content support. Behavior problems are addressed by the counselors before they escalate into insurmountable challenges. The philosophy of the school is that students face different types of challenges to be successful in school and so support systems need to be tailored for them. The school reduces the risk of dropping out by personalizing the learning environment with a program to meet every need.