**Bright Spot Schools Report**

**Purpose:** to Identify School Culture and Climate Factors that Support Graduation Rates

**DATE AVAILABLE:** December, 2013 – Present

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:** Research and Development (R&D) and Prevention and Support Services Sections (PSS).

**INTRODUCTION**

In December 2013 the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) personnel from Research and Development and Prevention and Support Services attended a U.S. Education Delivery Institute meeting in Baltimore, MD. After working through a series of activities centered on graduation rate and key indicators, the personnel noticed that despite a positive trend in the statewide graduation rate, there was a negative trend in some key indicators that if left unaddressed could have a negative impact on future graduation rates. The key indicators identified were in-suspension, absence and credit recovery (Table 1).

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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Graduation Rate and Key Indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>Graduation Rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-School Suspension</td>
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<td>Out-of-School Suspension</td>
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<td>Truancies</td>
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<td>Absences</td>
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<td>Credit Recovery (Success Rate)</td>
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Note. Statewide graduation rates increased at the same time that in-school suspension and student absence increased. Additionally, credit recovery success rates declined in the same period.
Identification of the negative trends prompted the need for further inquiry to ascertain the reasons why some schools seem to have bit the odds, which point to low socio economic status of students as detrimental to high school graduation. The team noticed that there were schools experiencing high graduation rates, low truancy and suspension rates in spite of low socio economic status. It was then decided that further inquiry in the form of field work/site visit to the schools was warranted. The ALSDE personnel grappled with some reflective questions such as:

1. Did the improvement in Alabama’s cohort graduation rate divert attention from the negative slide of the leading indicators?
2. What lessons could be learned from schools whose data showed positive trends in graduation rates as well as reduction in truancy and suspension rates?
3. What qualitative data could be gathered from such schools for future practice and perhaps policy recommendations?

The quest for answers to these questions provided the impetus for the qualitative research dubbed *Bright Spot Schools* research.

**IDENTIFICATION OF BRIGHT SPOTS**

Supporting comparative data, which served as the backdrop for the investigation were provided by the ALSDE Prevention and Support Services, and Technology Initiative sections. The ALSDE Research & Development section provided data analysis of school level data utilizing FY 2012-13 as baseline data and determining threshold for the investigation. Data points pulled were as follows: System/school code and name, graduation rate for all students, absences per student, truancies per student, suspensions per student and retentions per student. The expectation was that schools with a high graduation rate would be low in the key indicator
data, but that was not necessarily the case. Further data analysis also indicated a strong negative correlation between graduation rate and poverty. Non-title I schools in general had higher graduation rates than Title I schools. As a result, Research & Development personnel decided to pursue more in-depth investigation into the prevailing school culture and climate at schools with graduation rates above state average, who also were identified as high poverty schools with at least 60% of students on free or reduced lunch.

Qualification criteria for Bright Spot Schools were set at a graduation rate above the state average of 80%, free/reduced lunch rate of above 60% and key indicator data above average. Only schools with the lowest 10% truancy, and suspension rates per student when compared to other schools statewide were considered. Schools that met these qualification criteria were identified and ranked ordered from lowest percentage per student to highest. Additionally, qualifying schools were not to include priority schools, or focus schools. Nineteen schools were identified as potential Bright Spots Schools.

**PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to conduct a qualitative study of high poverty schools with high graduation rates, low truancy, low in-school suspension, low-out of school suspension, and low truancy rates. Also, to identify elements of school culture and climate that support student success in the schools. Additionally, to ascertain what if any common threads are evident in all the schools.

**STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

ALSDE 2012-2013 graduation data indicated an increase in graduation rate, at the same time that two key indicators that negatively impact graduation rates increased. The two indicators
that increased were Truancy and Out-of-School Suspensions. ALSDE researchers, felt that the trend did not augur well for sustaining statewide graduation rates in the future.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

To validate the identified schools as *Bright Spot Schools*, staff members from Research & Development and Prevention Support Services visited each identified school site. Once onsite, the investigators conducted a tour of school facilities and interviewed school personnel, students and community stakeholders. The following core questions were utilized for the interview:

1. What makes your school unique? (Tell us about your school and the community).
2. Share the process you (and others) have developed to sustain an 80% or higher graduation rate.
3. How has maintaining reduced numbers of truancies and behavior incidences factored into your school’s success? Please share specifics.
4. Last question: If we could only write one statement about your success with student achievement when faced with barriers to learning, what would you want us to write?

**Methodology**

This was a qualitative study, which entailed the gathering of qualitative data based on experiences of adults and students in the selected school sites. Paired teams from Research and Development and Prevention Support Services conducted site visits to the schools to gather artifacts as well as conduct on-site interviews of personnel, students and community stakeholders, where available. Site visits were conducted from March through April, 2014.
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant because of its potential to provide insight into the components of school culture and climate that support graduation rates in spite of student demographic factors such as high poverty. Findings from this study will provide exemplars for school districts that may want to replicate activities and practices that have been beneficial to the culture and climate of the schools in the study. Further, other schools with similar demographic makeup, including priority schools, focus schools and others might want to partner with Bright Spot Schools for future collaboration.

FINDINGS

There were a total of nineteen schools that met the selection criteria set by the research team. All the schools with the exception of Ramsey High School were located in rural counties across the state. Although nineteen schools met the selection criteria, eight of the nineteen schools significantly exceeded the threshold, which set them apart from their peers. The eight schools that the research team found to be exemplars were: Section High School, Jackson County (Region 3); Woodville High School, Jackson County (Region 3); Ramsey High School, Birmingham (Region 5); Gaston High School, Etowah County (Region 6); Talladega County Central High School, Talladega County (Region 7); Billingsley High School, Autauga County (Region 8); Ashford High School, Houston County (Region 11); and Houston County High School, Houston County (Region 11). The following are some examples of qualitative data gathered from research team members that conducted site visits to the schools. The team agreed that these elements of culture and climate supported high graduation rates at the schools.
Community Support

Although Woodville High School serves students within a 26 mile radius yet, students at the school indicated that they felt like they came from the same community. The same was true for students at Ramsey High School, Houston County High School and Ashford High School. These four schools are highlighted in this category because they show how the school can serve as a unifying agent for students from various communities. At Ramsey High School the current 9th grade class is comprised of students from 21 different middle schools.

At Talladega County Central High School (TCCHS), school alumni are very much engaged in the school, volunteering time in various capacities, including mentoring current students. One of the volunteers our team of researchers met at the school was an alumnus, and a retired former teacher at the school who currently volunteers her time mentoring young teachers and students. Local churches support students at Billingsley School by sponsoring First Priority activities at 7:15am on Wednesdays. First Priority feeds students who want to come to school early for breakfast and fellowship. Also, senior citizens come to the school to stuff envelopes or make copies for classrooms.

Community involvement at Houston County High School was identified as a powerful ingredient in the success of the school. The school community recognizes that some students may not be growing up in the best home life situations and may not come from rich backgrounds, so teachers communicate the message to all students that they can overcome their difficult home-lives through education. School leadership at the school encourages teachers to “go on field trips” by having teachers ride with the bus driver to see where students come from. The rationale is to help teachers appreciate the importance in the lives of their students. Teachers interviewed stated that participating in the field trips enables them to count their own blessings and to
appreciate the difficult home situations of most of their students. The field trips also help teachers to recognize that their job extends beyond teaching math and science, their job also includes caring for the students, feeding them, and loving them through difficulties to success. Several teachers said “We are invested in the kids.” Although the school is small in population, they take pride in their blue collar work ethics. The faculty indicated that they saw themselves as being on call 24 hours per day. Additionally, the faculty tries to find one positive thing about each student with which to build him or her up.

Houston County High School is committed to the success of all students including students with disabilities. A good testament to the school’s culture of inclusiveness is exemplified by Tyler, a graduate of the school, who in spite of the difficulties posed by his diagnoses of cerebral palsy, works full time in the school library, and also doubles as an attendant to a student with autism spectrum. Tyler’s work ethics and acceptance by the school community is truly inspirational. Athletics is also a major part of the school culture, but student-athletes are expected to work hard academically, and also expected to exhibit good behavior on and off the field.

Ashford High School has a school within a school in the Victory House School. The Victory House School is a building located across the street from the school. The building was donated by a family from the community, and it houses students with severe neurological disabilities. Victory House School provides life skills education for students with disabilities in a clean home environment. Victory House School is exceptional in its set-up and inclusion into the school’s programs. Also, school district initiative makes it possible for parents of students with disabilities who cannot afford computers in the home to check out computers from the school for use at home.
To mitigate student absence and truancy, Houston County had a *Billboard Campaign*. The *Billboard Campaign* was part of the school district’s highly successful *Truancy Diversion Program*. The campaign strategically placed all over the county, billboards with the picture of the Houston County Schools System superintendent, the Dothan School System superintendent, and the district attorney urging students to be in school. Also, the district attorney and district judges, held town hall meetings to create awareness and show support for the school district’s *Truancy Diversion Program*. Parents and students with patterns of truant behaviors are required to attend class once a week for six weeks utilizing the *Norvick Behavior Program*. The *Norvick Behavior Program* is a part of the comprehensive Truancy Diversion Program.

**Shared Goals**

School leadership and the faculty at *Bright Spot schools* also have a culture of shared goals with students and the community. At Ramsey High School every student is expected to graduate, and they do. With 100% graduation rate, every graduating senior is expected to have a letter of admission from a college, the military, or employment before the end of the senior year. In addition, the *ACT 25 Club* at the school is a faculty sponsored student club whose goal is to encourage club members to score 25 or higher on the *ACT*. Talladega County Central High School (TCCHS) is another example of a school with high graduation expectations communicated from the school leadership to all stakeholders. When asked to provide a one-sentence descriptor for the school, school principal Mr. Timothy Young stated “*TCCHS is a school where every student has every opportunity to be successful, to know what success looks like, and to help others succeed, a school with strong emphasis on professional teaching and learning involvement and first class performance in everything.*”
One of the many shared goals at Ashford School is that teachers can and must teach students who are present at school. For that reason, the school leadership at Ashford school does not believe in out of school suspension. They do everything possible to keep students in school, rather than as the principal, Mr. Odom put it “reward bad behavior with vacation time in the name of out-of-school suspension.” There is also very little in-school suspension at the school because school staff build relationships with students in and outside the school which enables them to spot problems easily and address them before they escalate. Also, the sheriff is considered a member of the school community, so much so that he was not only present but actually participated in the interview during the researchers’ site visit to the school. In-school suspension at the school is done in an alternative classroom supervised by a teacher with work for students to complete rather than out of school suspensions.

**Commitment to Student Success at All Cost**

The schools in this study shared a sense of stewardship that motivates them to reach all students at all cost. Three years ago, Billingsley School scored very low in their self-assessment and students felt disconnected with teachers. Historically, Billingsley School had a high dropout culture that dated back several generations. A large percentage of parents with students at the school were themselves high school dropout, so most students and parents did not see anything wrong with dropping out of school at the age of 16. To transform this culture, the school leadership created the Activity Period Schedule. During the Activity Period Schedule, students can engage in an activity of their choice such as grilling, Zumba, jogging, calligraphy and field maintenance. Enrollment in each activity is limited in number to keep the groups small. Activity offerings are also based on what teachers enjoy and think the students will find interesting. The
Activity Period Schedule has helped build relationships and boost morale among the faculty as well as with the students. Students who need to make up work or need extra help attend an On-Call class instead of participating in the Activity period. The result is that students now want to be in school as opposed to being absent.

Former students who dropped out of school are located and given the opportunity to enroll in an online program to help them earn their diplomas. Such students are allowed to check out computers from the school and also receive tutoring from teachers after school. The School Improvement Specialist also makes home-visits to assist them. The principal opens the gym on some Sundays so students can come and play recreational basketball.

Innovative Programs

School leaders and staff at Bright Spot Schools were also highly effective in finding ways to introduce innovative programs in their schools. Talladega County Central High School’s Professional Academy (TCCHS) is a program that provides career counseling and preparation for students. TCCHS kicks off the program every August with a lot of fanfare and community involvement as a way to encourage every student to sign up and explore any one of the many career pathways offered in the program. The 2013-2014 School year boasted 100% participation of students. Thursdays are designated business attire dress code days. Therefore, the dress code for all students on Thursdays is khaki bottoms, button down dress shirts, navy blue blazers and neckties. Students come to school on Thursdays prepared to interview or receive coaching on how to interview for jobs in their chosen pathways and also research their areas of career interest. TCCHS students conduct themselves as school ambassadors and the student council is involved in decision making at the school. The school motto is Strive for Perfection, which is
evident in the way students at the school convey their ownership of the school. The student council was involved in taking the team of researchers around the school. TCCHS won the Superintendent’s Trophy for Robotics and was named a Bronze Medal School by the US News and World Report. This is an impressive feat considering the fact that the school is rural with 95% of its students on free/reduced lunch.

To ensure that students have ample opportunities to make-up school work missed as a result of absences and tardiness, Bright Spot Schools also have Saturday School. Students who miss school due to work schedules or for other reasons are required to make up missed work during Saturday School. Saturday school is staffed by certified teachers and serves as both a deterrent for truancy and an innovation to provide support to students who need it. At Ramsey High School as in other schools, students are required to attend Saturday School from 8am to 12 noon after two tardy infractions.

Program Availability/Flexible Scheduling

Bright Spot Schools also engage in scheduling flexibilities that enable them to provide more courses/programs to their students. For example, Ramsey High School is on a block schedule, yet every Wednesday the school schedule runs on a Skinny Wednesday Schedule. A Skinny Wednesday Schedule is comprised of one shortened class period combined with a shortened lunch wave. In this particular configuration the lunch wave lasts only 30 minutes. The combination of extra time earned in the day adds up to 50 minutes which is then devoted to RtI., or made available for students who need remediation, or need to make up missed assignments. Teachers also create individualized intervention plans outlining specific skills as well as delivery strategies to be utilized in remediation for students at risk of failure. Prior to implementing the
plans, parents and students are required to sign off on the plan. The Computer lab at Ramsey is also open from 7-8:30 am, as well as after school until 6pm for students who do not have computer access at home.

Houston County school leadership provides a lot of opportunities for students to succeed. Houston County’s *Hope School* is a great example of this. *Hope School* is a nontraditional online school for students who are at risk of dropping out of school due to work schedules, teen pregnancy, sickness, or other family constraints. Students enrolled in *Hope School* attend school half a day, and work half a day. *Hope School* is supported by the school district and it is staffed with a principal and math teacher. *Hope School* is accredited, and the school system pays the enrollment fees for students enrolled in the school. *Hope School* graduated 30 students last year. This program has been extremely helpful for students who would have otherwise dropped out of school, and it is credited with helping at risk students to complete their high school education.

At Gaston School, students attend *Academic Press* during the 3rd period. *Academic Press* runs on a modified block schedule designed to afford students an opportunity to catch up on missed work or receive remediation in challenging subject areas.

*Adult Advocacy for Students*

Student advocacy is huge in all *Bright Spot Schools*. At Ramsey High School, every 9th grade student is assigned a homeroom and he/she stays with the same homeroom teacher and group of students throughout his/her four-year high school career at Ramsey. This helps students and teachers build strong relationships, which makes the school seem more like a family. Teachers thus become advocates and mentors for their homeroom students, keep track of
students’ academic progress, challenges, behavior and absences. Students in Grades 7 to 11 are assigned a teacher that follows them through graduation.

Gaston High School also has a career counseling partnership with Gadsden State College, which makes it possible for a career counselor from the college to work regularly with Gaston High School students. The school provides after hours-registration for students, which allows parents to work collaboratively with teachers in developing 4-year plans for students. Every teacher at Gaston High School acts as a counselor to the student body. Students who excel in academics/or athletics are rewarded with personal ceiling tiles displayed in the main hall of the school. This level of recognition is a goal that students strive for individually, as well as in groups/clubs.

Teachers at both Ashford and Houston County High School have at least three children that they must mentor/adopt from 7-12th grade. Students are required to meet regularly with their mentor teachers. A student contemplating dropping out of school is required to receive counseling from his or her mentor, other teachers at the school, as well as every district office personnel including the school superintendent before he or she can be allowed to drop out of school. District and school leadership alike believe that going through such a process allows them time and opportunity to discourage the student from dropping out. They have had much success by having students go through this rigorous pathway before they drop out of school, invariably there is a staff member that can successfully counsel the student out of the intent to drop out of school. Parents are also encouraged to attend the counseling sessions with the students. Social media is also incorporated into the dropout prevention program. Teachers and other students use Facebook to track down truant students and bring them back to school.
**Familial Culture**

*Bright Spot Schools* pride themselves on their familial culture. Teachers indicated that they see themselves as parents/guardians of their students. As stewards and custodians of their community, teachers see themselves as responsible for passing the torch of excellence to their students to ensure the posterity of their community. They try to engender in students a sense of responsibility to the community, which is why many of their students return to work in the community after college. Many of the teachers in *Bright Spot Schools* either attended the school that they now teach in, or have children and relatives who attend the school. Therefore, they share a great sense of responsibility in their work. At Section High School teachers stated that their school is “a unit school and our upper level students act as role models and tutors for younger students. That benefits the younger students and also adds a layer of responsibility on the upper level students to set good examples for the younger ones. Section High School is a forgiving school.” The school environmental structure in *Bright Spot Schools* were also conducive to meeting the individual academic and social needs of students regardless of the age of the schools. Many of the schools have old building yet they are very well maintained and clean.

Although Woodville High School is a very “old school” with a challenging history, five years ago the school leadership and its staff decided to change the culture for better. It is now a school where getting to know the needs of each student is of paramount importance and meeting those needs is truly “the work” that every adult in the building wholeheartedly embraces. Members of the school leadership interviewed by the research team made the following statement: “We have received 1.1 million dollars in scholarships for a class of 50 students. This used to be a dangerous school. By changing the culture of our school, we have quickly
developed into a school where students want to be. People don’t do things to get removed from places where they want to be. Woodville High School is a school that provides avenues and enriches futures.” The school credits the work done by the school counselor as very beneficial in ensuring that students graduate and attend college or join the workforce. At Ramsey High School students are made to understand that they are members of one large family regardless of where they came from to join the school, therefore, there is a high expectation for students to conduct themselves at the highest ethical standard as members of the “Ramsey Family.”

**Belief in Student Success**

School leaders and staff in the *Bright Spot Schools* approach their work with the belief that all students can achieve regardless of their socioeconomic background, ability/or disability, location and past history. This belief drives the attitude of teachers toward their students, a fact that is not lost to the students either. School leadership at Woodville High School stated that “Teacher here have a heart for children. That means fixing problems is what we are good at. Therefore, truancies are not an issue in a school where individual problems are being addressed and overcome.” At Talladega County Central High School, one student recalled how he arrived at the school from Detroit, Michigan with a laundry list of problems, but that the school leadership not only accepted and loved him through it all, but also held him accountable for his success. He talked about how even the janitor was on his “case” demanding to see his report card. He quickly learned that he needed to accept the love and high expectations of all adults in the school. He is now a transformed young man, poised to do something good with his future. Janitors at Ashford and Houston County High Schools were also commended for their exemplary attitude toward students.
**Support for Students Within and Outside the School**

Faculty support for students in *Bright Spot Schools* transcends the school day and school yard. Adults at these schools are members of the local community, who take the time to be there for school and social events that students are involved in. At Woodville High School, there is a student initiated *Panthers Always Living Strong* (PALS) program that will serve as a good example for symbiotic relationship between school and community. Members of PALS are involved in helping with the annual *Thanksgiving Canned Food Drive* and *Christmas Charities* held in the community. The PALS program also feeds indigent students outside of scheduled school hours. This program delivers food to more than 70 students on weekends and through the summer who would normally receive free/reduced meals. At another school, teachers and students successfully led efforts and donated a home for a terminally sick student and his family. In an effort to “catch them young,” Houston County High School shares vertical collaboration with Webb Middle School because they believe that such a relationship will help foster student success in high school.

**Zero Tolerance for Failure**

*Bright Spot Schools* exhibit zero tolerance for failure. They do whatever it takes to ensure that students succeed in school. At Section High School in Jackson County, there is a *No Zero Policy*. The school operationalizes that belief that no zero will be given except in cases of blatant defiance. Students are given opportunities to redo/retake any test score below 70%. Test scores below 70% can be retaken with a possible maximum score of 80% upon retake. The caveat is that this is done only upon student request. Also, a *Problem Solving Team* (PST) of teachers work collaboratively to intervene when students are in danger of failing a particular
course. The PST keeps open lines of communication with parents to ensure that parents are fully aware of the situation.

Woodville High School has a Recognize Our Academic Responsibilities (ROAR) program, which provides additional support for student success. The ROAR program provides internet cards to students, which affords them free access to computer games, as well as opportunities to win computers. This program is used to incentivize students to maintain academic excellence. At Ramsey High School, teachers and students also understand that failure is not an option. Although Ramsey is a large school comprising of small schools within in a school, yet everyone belongs to a larger school community and they strive as one unit to overcome individual difficulties.

Interestingly, every research team that visited the Bright Spot Schools stated that students interviewed used similar adjectives to describe their schools and teachers: caring, respectful, and trustworthy. The students stated that they trusted adults in their schools, believed that adults genuinely cared for them regardless of their home situations and/or environments. For that reason, they try to rise to the expectations of adults in their school and community even in the face of daunting social obstacles.

**Conclusions**

Based on qualitative data gathered by the research teams, it appears that school climate and culture are significant in increasing graduation rates in Bright Spot Schools. School climate and culture factors identified by the ALSDE researchers include the following: visionary leadership, strong bonds of relationship between teachers and students, mutual respect among adult members of the school community and among students, community support, shared goals,
commitment to student success at all cost, availability of innovative programs, program availability and flexible scheduling, adult advocacy for students, familial school culture, collegial climate, loving and caring attitudes demonstrated through the belief in student success, support for students both within and outside the school, zero tolerance attitude for failure, and trust. Bright Spot Schools have been able to maintain high graduation rates in spite of low socio-economic obstacles, because of positive school climate and culture, which affect how students feel about school and self-efficacy. For that reason, the conclusion can be drawn that while it is important to provide students with rigorous academic material, equally important is the need to ensure that school climate and culture are conducive to student success. Teachers and students alike seem to thrive in an environment where they feel loved and appreciated. School climate and culture matter in any attempt to improve graduation rates and student outcomes.