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South High wants students thinking career early

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Miguel Zeferino, a three-sport athlete at South High, transformed his grades from junior high to freshman year in 2013-2014.

He earned Cs, Ds and Fs at an alternative school in Delano; Bs and Cs at another alternative campus in Bakersfield; and As and Bs his first year at South, a traditional high school.

Miguel says what changed his whole life -- in addition to sports -- was a pilot school program that required him to map out his future.

And now that same curriculum will be implemented schoolwide at South this year, while Bakersfield, Highland, Shafter and West high schools will test it out with 1,500 to 2,000 freshmen.

That curriculum, Career Choices, requires students to create 10-year plans and answer three questions designed to help shape their course loads: Who am I? What do I want? And how do I get it?

Miguel, an incoming sophomore at South, said he is thinking about wrestling in college and majoring in drafting and design, a class he took his freshman year.

"I just want to get a better job and a better life and help out my family," he said.

Requiring students to start thinking about their futures early and plan beyond high school are new concepts for many students, who graduate unprepared for college or career, counselors say.

Just 32 percent of KHSD graduates passed courses required to enter University of California and Cal State schools with a grade of C or better in 2012-2013, though that's up from 17 percent in 2002-2003.

The number of those graduates who have passed college-prep courses has lingered below the state average for more than 15 years. That average was 39 percent in 2012-2013, according to the California Department of Education.

Katie Price, a high school counselor at Bakersfield High School for 12 years and an adjunct professor at Cal State Bakersfield, said part of the problem is community-wide apathy about higher education.

Many students don't think about their interests and plan for the future, and many community members who have gained success without going to college don't see the merit in a degree.

"It's just so frustrating," she said.

Price has watched students drop college preparatory classes because they are challenging. Their parents, up against persistent urging from students, allow them to quit instead of challenging them to "rise to the occasion," she said.

Counselors "feel like we're banging our heads against the wall" because when parents push their students to stay in tough classes and students persist, the result is success in college.

"Hold them to a higher standard and tell them they can do it, and they'll do it," she said.

That's what happened with Miguel, South High Principal Connie Grumling said.

Miguel said he began his first stint, 30 days, in a group home for receiving stolen property in 2012 and missing his court date. He later ran away from the group home and ended up in a similar facility in Bakersfield, where he currently lives.

Miguel said he has about one more year to serve in the group home, but he changed his behavior and outlook on life long ago.

He attributes the change to his Career Choices teachers and coaches.

"They told me to get my education, to get a career," he said.

South High administrators piloted Career Choices with Miguel and 50 other freshmen in 2013 in an initiative named Project 17 after the

group's graduation year.

A majority of the 51 students had poor attendance, bad behavior and low test scores in eighth grade.

They tested below basic levels in English and math. But instead of putting them in basic English classes, South High administrators placed them in higher-level, college-prep English.

The school put the group in class sizes of about 24 students per teacher instead of the average 34 in core areas like math and English. Students listened to guest speakers talk about their careers and participated in projects like one in which they built model solar cars of plastic.

Instead of dreaming, the group calculated how much money it would take to sustain the lifestyles they planned.

"Research says if you can grab students first semester freshman year, you can help them be successful," Grumling said.

By her measures, the program worked.

Only two of the 51 students enrolled in college-prep English failed, and 25 transferred from remedial math to algebra midway through their first semester.

"There's one counselor for 500 students district-wide," Grumling said. "This program creates more time and more focus on gearing your high school years toward your future."

Project 17 students completed more credit units, had higher GPAs and better retention rates than a similar group of 52 students in 2012-2013 who did not use Career Choices.

Project 17 students completed 27.5 credit units on average; had an average GPA of 2.2; and only 11 percent of the group dropped out of South High.

The 2012-2013 group completed 23.5 credit units on average; had an average GPA of 1.9; and 32 percent of the students dropped out of South High.

Miguel earned a 3.5 GPA the last semester of his freshman year.

Kyle Wylie, athletic director at South High, said Miguel shows up to school every day and works hard on and off the field.

"He's just a quality kid," Wylie said.

"I think that's the reason why we're all in education, for kids like that," he added.

Manuel Vasquez, Miguel's wrestling and football coach, described the 15-year-old junior varsity fullback and linebacker as tough, hard-working and determined.

Vasquez let Miguel try his hand at a varsity wrestling match last school year. Even though he lost, other coaches talked about how tough and talented he is.

He's a small kid at about 5-feet 2-inches tall and 140 pounds, but he "has a really big heart," Vasquez said.

"He wants to work hard. He wants to be successful in athletics," he added.

Miguel wants to be just as successful in life, he said.

KHSD will begin requiring students district-wide to develop long-term plans this school year, separate from Career Choices.

Vickie Spanos, KHSD director of instruction, said her hope is to work with local elementary schools and have students begin the plans in seventh grade and extend them through the first two years of college.

"We want students to, no matter what, be able to earn a good living," she said.

Bob Hawkes, director of workforce development in the Kern Community College District, said long-term planning that begins early is key to preparing students for college and career.

He has been discussing high school career exploration activities as part of a career tech education collaborative since 2009. Hawkes recommended Career Choices to South High to help better prepare students for higher education.

Fifty-eight percent of first-time freshmen at Cal State Bakersfield were unprepared for college-level classes in 2013, and 84 percent of incoming Bakersfield College students were similarly unprepared for college math or English, according to the two schools.

KHSD had 2,127 students absent each day -- or 5.7 percent of students-- in 2013-2014. It cost the district \$17.2 million in state funding allocated based on attendance. Hawkes said Career Choices, which has in some cases reduced absences by 15 percent, could save KHSD money in the long run.

In the short run, implementing Career Choices district-wide would come with a \$1.56-million price tag.

It is a cost Hawkes said is worthwhile and could mean reducing time it takes students to finish community college.

"When you have students hanging around for four or six years, they take up space," he said. "And they don't graduate."

Wylie said he doesn't think that will be the case for Miguel.

"We just hope the momentum he had his freshman year carries over to his sophomore year," he said.