

What a Difference a Year Makes

McCormick High School
South Carolina



McCormick, South Carolina is a rural town of around 1,500 people with extremely high unemployment rates, a higher than 50% adult illiteracy rate, and around one quarter of its population living below the poverty line. In 2006, McCormick High School was facing some of the steepest dropout rates in South Carolina, making the school eligible to utilize a technical assistance fund and a Carl Perkins grant to help institute a program to turn things around for its students.

Faced with such a daunting socio-economic picture, the faculty at McCormick knew they had some major challenges to overcome in order to help students achieve. The question was how best to go about facing the challenges?

In order to satisfy a “character education” mandate from the South Carolina State Department of Education, McCormick chose to implement a Career Management course using Academic Innovations’ *Career Choices* curriculum. The plan to combat the seemingly insurmountable dropout rates was simple: Get students thinking about an individual plan to **graduate** by making development of a “graduation portfolio” a requirement.

In his first year as McCormick’s principal, Bobby Cunningham recognized that failing to plan meant they were planning to fail. So, he says, they did a lot of planning, which included sending four teachers and a principal from the McCormick Freshman Academy to an Academic Innovations workshop. The teachers were so excited upon their return that they urged McCormick to implement the material starting in the second semester of that year rather than waiting for the following year.

And, that’s exactly what happened.

Principal Cunningham chose not to limit *Career Choices*’ influence to the school’s 63 freshmen, instead opting for a school-wide approach. “We don’t have a freshman course *per se*,” says Cunningham. “We use *Career Choices* in what we call our advisor-advisee classes. Our advisor-advisee classes meet for 30 minutes a day throughout the course of the year.”

All told, it amounts to approximately 90 hours of instruction with *Career Choices* material over the course of a year for each student at McCormick. More important, the students get an advisor who stays with their class from their sophomore year until graduation. Principal Cunningham says this course is taken extremely seriously at McCormick, “**It is a requirement for graduation.** In fact, the advisor-advisee class carries on throughout the senior year. It ends with a career portfolio being developed by each of our students, and that portfolio is one of the requirements for graduation.”

In the Career Management course, students use a number of *Career Choices* materials, including the hardcover main textbook and the *Workbook and Portfolio*, as well as *Possibilities*, the language arts anthology. Mondays are set aside for character development, while students in the course focus specifically on the *Career Choices* materials on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursdays. Fridays are set aside for students to focus on their reading skills through the *D.E.A.R.* (Drop Everything And Read) program.

According to the website www.greatschools.net, as of 2007, 94% of McCormick students are meeting or exceeding standards in the area of English and language arts. This is a point of pride for Principal Cunningham, “After one year, [McCormick High School] moved from a below average school to one of two excellent [per the state of South Carolina educational ranking system] schools in South Carolina.”

While the teachers and students at McCormick work hard to get the best results this course structure has to offer, the administrators are surprised at just what they’ve been able to accomplish. Comments on the course like, “**it surpassed expectations**” from Principal Cunningham or “[*Career Choices*] really relates well to what our students need” from Freshman Academy Principal David Livingston are quickly forthcoming from the school brass that helped bring about the change in the school’s culture.

Teacher Joe Varas points out that McCormick high school can boast about having “**the fourth highest graduation level in the state last year!**” That kind of a statement seems almost unbelievable when one reflects on all the academic struggles McCormick has overcome.

“The biggest surprise,” Cunningham adds, “has been the brevity...to take hold of this in our school, it only took a year, and **it only took a year to make a major impact on our students.**”

Much to the joy of everyone involved in the process at McCormick, folks throughout the state are taking notice as well. According to an article for the November 2007 *Messenger School Report Card*, there’s “a reason everyone at McCormick High School is smiling this week. They learned their school has earned the highest possible score on the State of South Carolina 2007 Annual School Report Card—An absolute rating of Excellent and an Improvement rating of Excellent.”

Principal Cunningham speaks of this success in broader terms, however. “We want to make sure our students have an opportunity to be exposed to careers, to be exposed to what’s out there, to be exposed to what’s in a global society.” When all is said and done, he summarizes what these results mean in real terms: “Students graduate with the ability to seize opportunity—or create their own...”

After one year

of using *Career Choices* with all its students, McCormick went from being a **below average school to being one of two excellent schools** in South Carolina.