

Helping Minority Students Succeed

Verona program gives incentives to minority support staff and students who become educators

SESSION *Improving Teacher Diversity Through Grow-Your-Own Programs*

Presenters Verona Area: Jason Olson, director of human resources; Dennis Beres, board president; Frank Rodriguez, school/parent liaison; Laurie Burgos, director of bilingual programs and instructional equity

In some ways, the Verona Area School District has become a tale of two school districts.

The district — located just outside Madison — was once primarily a white affluent suburban district. As less affluent parts of the district began to grow, student enrollment increased and the district began to serve more black and Hispanic students, many from low-income households.

“We have a real mixture of very different characteristics of people,” Verona School Board President Dennis Beres said.

Although the district’s mission statement included a commitment to help every student succeed, many of the minority students were not succeeding. So the district reallocated resources and began to change its approach.

“We were done admiring the problem,” said Jason Olson, the district’s director of human resources. “We realized that if what you are doing is not working, why not try something else.”

A key strategy was to add staff positions to help the district better connect with its minority student population. Frank Rodriguez is the school/parent liaison.

“I am the bridge. I help connect families to the district,” Rodriguez said.

“We have a lot of families who feel like they are not connected to the district.”

He meets with families and helps them navigate paperwork and services.

But even more important was to change the face of the district teaching staff, which was still primarily white and female. When efforts to recruit minority candidates from outside the district failed, the district decided to grow from within. Officials realized they already had many minority staff members who lived in the community.

“You can find a lot more treasure, passion and success by looking at home,” said Laurie Burgos, director of the district’s bilingual programs and instructional equity, adding that minority students tell her frequently that they want to see teachers who look like them because they can relate better to them.

And that means they are more likely to succeed.

So the district actively began recruiting its high school students and support staff to go into teaching by enrolling in a Grow Your Own partnership program with Edgewood College. Support staff enrolled in the two-year program continue to receive full pay and benefits while they are student teaching. High school students in the four-year program have



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their tuition reduced and student loans forgiven if they complete the program and agree to take a job with Verona upon graduation.

The first class in the two-year program for support staff graduated in 2016 and three of the four candidates were hired by the district. The first class of high school students are now sophomores at Edgewood.

Olson said the district also completely revamped its interview questions for teacher candidates to focus less on academic programs and more on “soft” interpersonal relationship skills like resolving conflict. In addition, they changed the composition of teacher interview teams to make them as diverse as possible.

The district’s efforts have paid off. In 2014, 4 percent of the teaching staff was racially/ethnically diverse. In 2015, it was 8 percent and this school year the percentage has risen to 11.5 percent. ■