



For Immediate Release
Jan. 29, 2010

For more information contact:

Bonny Millard, Executive Director, Blount Education Initiative
(865) 273-1210, bonny@blounteducation.org
www.blounteducation.org

Other Media Contacts:

Amy Schwinge, (865) 982-6626 or amy@marybethwest.com
Tyra Haag, (865) 982-6626 or tyra@marybethwest.com

***Graduation Coaches Key Factor in Significant Graduation Rate Increases
Achieved in Area High Schools***

Blount Education Initiative Says Struggling Students Benefit Greatly from Extra Layer of Support

Maryville, Tenn. — Many local students who may have been high school drop-outs several years ago can find new levels of support through designated graduation coaches. According to the numbers, these coaches are making an impact.

Heritage High School and William Blount High School have experienced a significant double-digit jump in graduation rates since 2006 with help from two part-time graduation coaches at both high schools.

In addition, Alcoa High School hired the first graduation coach in the area three years ago while Maryville High School integrates the graduation-coach role with existing staff responsibilities. Graduation rates for Alcoa High School and Maryville High School have consistently remained above the state goal of 90 percent since 2007.

“Many East Tennessee public high schools provide graduation coaches as an added layer of support to keep struggling students on track to graduate,” said Bonny Millard, executive director of the Blount Education Initiative (BEI). “Better graduation rates are a win-win situation for all involved, including students and the community at large.”

From 2006 to 2009, William Blount High School experienced a 13.6 percent graduation increase. Heritage High School’s numbers also are impressive, seeing an 11.2 percent jump during that same time period.

“A number of years ago, a GED was acceptable for those not on target to graduate, but now a student who leaves school but earns a GED is considered a dropout,” said Millard, who has been reviewing local graduation rates since 2004. “The progress of the two county high schools to bring their graduation rates up in only four years is impressive and to be commended. It has taken much hard work and effort to pinpoint these students and make sure they stay on the right track to graduate.”

The data suggests schools with graduation coaches exhibit improved graduation rates.

“Just look at the data, and you can see the benefits of graduation coaches very clearly,” said Jane Morton, supervisor of grades 6-12 instruction for Blount County schools.

Millard added, "With the great results that these graduation coaches have achieved, it would be a step backwards if these positions were eliminated."

Although there are no specific state requirements to be a graduation coach, it is desirable for coaches to have a professional teaching license and some experience with high school students.

As with guidance counselors, graduation coaches work with at-risk students in jeopardy of not completing high school. Unlike most counselors, graduation coaches do not have to multi-task with administering tests, scheduling classes, grading papers or typical administrative responsibilities – enabling them to focus solely on the students they help.

"Graduation coaches truly have the ability to face a tough situation and stick with it," Morton said. "They also recognize that there's such a deep connection between school and home."

Still, graduation coaches can't save every student. Morton recalled that one student who was on target to graduate early after the fall semester turned 18 and dropped out. Despite their best efforts to persuade the student to remain in school for the final six weeks or so, he decided not to and because he was 18, school officials had no leverage to retain him.

On a daily basis, graduation coaches monitor a student's academic progress and attendance and work with teachers to identify those who are falling behind or at risk of doing so. They also focus on getting parents involved and will even make home or workplace visits with parents.

Mike Winstead, assistant director of schools, credits Maryville High School's collaborative approach with its teachers, guidance counselors, administrators and parents to keep students on track to graduate, since Maryville High School does not have separate graduation coaches.

According to Winstead, MHS students receive a great start in ninth grade with one full-time guidance counselor who is responsible for helping students create a plan for graduation. Four other counselors focus on students in grades 10-12.

"Interventions with both the student and a parent are conducted if a student is deemed at risk of not graduating," Winstead said. "MHS counselors engage in a very individualized approach for each student who gets off track in the pursuit of graduation."

BEI recently sat down with local graduation coaches to get a glimpse of what their influential jobs entail.

Questions and Answers with graduation coaches in the Blount County community:

Alcoa High School (AHS)

Heritage High School (HHS)

William Blount High School (WBHS)

1. How long have you been a graduation coach?

Kim Hawkins, AHS: Our principal, Scott Porter, created the position three years ago with the support of the central office. The first two years, it was called Graduation Specialist, even though the position included responsibilities other than working with at-risk students. Since we are such a small system, we all have to wear many different hats. This year, the position was renamed AYP (Adequate Yearly

Progress) Coordinator to encompass more of the responsibilities. I was the original Graduation Specialist and am now the AYP Coordinator.

Virginia Loflin, WBHS: I'm currently in my second year as a graduation coach for WBHS but was a guidance counselor for 12 years at the high school prior to that.

2. How are graduation coaches different from guidance counselors?

Kim Hawkins, AHS: Our position acts as part of an at-risk team that includes the counselors, principal, and Family Resource Center. We know it takes a team approach. Some grad coaches are former counselors and some have other classroom experience.

Virginia Loflin, WBHS: High school guidance counselors have become consumed with several duties and a caseload of around 450 students usually. We identify and focus solely on at-risk seniors.

3. What do graduation coaches do?

Kim Hawkins, AHS: We do whatever needs to be done to ensure that the students graduate on time while maintaining the rigor and integrity of programs. This includes monitoring data to target at-risk students, finding support programs for the students and families, finding appropriate interventions to address the issues that may prohibit the student from graduating on time, tracking the progress of the students, being a liaison between teachers and students, helping teachers adapt curriculum to meet the needs of at-risk students or taking any other appropriate action to help the students succeed. No day is the same. Larger schools have grad coaches that are focused totally on at-risk students. Alcoa's small size means that the responsibilities of the grad coach are only a portion of what I do. Some of my other responsibilities include school-wide data analysis, school improvement and reform, standardized testing, curriculum, teacher evaluations, Title I and anything dealing with accountability.

Wilda Cornett, HHS: We work with at-risk students in danger of not graduating from high school. It could be because of attendance issues, failing classes, lack of motivation, family issues, personal issues, such as lack of stable housing, extended illness or whatever has caused them to fall behind in required credits or courses.

Virginia Loflin, WBHS: Graduation coaches identify high school students at risk for not graduating on time. Some of the risk factors include: students falling behind in credits, failing a class needed to graduate, having a history of academic difficulties, not performing well on state tests, coping with difficult family circumstances, raising children, having discipline problems, dealing with transportation issues and missing several days of school. Attendance is truly the single biggest factor in not having satisfactory performance in school. We also monitor students who are close to turning 18. This is important to monitor because 18 is the end of compulsory attendance at school, and students can sign themselves out whenever they want. Unfortunately, every year, we have a student on track to graduate but decides to drop out for whatever reason.

4. Is this position a new phenomenon to the Blount County / East Tennessee area?

Kim Hawkins, AHS: When we created the grad specialist position, we were unaware of any other similar positions in the area. Since then, we have shared our experience with many of the grad coaches in the area. Our grad specialist position evolved into our current AYP coordinator position. Our system has an AYP coordinator at each of the three schools, and we are unaware of any other positions like this in the area.

Virginia Loflin, WBHS: Georgia has had graduation coaches for years. Recently, WBHS has expanded the program because of stimulus money and now has two part-time graduation coaches.

5. What are the biggest struggles graduation coaches face?

Kim Hawkins, AHS: Some unrealistic expectations (from others and of ourselves) haunt us. We are expected to save everyone, be everything to everyone all of the time and fix everything. Some societal issues that revolve around family life or educational policy that does not support student success make it frustrating and difficult. Sometimes, you work with a family who does not value education or has more pressing issues, such as where they will sleep or how they will eat, and it is hard to overcome those problems.

Wilda Cornett, HHS: Getting students motivated and seeing the benefits of a high school diploma is a challenge. The same applies to their parents or guardians. So many times, the students are already behind and unable to graduate on time before we get the referrals from our teachers or the student comes from another school already behind in credits.

Virginia Loflin, WBHS: Aside from the students who have credit deficits or several missed days of school, social concerns are a main factor. Oftentimes, these students have nowhere to live, are expecting children, have children already or are 18 and just do not want to go to school anymore. We work with the Family Resource Center to help these struggling students and teach them how to access services in the community. Some of them are just trying to survive.

6. How do graduation coaches motivate struggling students to go the extra mile?

Kim Hawkins, AHS: Our strategies depend upon the student and what he or she needs. Each student and situation is different, so it is hard to make general statements about motivating students. Some students just need to know someone cares and is paying attention. It varies from checking in with them every day to finding things they or their families need, to texting them every morning to make sure they are getting ready for school.

Wilda Cornett, HHS: We make personal contact with students and parents and encourage the students to come to school, work hard in class and meet standards for all classes. We develop individual plans with students, parents and teachers. We work with students to get them into credit recovery classes, online courses and recommend tutoring. Sometimes, we make home visits or the school resource officer does. We encourage students and keep in touch with students who, very often, receive little support at home, from peers or themselves (due to low self-esteem). We work with guidance and attendance to follow up on students who transfer from Heritage to make sure they enroll in another educational program that enables them to get a high school diploma.

Virginia Loflin, WBHS: Everything I've read about dropout prevention says to identify at-risk students early and give them as much support as soon as possible. School attendance is the biggest factor, so I check every day to make sure the students I work with are in class or locate them to find out where they are. We make home visits and help teachers coordinate getting students into a credit recovery program.

Katherine Bowerman also serves as a graduation coach at William Blount High School. Ron Eades is also a graduation coach at Heritage High School.

#

About Blount Education Initiative

The Blount Education Initiative's (BEI) mission is to make education the Blount County community's top priority by developing a sustained public awareness campaign focusing on the critical issues related to education, supporting local schools in their efforts to provide a top-notch education for all students and serving as a bridge between the educational community and businesses to develop meaningful collaborations.

Achieving consensus about education's vital importance, and what forms of support are required to achieve educational excellence, requires an organized, concerted campaign involving information exchange, dialogue, learning and persuasion. That's why BEI exists – to facilitate this process.

For more information, visit www.blounteducation.org