Edmonds SCHOOL DISTRICT

MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE AT:

How One School District Sought Equity By Creating Pathways For Recovery

GRADUATION ALLIANCE CASE STUDY

Graduation Alliance

Background

Gustavo Balderas has always been driven by the guiding principles of opportunity and equity — and by the potential to make meaningful changes that help more students get the education they deserve.

So, when the 2020 AASA National Superintendent of the Year learned about what was happening in the Edmonds School District, he was intrigued. The district, located in a historic logging and fishing region north of Seattle, had long served a diverse population of indigenous, white, Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander families. In the past 20 years, the Hispanic and Latino population of the region served by the district had grown by more than 200 percent. And the population of refugees and other migrant families had burgeoned, as well.

> *"To me, that diversity was the biggest draw for me," said Balderas, who was recently elected as president of the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents. "The students in this district speak 129 languages. More than half of them are students of color, and that number is growing and growing."*

In too many cases, though, those students weren't finishing school — and community leaders had made a commitment to change. "I wanted to be a part of that," Balderas said.

The Challenge

It came as no solace to school leaders in Edmonds that their challenge was one shared by nearly every district in the United States: **a gap between graduation rates that disfavored traditionally underrepresented students from diverse backgrounds.**

"We're driven to do what is best for all students," Balderas said. "It may be cliché now to say 'no child left behind' but it is still a very relevant question. Which kids aren't being successful right now? We know we have teachers doing great work, fighting for every one of those students, but what else can we do? How can we help them?"

Those are the kinds of questions that assistant superintendent for secondary schools Greg Schwab spends a lot of his time thinking about.

"We know that there are interventions that work for many students, but there is nothing out there that works for every student," Schwab said. "You need to have a lot of tools in your tool chest, and if there is still a group that isn't being served, you need to ask why you didn't have the right tool for them when they needed it."

Among the challenges Edmonds school leaders have focused on is what Balderas calls "a perfect fail" system in which the state mandates a 24-credit graduation requirement — and schools typically offer the opportunity for each student to earn six credits a year.

"What does a system like that say to a student? It says, 'You can't make any mistakes,'" Balderas said. And that, he said, is especially true for students who must work, care for siblings, or care for their own children.

Those students know they are already living at full capacity, Balderas said, and can't simply take on an extra class outside of school hours.

What is even worse, he said, is that school districts all too often take a student who failed a course and put them in the exact same course the following semester or school year. "What do we expect is going to happen? Something magical? Well, I'll tell you: If we don't change the situation in meaningful ways, nothing magical happens. A student who wasn't successful last year will struggle to be successful this year as well," Balderas said.

Edmonds school leaders have worked hard in recent years to create environments that don't cause struggling students to fall into disillusionment and despair.

Schwab said the district has worked hard to create credit recovery programs that are centered on helping students learn the materials they haven't yet mastered, rather than rehashing an entire semester's worth of content. The district has also created numerous alternative pathways, including those that result in accelerated credit attainment, so that students who have fallen behind or are at risk of doing so know they aren't doomed to be behind without any real hope of catching up.

But even though the district has made substantial progress in these areas, and work continues, Schwab said it isn't enough to "patch the hole" for future learners. "We have a responsibility to those who weren't successful in the systems we created," he said.

The Solution

In a perfect world, “we would never let a student go — not even one,” Balderas said. “We’d have a personalized education plan for every kid. We’d track them for their entire education. We’d engage their parents and guardians. We’d have a case managed for every kid. We’d stay connected and we’d never lose them.”

Balderas believes that’s a goal that can come to fruition someday. But until it does, he said, districts like his must account for the fact that “sometimes kids do go away.”

> *“We need to have pathways for reentry,” he said. “And those pathways can’t just be a slightly different version of what they left. We have to meet them where they are at, in as many different ways as is needed. In alternative schools and night schools and leveraging technology to have multiple opportunities for online programs. Literally, we have to have education everywhere.”*

That ambition is one of the key factors that led Edmonds to Graduation Alliance, which has helped hundreds of districts across the nation provide “anywhere, anytime” educational programs for disengaged students.

The other key factor, Schwab said, was Graduation Alliance’s experience in locating disengaged students. “Some schools try to do this, and have some limited success doing it,” Schwab said. “But this is Graduation Alliance’s wheelhouse. We knew they have resources we didn’t have and that, to me, is the very reason you make a partnership.”

On Sept. 28, 2020, the Edmonds School District Board of Directors unanimously voted to partner with Graduation Alliance to find and re-engage students who had left school without earning a diploma. By the middle of the following month, the program’s first students were starting their classes.

The Results

Among the first students to re-enroll through Edmonds' Graduation Alliance program was Kingdave. Like many students in the district, Kingdave was a first-generation English language learner who had struggled in school, fallen behind, and left school to pursue work when he decided there was likely no way to get caught up in time for graduation.

After trying to apply for a job in a warehouse — and being told that he couldn't be hired without a high school diploma — Kingdave realized he needed to find a way back to school. As luck would have it, that decision came at about the same time Edmonds launched its Graduation Alliance program.

Over the next three months, Kingdave worked with his teachers, academic coaches and local advocates to complete the classes he needed to graduate, and in doing so became the first Edmonds student to earn his diploma through the Graduation Alliance program.

"It made me proud — so proud — to be the first one," said Kingdave, who was able to earn a job with good pay and benefits in a shipyard shortly after graduating. "I needed this diploma to get a job, and it is a big change in my life."

Kingdave said he was particularly excited to be able to tell his mother that he had finished high school. "She told me, 'good job son, I am so proud of you,' and for me those are the best words I could ever hear."

Another student who was an early enrollee in the program, Alondra, had left Edmonds to enroll in a high school attainment program at a community college, hoping she would have more time to work and take care of her siblings. Soon, though, Alondra was struggling to get reliable transportation to the college. By the time she realized she would have been better off staying in her original high school, she was behind — and in a "perfect fail" situation much like the one Balderas had described, feeling hopeless to catch up.

> *"This is one of the things that many people don't understand about students who leave school before graduation," said Alondra's Graduation Alliance academic coach, Olivia B. "Many times, of course, we are working with students who have really struggled academically. But other times there are those who were soaring and simply reached too high at one point, fell behind, and couldn't see a way out of their situation."*

With the flexibility and support she needed to get back on the path to graduation, Alondra was soaring again, completing the six credits she still needed to earn a diploma in about six months. She now intends to go to college to study radiology.

With scores of students now enrolled in the program, Balderas said he is confident that he will be hearing more inspiring stories from re-engaged students.

"This is what it looks like," he said, "to be accountable to our students — to all of our students."