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## Graduation coaches are helping more local students stay in school

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Everything came to a head when Rebecca Nix was in seventh grade: Her parents had divorced, her family struggled to make ends meet, and her best friend died.

She lost it emotionally, and school became an afterthought. Rebecca, now 15, didn't care about school and had the grades to prove it.

If she made it through college, she would be the first in her family to do so, and she didn't think there were adults she could talk to at school. She fit just about every indicator suggesting she would drop out.

That's when the graduation coaches stepped in.

Most Marion County high schools -- including Warren Central, where Rebecca attends -- have added the coaches, who work with a small group of at-risk students. They are paid for by local businesses, and districts say they are one reason why more students are graduating.

On Friday, education officials announced that the number of students in the Class of 2009 graduating in four years statewide jumped nearly 4 percentage points to 81.5 percent, and Marion County's graduation rate leapt 5 percentage points to 73.8. Pike High School improved by nearly 13 percentage points.

Community involvement -- reflected in efforts such as the graduation coach program -- is what's making the difference in Indianapolis, said Dennis Bland, president of the Center for Leadership Development. His organization promotes education excellence and leadership in students.

"This must be important," Bland said. "It must be something the community values."

The graduation coaches are each assigned a small group of students and set out to help them with any obstacle to graduation, be it personal or academic.

When the statistics come out for the Class of 2012, Rebecca might be among students saved from dropping out.

She says she never would have let herself drop out, but the graduation coaches at her school saw the tell-tale signs and reached out.

"They've done so much for me," Rebecca said Friday afternoon. "It gave me someone I could connect to and talk to about anything. They don't pass judgment. I don't know what I'd do without them."

Rebecca now has a B average. She plans to go to college.

Educators aren't so naive as to say that kind of help will stop every student from dropping out, but they suggest it's a good way to help kids who may have become lost in the system or had obstacles

arise.

Warren Township Schools Superintendent Peggy Hinckley said Rebecca's story demonstrates how a smart kid can be sidetracked by issues outside school.

"The challenge of graduating is simply that life gets in the way for a lot of young people," she said.

## On the brink

That seventh-grade year proved to be the first turning point in Rebecca's academic life, the point when she went from being a good student in elementary school to being an abysmal one.

The summer after that, she acted out and got into trouble with her parents. She rallied some in eighth grade, but it didn't last long.

Her parents, Tom and Anne Nix, tried to motivate her to stick with her studies, but the family didn't have much experience with college. All the while, the distractions mounted.

Her mother lost a job working for the school district when the district had budget cuts. Finding work, Anne Nix said, is especially hard without a college diploma.

She hopes that helped motivate her daughter to take school seriously.

"I hope I was part of the reason to do that," she said. "Looking where her mother is today and telling her straight up, 'I don't want you to be me.'"

Rebecca said it was a combination of factors that helped push her to achieve, but she knows it wouldn't have happened without the graduation coaches from the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce's Common Goal Initiative.

The chamber has deployed 10 coaches in Indianapolis Public Schools and township schools that they think need help.

## An academic coach

A middle school counselor identified Rebecca as at risk of dropping out, and when she arrived to register for classes at Warren Central, she found a sticker on her paperwork telling her to see an administrator.

Rebecca was skeptical at first; she thought it would just be another program she wasn't interested in.

But instead, she found herself meeting in small groups with her graduation coaches, going on a trip to visit Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and volunteering at a charity golf outing.

The coaches were there to help Rebecca through the problems that arose, and to ensure she was on track in her courses.

When she failed algebra last year, the program paid for her summer school class, in which she got a B+. And they were there to persuade her counselors to approve a rare transfer into a higher-level geometry course a few weeks into this school year.

"Over time, I grew really close to the coaches," Rebecca said.

Warren Central Freshman Academy Principal Emily Brown had feared for Rebecca when they first met last year. Now, she has a different assessment: "This kiddo's going to make it."

## Additional Facts

How graduation coaches might help

- **Academically:** Helping students plan their courses, exposing them to colleges and working on study skills.
  - **Getting through the red tape:** Helping students maneuver through school policies, such as changing classes after deadline, or working with other government agencies.
  - **Life strategy:** Helping students figure out the best way to deal with problems concerning classmates, family members or others.
  - **Resources:** Connecting students with the resources to take a summer school course or a clinic would help them get reading glasses or a local business for a part-time job.
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