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United effort to reach goal

The quality of education in Central Indiana is everyone's business. Building, retaining and attracting talent to our community is a key factor for economic growth. In order to ensure growth and a bright future for our children, the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce has partnered with businesses and community organizations, along with all 11 Marion County school districts, on an initiative to raise the county's high school graduation rate from 70 to 80 percent and decrease the dropout rate to 5 percent by 2012. Because the entire community is engaged in this initiative, we have labeled it Common Goal.

What distinguishes Common Goal from other dropout prevention programs is the use of customized, specific interventions, identified by the education community as national best practices. Common Goal utilizes six intervention strategies, because we know that one size doesn't fit all when it comes to students. When a high school student is at risk of dropping out, maybe he doesn't read at grade level, or perhaps she simply needs a caring adult in her life to motivate her. To prevent students from dropping out, interventions include internships, alternative high school models, graduation coaches, mentors, credit recovery and reading intervention programs.

These strategies are customized for every school building, so we can meet the unique needs of every student at risk of dropping out. (An at-risk student is defined as having high mobility, failure to pass

Another distinguishing factor of Common Goal is the emphasis on accountability. The four-year aim rate of 80 percent can be broken down into indicators that prove we are on the right path. Early this year, the first report of performance metrics of the Common Goal initiative was released. The report provides baseline data that are a starting point to compare progress after each semester. At the end of each semester, indicators that prove a student is more likely to graduate are measured (attendance rates, how many courses a student fails, the number of times he or she is suspended from school, etc.).

In the first reporting period, three of the six interventions were measured (graduation coaches, credit recovery and reading intervention programs) with assistance to more than 1,000 at-risk students in eight of the 11 Marion County school districts.

In only the first semester of implementation in Marion County schools, more than 360 at-risk students assigned to a graduation coach have an average attendance rate of 93.67 percent, and 58.77 percent are on track to graduate in four years. In addition, students enrolled in the Common Goal reading intervention program demonstrated an average of more than one year's growth in the Lexile Framework for Reading, which measures reader ability and text difficulty. And more than 150 students are enrolled in credit-recovery programs, which provide computer-based, flexible, targeted instruction for students who may not excel in a traditional classroom setting.



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Of the participating students, 73 percent were able to recover one or more failed credits. Moreover, 69 percent of those students went on to pass the subsequent class.

The baseline first semester measurements demonstrate the capabilities of Common Goal interventions. The yet-to-be measured interventions include internships, alternative high school models and mentors. Each of these serves students' unique needs and works to assist with the specific challenges they face to graduate. Data for all six interventions in the 11 school districts will be available this summer.

Although we are encouraged by the first semester measurements, the road is long and we need the entire community to get behind this effort. Even during this economic downturn, the business community has generously donated more than \$1.7 million to Common Goal since the program's inception in 2007. However, nearly \$5 million is needed to support the full objective and hundreds of volunteer mentors are needed to start in August 2009.

A united effort by the entire community is needed to achieve our goal and ensure long-term economic success for the community. Business leaders can provide meaningful summer internships for students; volunteers can mentor students on life skills during the school day; citizens who want to improve the quality of their schools can fund intervention strategies. Visit commongoalindy.org to learn how you can make a difference to achieve this goal.