

Pathways to Success: A Second Chance for At-Risk Students

By Erik Baumann

Each year approximately 1.3 million students drop out of high school. That means every day more than 3,500 teenagers disengage with their education and, as a result, face a stark reality. Americans who do not earn a high school diploma face daunting rates of unemployment. Those lucky enough to find work will most likely be in low-skill, transient positions. As a result, students who do not finish high school are also more likely to rely on public assistance and worse, face a greater chance of being incarcerated. Failing to educate these students has a trickle-down effect that wreaks havoc on our economy and society.

It is easy to dismiss high school dropouts as lazy and apathetic. It's even easier to insist that, "if I can finish high school, then so can they." But unfortunately, for many students, life-changing events throw them off course; one mistake or tragedy can spell disaster. Yes, high school is hard. Students choose to leave because, for one reason or another, they aren't able to make their education a priority. Is this reason enough to cast them aside to a lifetime of poverty?

There is enough blame to go around. We can blame parents, we can blame teachers, we can blame schools, we can blame politicians, we can blame society as a whole and of course, we can blame the students themselves. But what if, instead of assigning blame, we did something to help students find the right path?

The reality is that students drop out for a variety of reasons; abuse, bullying, addiction, pregnancy, peer issues, and more. I've seen it firsthand. I've worked with students who had to take a job to help support their family. I've worked with teen mothers and fathers. I've worked with students on the road to recovery from addiction and I've worked with students who, in the past, made some bad choices and now want to start making the right ones. All of these students needed and deserved a second chance.

But what do we do with a 20-year-old student who left school in 9th grade? Do we put them in a classroom with 15 and 16-year-olds? How can we ask a student to go back to a place that didn't work for them the first time? For these students who want an education and want to do better, we need to offer different pathways – ones that will prepare them for a career, college and beyond.

At Bristol Community College's Gateway to College program we are providing one such pathway that serves students who have disengaged with their education. In partnership with the Fall River Public Schools, Gateway to College gives students who weren't finding success in a traditional high school setting a chance to flourish. Students in Gateway take all of their courses at BCC and are integrated into the college campus. Their coursework counts towards a high school diploma but also earns them college credits that can count towards a degree or certificate from Bristol Community College. It is, in essence, a scholarship -- a second chance scholarship. It's not easy and it is a selective program that requires students to commit to making their education and their success a number one priority.

Many may balk at the idea of giving a high school dropout a scholarship and putting them in a rigorous academic program. However, the vast majority of our Gateway students find success and remain engaged with their education. Over the past year, the Gateway to College program at Bristol Community College has served 75 students. Twenty-eight have already graduated with a high school diploma.

Gateway to College isn't the only answer to our dropout crisis--it can't be. This is a dilemma that requires more than one solution. We need to develop a variety of pathways for students to find success. Let's embrace the opportunities for students to learn and become not only career and college ready, but productive citizens as well. Gateway to College is just one pathway that helps Fall River live up to its name as the Scholarship City and changes the world, learner by learner. Let's work together to create more opportunities for students to become successful. We owe that to our city, our state, our country and to each other.

Erik Baumann is the director of Bristol Community College's Gateway to College program. A national network of 43 colleges in 23 states partnering with more than 125 school districts, Gateway to College offers high school dropouts and at-risk students another chance to earn a high school diploma and college credit. He can be reached at erik.baumann@bristolcc.edu.