

Vermont High School Completion Program 2006 – 2010 Evaluation Report Executive Summary July 2011

Introduction

The Vermont Legislature initiated the Vermont High School Completion Program (HSCP) on July 1, 2006 due to the enactment of Act 176 during the 2006 legislative session. The goal of the HSCP was to provide an alternative and flexible path to a high school diploma for Vermont students who were between 16 and 21 years of age and had left school. As an outgrowth of Act 176, the HSCP is operated by Learning Works, a consortium of Vermont's adult education and literacy providers, in partnership with Vermont high schools and the Vermont Department of Education. Learning Works organizations are Central Vermont Adult Basic Education, Northeast Kingdom Learning Services, The Tutorial Center and Vermont Adult Learning. For questions or more information about this study, please contact Carol Vallett, Ed.D., Research Associate Professor at 802-656-0266 or Carol.Vallett@uvm.edu.

Purpose of this Study

This external evaluation is funded by the Nellie Mae Foundation and conducted by the College of Education and Social Services of the University of Vermont as a subcontractor for the evaluation grant awarded to Learning Works and administered by Northeast Kingdom Learning Services. Data for this report were collected from October 2010 until May 2011. The evaluation serves to document the establishment and achievements of the first four years (July 1, 2006 - June 30, 2010) of the HSCP activities and to offer recommendations for improvement and extension of the program beyond Vermont. Further, it documents the process that has led to the establishment of the HSCP and explains subsequent changes that have been made to the program. Additionally, this report describes the student population served in the first four years of the program, summarizes outcomes, determines cost effectiveness, and identifies other outcomes and considerations.

The study was designed to evaluate the HSCP based on the following guiding questions:

- What practices and policies have proven successful for program implementation? What changes in the program might the Vermont

- Department of Education and the providing partners make in order to improve the HSCP?
- What lessons can Vermont schools learn from their participation in the HSCP that would inform future initiatives as the schools engage in their own transformation to 21st Century learning?
 - How can the HSCP become a national model for successful engagement of students who are at risk of non-completion or who have already dropped out of school?

HSCP Program Description

Act 176 established new systems for providing adult education services culminating in a high school diploma to 16 to 21 year old Vermonters who dropped out of school. The Act defined key elements of the program including the graduation education plan, responsibilities of the Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) providers and high schools, and provisions for reimbursement payments to HSCP partners.

The graduation education plan was defined in statute as a written plan that “shall define the scope and rigor of services necessary for the student to attain a high school diploma, and may describe the educational services to be provided by a public high school, an approved independent high school, an approved provider, or a combination of these” (Vermont General Assembly, 2006, p. 2). The plan was meant to outline not just the services provided to the students but also to help capture the student’s career, personal and educational goals and was only for 16-21 year olds not enrolled in a public school.

The Act designated that students who wished to engage in a graduation education plan be assigned to a high school in their district of residence. In turn, the high school agreed to partner with contracted AEL providers to develop the graduation plan and ultimately award the high school diploma. The Act further provided that both the schools (or school districts) and the AEL providers would be reimbursed for services provided to HSCP students based on the elements of these graduation plans.

Provisions were made for the Commissioner of Education to report on the HSCP to the legislature each year and that an initial \$1 million would be appropriated from the education fund to pay for reimbursements in the first year of the HSCP. The legislation was approved in May 2006, and the HSCP began operating on July 1, 2006. In subsequent years, two important changes have been made to the HSCP: 1) the initial required assessment levels of incoming students have been increased, and 2) legislative Act 44 in 2009 allowed students to be dually enrolled in high school and HSCP. Reimbursements to high schools for dually enrolled students were eliminated.

Evaluation Methodology

Data for this evaluation were collected from various sources using a mixed methods approach. The following list outlines the data collection methods and sample sizes.

- Semi-structured interview guides were developed for interviews with
 - HSCP plan managers (21)
 - Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) administrators (12)
 - High school partners
 - Principals/assistant principals (6)
 - Guidance personnel (14)
 - Students
 - In progress (22)
 - Graduates (5)
 - Community partners (5)
 - DOE staff (3)
- Data were also retrieved from DataWorks, the AEL system database. This included:
 - Student demographic data
 - Achievement data
 - Financial information for the program
- Documents were also collected from AEL and DOE personnel as well as public sources. These included:
 - Graduation Education Plans (42)
 - DOE yearly reports (4)
 - HSCP manual
 - Policy statements
 - Program guidelines
 - Legislation

Findings

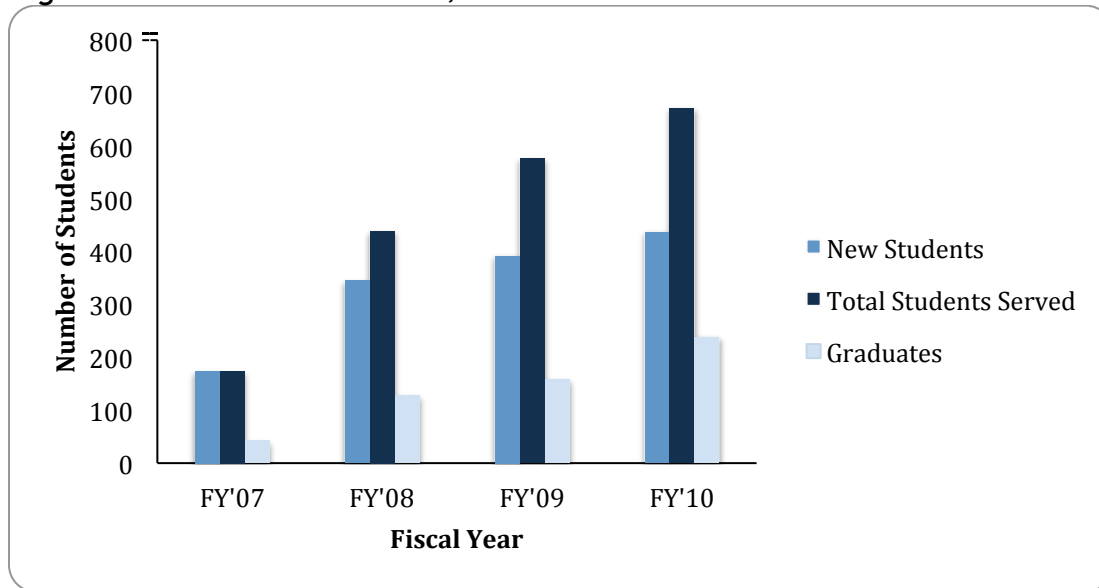
HSCP Students

During FY '07-FY '10, 1,348 students were enrolled in the HSCP. Student characteristics point to a typical student as being of traditional high school age (85%), ethnically white (93%), living at or just above the poverty level (72%), and most likely having completed the 11th grade (54%). Male and female students were equally represented in the HSCP population. Overall 10% of students were parents, 12% received special education services and 27% reported a disability of any sort. Just 2% were involved with the Department of Corrections. Details of HSCP student characteristics for FY '07-FY '10 can be found in the complete program evaluation report.

HSCP Graduates

In the first four years of operation, 566 students earned their high school diplomas through the HSCP with an overall graduation rate of nearly 42%. Figure 1 depicts the growth in students and graduates from FY '07 to FY '10.

Figure 1. HSCP New Students, Total Students Served and Graduates



The 238 graduates in 2010 include 41 students who were dually enrolled in their local high school and the HSCP. Analysis of graduates and non-graduates showed that graduation rate varied significantly by:

- Highest grade completed
- Special education status

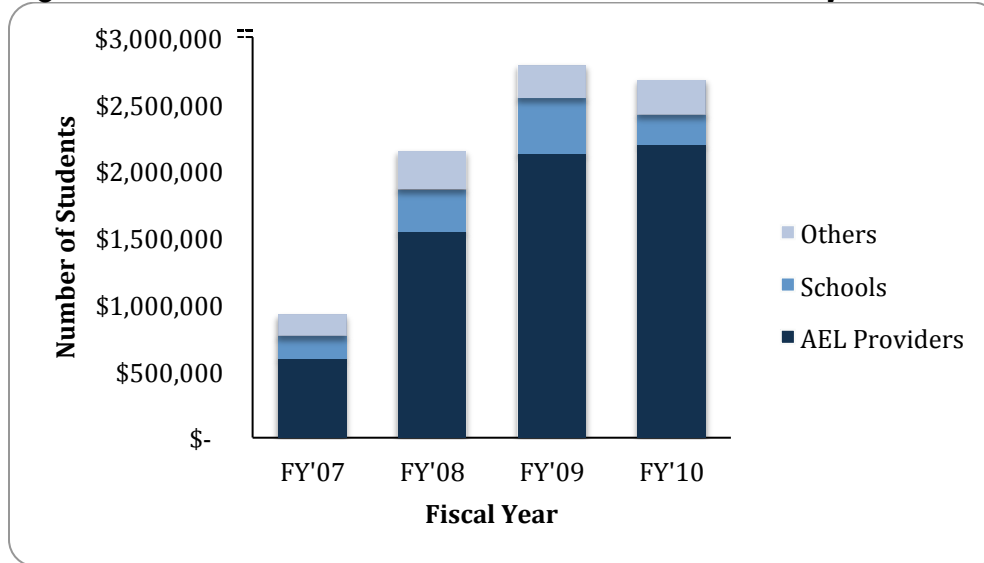
Increases in highest grade completed tracked with increased graduation rates. Students who had been designated with special education status graduated at significantly lower rates than their counterparts. However, special education status was self-reported; actual representation of this population in the database might be higher.

Commonly cited reasons for graduation success included student internal motivation, support from an adult, clear student goals, and flexible learning environment. Barriers to graduation often found were significant student learning gaps, substance abuse or mental health issues, work schedules, transportation problems, and unstable living arrangements.

HSCP Costs

Information was retrieved from DataWorks for FY '07-FY '10.

Figure 2. Student Reimbursement Totals FY '07-FY '10 by Provider



For unenrolled students, the average cost per student per year was \$4,685. For enrolled students (FY '10 only) the average cost per student was \$3,412. All expenses for HSCP were paid out of the State's Education Fund.

Evaluation Questions

What practices and policies have proven successful for program implementation?

Findings point to the following key successful practices for HSCP.

- Graduation Education Plans – Individualized and student focused learning contribute to student success.
- Flexibility – Accommodating student schedules rather than school schedules helps students complete HSCP.
- Scale – AEL programs were small enough so students received personal attention and made connections with adults and others.
- Intake Process – Common assessment process and standards assured that students had the right skills for the program.

- Focus on Outcomes – Focus on student demonstration of competency and requisite funding puts the emphasis on achievement and not seat time.
- AEL and High School Partnering – Joining two educational entities and requiring them to function together serves students well and has enhanced both types of organizations.

What changes in the program might the Department of Education and the providing partners make in order to improve the HSCP?

Findings suggest the following areas for program improvement.

- Communication – Enhance communication between DOE, AEL providers and high schools. This would aid more consistent practices. Expand outreach efforts to professional associations (i.e., principals, superintendents, guidance counselors).
- Professional Development - Expand professional development for all HSCP partners. Create a mentoring program for new plan managers with emphasis on those working in small AEL sites.
- Enrolled Students – Develop clearer and consistent practices for enrolled students. Current practice is inconsistent across the State.
- Special Education Students – AEL sites should work with school personnel to be sure that special education students are receiving sufficient support for success.
- Develop a Pre-HSCP Initiative – Students who do not meet intake assessment standards are falling into a void between HSCP and high school. A defined program would provide a clear pathway to HSCP entry.
- College Bound Students – Partner with high schools and CCV to be sure HSCP students are college ready.
- Document Competency-Based Outcomes – Establish multiple options and examples of competency-based outcomes and achievement measures. Work with schools as they consider adopting these practices. Bring in a national expert on this topic.
- Data Systems – Examine how DataWorks can become a student management system.
- Technology Integration – Integrate educational technology applications with student learning.
- Wrap-Around Support Services – Establish a network of support for students who need intensive services.

What lessons can Vermont schools learn from their participation in the HSCP that would inform future initiatives as the schools engage in their own transformation to 21st century learning?

- Individualized Education Plans – Schools should adopt the practice of developing a personalized graduation education plan for each student. Include a component of career and college readiness and goal setting.
- Flexibility and Customization – Schools need to move to more flexible schedules and learning that is designed for each student rather than for the school.
- Competency-Based Outcomes – Each high school should develop competency-based graduation standards.
- Outside Learning Opportunities – Schools could emulate elements of HSCP learning plans and incorporate more outside learning opportunities into students' academic lives. These could include internships, mentoring, employment, and college classes.

How can the HSCP become a national model for successful engagement of students who are at risk of non-completion or who have already dropped out of school?

The HSCP could consider:

- Enact Program Improvements – Adopt the suggestions from this evaluation.
- Conduct a National Outreach Effort – Present success, student stories, and history of HSCP at national conferences, author articles and conduct a general outreach campaign.
- Develop Professional Development for AEL Professionals – Create a workshop on HSCP for AEL professionals from other states and create a training manual.

Conclusions

In 2009, Vermont set its sights on high achievement by establishing a goal in legislation of 100% high school graduation rate by the year 2020. It is clear that the Vermont High School Completion Program is and will continue to be one of the pathways that will support this goal. However, it is important to remember that the HSCP is a dynamic operation that has and will continue to undergo changes to policies as it continues to evolve and grow. Additionally, the revenues spent on HSCP have continued to increase as have the number of students engaged. One might theorize that at some time in the future, the HSCP will be truly successful if the numbers in the program actually decline and it no longer exists in its current format. This would indicate that schools are indeed transforming and meeting the needs of all students. Until that time, the State and its students are being well served by the HSCP.

References

Vermont General Assembly. (2006). *An Act Relating to a High School Completion Program for 16-22 Year Olds*. Retrieved from <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/legdoc.cfm?URL=/docs/2006/acts/ACT176.htm>.