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Performance Learning Centers Give At-Risk Students New Chances to Succeed

Combining online learning and teacher coaching, PLCs enable students to learn at their own pace and earn their diplomas

CAMBRIDGE, MA – Performance Learning Centers (PLCs) call themselves an alternative to traditional schools. Serving teenagers at risk of dropping out, PLCs use a “blended” approach to teaching and learning, combining online learning with a teacher-led classroom. Most instruction is online in the PLC model, but a teacher-coach is there to answer questions, direct projects, and keep kids on track. In the three years the 75-seat Hampton, Virginia, PLC has been open, it has graduated 91 students. There’s a waiting list for admission. 95 percent of the PLC’s online students pass Virginia’s end-of-course history test, which puts them well ahead of both the local school district’s and even the state’s pass rates.

In “Getting At-Risk Teens to Graduation,” scheduled to appear in the Fall 2011 issue of Education Next and currently available at www.educationnext.org, June Kronholz explores the PLC model. Two national trends are fueling the growth of Performance Learning Centers. Many states are raising their graduation standards, and they’ve found, Kronholz notes, that simply returning kids to the traditional classroom for a second attempt is often counterproductive. The second trend is the exponential growth of online learning. Thirty-two states have virtual schools where online offerings range from one class to an entire high-school curriculum.

The nonprofit dropout-prevention program, Communities in Schools, developed the PLC concept in 2002 and has since expanded the project to seven states and 33 schools. PLCs are small units within schools, typically consisting of only four or five classrooms, four or five teachers (who are district employees paid the same as other district teachers), and under 100 students, who apply for admission. PLCs are a part of students’ home school districts and receive the same per-pupil funding as any other district school. As PLC students earn their diplomas, they raise graduation statistics for those schools, generating buy-in from administrators.

A brochure for the Adult Career Development Center PLC in Richmond, Virginia, describes students for whom the PLC is a good fit: kids with “poor attendance,” “excessive tardiness,” “academic failure,” “social issues,” and “apathy.” The three PLCs that Kronholz visited were, nonetheless, quiet and orderly. The principal of Richmond Technical Center PLC, Wes Hamner, pointed out that there is no security at his school and that the lockers don’t even have locks.
Students in PLCs learn the same course content as their peers in regular district schools, distinguishing the PLC model from “credit recovery” programs designed to boost graduation rates quickly. Most PLCs use NovaNET, an online curriculum that is marketed by Pearson Education Inc. The program tests students at the end of each lesson, unit, and course, reinforcing material as needed and letting students who pass tests by at least 80 percent move ahead.

PLCs in Virginia report that 96 percent of their students passed the state’s end-of-course algebra exams, 97 percent reading, 90 percent biology, and 100 percent passed writing, putting the PLCs ahead of state averages in all four subjects. Kronholz recounts the indelible impact of a PLC on a student in Hampton: the young woman had laid out her post-secondary plans, including community college, university, and then a career in teaching or nursing. “Honestly, if it wasn’t for here, I wouldn’t graduate,” she said, and by June, she had.

About the Author
June Kronholz is a former Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent, bureau chief, and education reporter, and currently a contributing editor at Education Next.

About Education Next
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