

Basic Skills Bulletin

News for and about the largest network of alternative learning centers in the nation



A Basic Skills Model Unity School, Scott County, IN A Collaboration Between Two Rural School Districts

This article is part of an on-going series about the learning centers and sponsoring organizations that make up the U.S. Basic Skills Network.

Unity School of Scott County, Indiana, combines the U.S. BASICS Learning System, counseling and community support to provide alternative education for middle and high school students.

Unity School is a self-contained alternative school located on the grounds of Scottsburg (IN) High School. Opened in October 1998, its day program serves a maximum of 25 students in grades 6-11. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, "unity" implies agreement and collaboration among inter-dependent, usually varied components. At Unity School, this occurs at several different levels, including management, curriculum and financial support.

Creating the Collaboration

The idea for the school was born during the 1997-1998 school

year. At the suggestion of the county's special services coordinator, the superintendents from Scott County School Districts 1 and 2 and the administrator of the Madison Area Educational Special Services Unit began meeting to find some way to help their students who had serious academic problems or chronic behavior problems. They formed a committee, adding representatives from the middle and high schools, and researched the field of alternative education, visiting schools and attending conferences.

By January 1998, the committee had developed a plan to create an alternative school with a program that was both academic and therapeutic. The new school would serve middle and high school students from the two school districts, with initial funding from a grant obtained by the area special services unit. That summer, Bart Newton was hired as alternative education coordinator and he put together his staff: a teacher, a school/licensed mental health

counselor and two instructional assistants. The staff were all experienced working with young people with emotional handicaps or who were unable to function successfully in the general education setting.

"Hand, Head, and Heart"

Newton and his staff began looking for curricula to meet the school's mission of the positive development of the "hand, head, and heart" of the students. After reading "lots of material" and visiting alternative schools in Indiana and Kentucky, they selected the U.S. BASICS Learning System for the school's academic program. "It seemed to be just what we needed," Newton explained. "It makes it easy to manage individualized instruction at the administrative level and at the instructional level and it keys on students' strengths and weaknesses. It also gives us the information we need in terms of accountability."

Meanwhile, Newton was overseeing the remodeling of the building on the Scottsburg High School campus and making

presentations to businesses and civic organizations in the community. "This collaboration between the school districts was about pooling our resources to provide appropriate services for our children. People all across the county saw the sense in that and really got behind us."

Local businesses donated excess office supplies, offered job shadowing opportunities and tours of their facilities and provided funds for incentives and experiential activities. Civic groups made financial contributions and helped set up service learning opportunities. Their members volunteered to be guest speakers, tutors and mentors. "One family even donated new cabinets for our kitchen," said Newton.

The Process

The students at Unity School are usually referred by the administration of their middle or high school, which supplies Unity with a referral packet consisting of the student's academic records, information from teachers and a completed questionnaire. A referral committee of the sending school principal, the alternative school coordinator and a representative from the special services unit approve or deny placement. If approved, Newton meets with the student and parent to inform them of the school's services and complete an intake process.

Students must attend Unity for a minimum of one semester, and most are there for at least two terms. The school's objective is to transition students back to their home school once they have completed the alternative education program designed for them. Students earn credit upon successfully

completing their academic plan and upon meeting all attendance requirements.

In addition to their academic instruction using the U.S. BASICS Learning System, students receive individual, group and adventure-based counseling and participate in "family style" dining and service-learning and "helping others" activities. They are also exposed to positive role models in the adults who volunteer at the school and by guest speakers. The entire program aims at holding students accountable and providing them opportunities to work through their challenges.

Funding and Management

The initial grant for the school was through the Madison Area Educational Special Services Unit, and the alternative education coordinator and the two instructional aides are paid by that office. The teacher and counselor are considered employees of School District #2, although the funds for the positions come from the grant. However, the coordinator reports directly to the county's special services coordinator as well as to the superintendents of the two school districts.

In addition to financial support from local businesses and community groups, the school receives funds to use for counseling materials from the County Prosecutor's Office. Grants from the United Way of Scott County and the Scott County Step Ahead Council support experiential learning activities. In 2000, Unity School was recognized by the State of Indiana as one of six exemplary alternative education schools and was awarded \$6,000.

A Full Schedule

At the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year, Unity School began offering an after school program, from 3:30 - 6:30 p.m. At this session, high school students behind on credits or who for health reasons cannot maintain the regular schedule, use the U.S. BASICS Learning System at the alternative school to make up credits. A maximum of 25 high school students from both of the school districts may participate, attending at least 60 hours to receive credits.

Along with Newton, teacher Vicki Vaught, counselor Donna Marsh, instructional assistants Rita Treadway and Don Snyder and after-school program instructor Todd Rose make up the committed staff at Unity School.

Thanks to them, to visionary administrators within the school districts and special services unit and involved and to concerned community members, "at-risk" students in Scott County are succeeding academically and developing positively.

This rural community demonstrates how cooperation and pooling of resources can positively impact students who are struggling academically and behaviorally.

For more information about Unity School, contact Bart Newton, alternative education coordinator, at (812) 752-8980.