

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast “Getting Students Over the Fence in Newport News”.

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]

Fritz GEISSLER: Well good morning and today I am joined by Dr. Lisa Powers and Michelle Mitchell from Newport News Public Schools. Thank you so much for joining us.

Lisa POWERS and Michelle MITCHELL: Well thank you!

GEISSLER: Really looking forward to speaking with you all. You all have put in place a program where you look at how to get kids over the fence and looking at graduation and students with disabilities. And I guess a good place to start is how it got started and looking at getting these kids over the fence? What happened? What was the start of this program?

Michelle MITCHELL: Well I think Lisa was looking at a student’s transcript one day and realized that the student may have not been in the right classes in order to get the student to standard diploma.

GEISSLER: Okay.

MITCHELL: And from that point it started the ball rolling.

Lisa POWERS: And we kind of start looking at other students and realized that was just one example of many students we didn't have on the proper track. So we kind got going, to make sure that are all the kids were on track for standard diploma and then started identifying what they needed in order to make sure that happened.

MITCHELL: And one of the ways we identified was to actually look at a hard copy of every high school student’s transcript, every high school student with a disability. And so we had huge binders, by school, and we went through each one and decided to really focus on seniors...

GEISSLER: Okay.

MITCHELL: We helped to get a diploma in that year. Not negating the other ones...

GEISSLER: Sure, sure.

MITCHELL: But the main focus was on the high school students ... I mean seniors, divided up by schools by the staff in our department and we kind of adopted a school...

GEISSLER: Okay.

MITCHELL: So Lisa had two schools and I had one. Various other staff members had schools. We actually poured over those transcripts and then had conversations with that and supervisor, guidance directors, to talk about how to go changing the diploma status. Lots of IEP meetings, meeting with lead teachers at the school. But the most important part actually having face-to-face

conversations with students. And so in effect, this year we have graduation coaches, but last year we became graduation coaches. And went out went over transcripts with students and said "Look, you got a 375 on your SOL last time. You are only this number of questions away. You really can't do this. Let's get some things in place to get you ready to pass the SOL.

GEISSLER: Right. What was the response from the students? I mean I don't think they often get calls. You are this close, you just need this credit. How did they sort of respond to that?

POWERS: Most of them were pretty surprised, many of them were not aware that they were going to earn a standard diploma. So that was kind of a big surprise. And when we gave them that information and talked about a plan about how we could get them to get their classes recovered that they needed in order to get a high school diploma. It was really quite amazing to see the commitment from the kids when they realized that someone was willing to work with them to make sure that happened. And we actually wrote out a plan for each kid. You know we showed them their transcript, we talked about what they needed in order to earn their verified credits and the number of credits they needed for a diploma. And we sat down with each of them and wrote out a specific plan with some timelines on if you do this. The seniors were probably the most incredible because we were on a short time frame for them...

GEISSLER: Sure.

POWERS: Some of them really did see that they would have enough time to get done, but we kind of went from that identification to setting up some recovery sessions for kids. I actually had one young lady, who was trying to get done early, who called right before spring break to see if anyone would be available to come and access the computer to do her recovery. And I was working and a couple of the daily supervisors were working and I said "Well she can come here to the admin building." That kind of sparked the thought - Well some other kids can come too. So we ended up setting up in actually one of the offices, we set up a portable computer lab, and all through spring break we had kids - probably around 8 to 15 come a day - we ran buses, they came and they worked on their recovery classes.

MITCHELL: And when they couldn't get the bus, they called us to pick them up. They called. The supervisors went to the homes and picked the students up. And I think, as Lisa was talking about writing the plan, there were three key areas we went over with the students. Their transcript, their actual schedule to say "Okay you already satisfied your P.E. credit in 9th grade, but you are still taking P.E. So we are going to take you out of this P.E. class and put you in this class. Or we are going to put you in an online class during this time period", and we also looked at their SOL scores with them. And I think what Lisa said about having anywhere between 15 spring break, now I wasn't here during spring break, they were here and on a daily basis I was getting emails - I even got some pictures - the excitement. The students were excited, the staff was excited. There was one young lady who stayed longer than the actual time was set up for because she was so committed to getting done and being successful. And I think in that in its self it kind of spread like wildfire. I think they were excited about it. They went back to school and had conversations with other students. We had student's general ed. and special ed. calling to say "Can I come. Can I get accesses to this?"

GEISSLER: Wow!

MITCHELL: And from there it kind of spiraled into Saturday. So we opened up two labs, computer labs, and had portable labs that came every Friday - a supervisor came to pick them up from a school - and transported them. So that Saturday mornings we had students coming. We were able to tap into the expertise of content area supervisors. So for example, the math supervisor, he would show up on Saturday to help with math. Or the science supervisor came. We had a social worker who came. We had someone who worked in the Office of Leadership to come, which turned out to be very good thing because a young man's grandmother was going to stay and gave him an opportunity to kind of have a conversation with her about some community resources that might be available to help. And so it went from being a getting a credit recovery to kind of a holistic approach where we were kind of trying to meet lots of different needs for the students.

GEISSLER: It sounds like it became a very personalized community effort. And that when kids they were really determined to go after that.

POWERS: We did run buses on Saturday, but we had kids who like slept in and missed the bus would call us and we would go pick them up. I mean who would do that? You don't think about kids willing to give up their Saturdays, but these were kids who were really committed to...

MITCHELL: Some who had part-time jobs, who worked it out, where able to go after they finished the course? We had the fence on the wall that looks like: We are a 21st Century School Division. But last year... our office probably didn't look that way. It was a construction paper fence and each school had a different color index card. We actually had the name of students - seniors - name of the seniors, because of course we pride ourselves on confidentiality, but any meeting that would be held with a parent or someone not dealing with special ed. was not ... in my office. We had a column with advanced diplomas, standard diplomas, modify diplomas, and special. And we actually had student's names on the cards, and had them under the type of diploma they would be exiting with at the time. Then if you were taking a course - a credit recovery class or you needed more SOLs - then your card was on the fence.

GEISSLER: Okay. Then as you pass a SOL, as you complete a class, then we checked it off. We knocked it off.

POWERS: They each got identified exactly what each kid needed. So if they needed courses to recover, or if you needed SOLs to recover, those were all listed in order earn their standard diplomas.

MITCHELL: Very low-tech. Supervisors ... very effective ... took the cards home, they took the transcript, took the students name, put what he needed and we check it off - highlight it, cross it off - and then move it from the fence to standard diploma. Or move it from the fence to advanced diploma. Prior to moving it we did a little of this, very competitive between the schools. That would just fuel the competitive nature, the lead teachers became competitive. It was just very powerful.

GEISSLER: I was sensing that. A lot of energy, a lot of excitement. And the visual sounds like it was very powerful too. You said you joked about being low-tech, but it was a very powerful visual to see.

MITCHELL: It was very powerful. We provided lunch...

POWER: Snacks and lunch.

MITCHELL: They could get up and get a snack. It was structured where if you were taking a math course online, then the math students were together. We had one lab that had math and science, one lab that had English and social studies. We compensated teachers that we knew were strong. General Ed. and Special Ed. teachers. If you were taking earth science, then we had an earth science teacher who would come on Saturday in order to answer the questions, do some clarification. If the students needed accommodations or modifications then we made sure they had the appropriate were on their IEP.

GEISSLER: What a great story.

MITCHELL: We have a lot of great stories.

POWER: We do.

GEISSLER: I bet you do, I bet you do.

MITCHELL: We had one young man, who transferred in from another school division. We realized he needed another an additional Latin class to get an advanced diploma. He did it over the polycom television with another high school, because his high school did not have that. But we would have not recognized he needed that had we not reviewed all of the transcripts to know that he could exit with an advanced diploma. So...

GEISSLER: Yeah to think it started, Lisa, with you looking at the wrong transcript.

POWER: Yeah it's just one of those things. I don't know it just happened ... it was a good thing

MITCHELL: It was a good thing. We had another young man who had failed - he was a 9th grader - failed first semester 9th grade English. So we kind of homed in on those students too, so he was able to recover that. He was taking first semester 9th grade English on the credit recovery program and taking second semester in-class, so when he came back this year he was solidly a 10th grade.

GEISSLER: Oh wow.

MITCHELL: And then we kind of expanded this, while it didn't change our graduation rate last year, but we had course recovery summer school. We were able to look at who's in 9th grade and failed certain course, let's get them on solid ground so when they return in September they will be 10th graders. And so we did that in summer school this year and were able to help a lot of students recover.

GEISSLER: Right, so we were talking earlier, that you started with the 12th graders. The immediate need and impact, so I was going to ask it now looks like you are looking at 9th graders and having them solid 10th graders.

POWER: Yeah we are. And even last year ... we pulled in other kids because the goal is to try to get them caught up to the grade. Sometimes our kids, if they fail a class or two, particularly 9th graders - you know we have had some kids who have been 9th graders for 3 or 4 years. Well in some point or time, how long would you continue to be willing to come to school? So once we sat with those kids too and said "If you do this, this, and this you can catch up with your grade." So sometimes it's just a matter of saying that it is possible. Because they really didn't believe it

some point and time that they could get caught up. So we really end up working with all grade levels, but really trying to help those seniors so we can get more of them out with their diplomas. We did have one young man who actually had been on a modified track but not in classes trying to get a modified, who ... when I was going around meeting with different groups of kids right before the spring break saying actually ... when I talked to him about getting a diploma. Well let's look at your transcript, you really are not going to get a diploma. But I said you can come over spring break. And he said he couldn't. So I said, can you come over one day, and he said he would come over one day. So he came on Monday and he came every day after that because he realized he could get some help. Be successful. And then he came to every Saturday. And he was slated to graduate last year, but he refused to walk because he wasn't going to walk until he could walk with his standard diploma. So he is actually still going to school. He works part-time, he comes back and does the course recovery to get his credits caught up. So he will finish this year, but he would have left with a special diploma.

MITCHELL: Now is this the same young man that keep calling you...

POWER: Yes it's the same.

MITCHELL: For the transition fair this year that we do collaboratively with the surrounding school divisions. He kept trying to reach Dr. Powers and her phone was probably off she was helping with the presentation and he contacted another member of our department to say "Will you have Dr. Powers call me?" It was pouring down rain and he was calling Dr. Powers because he needed to get to the transition fair. Because he wanted to see what opportunities were out there for him? But while he didn't catch up with Dr. Powers, he showed up. He took the bus. Made it there. I just think the personal connections, I know for Dr. Powers has had students that were not seniors last year to stop them to say "Are we doing Saturday school this year?" So the students are geared up and ready to get this additional support. And the nice thing I think about it is while the concentrated effort certainly came from the special education department as we mentioned earlier, we had general ed. supervisors that helped, but transportation was wonderful. Transportation told us to tell them what we need and we will make it happen. We had technology support. We had algebra. I think people value what it was going to do for kids and it didn't matter what your role or position was. One of our secretaries went to McDonalds, meet the manager, had conversation, and gave us a cut rate on lunch for our students. So it was a full-team effort.

GEISSLER: Real community effort.

POWER: While we didn't make 70%, we did increase our graduation by 8%. Which is better than the school of division as a whole did.

MITCHELL: We increased more than any of the other subgroups.

GEISSLER: Now as you work your way down, it will have that larger impact.

MITCHELL: We print cards that said the best way to predicate the future is to create it. Lisa saw that on a bumper sticker, and resourced it and saw that it was Abraham Lincoln. So we want the student to know that you can predict your own future by helping to create it.

GEISSLER: I see here on your papers - we believe. But it sounds like for the students that there was some concern and care. But that people also believed and told them they believed that they could be successful.

POWER: While I think that the cards seem kind of crazy. What they did for us ... the numbers. When you look at the numbers is just a percentage is just a number. But what I think that did was make each number a person. Once we made that connection between that kid and what that representing, I think that what really got everything going.

GEISLER: Well thank you all so much for taking the time. Fantastic effort. And I appreciate you doing that.

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Outro]