Case Study

West Sioux Central School District Friendly Home Visits

By Laura Hensley, Teacher, West Sioux CSD

West Sioux Community School District is located in Northwest Iowa’s Sioux County and includes the communities of Hawarden, Ireton, and Chatsworth. West Sioux CSD student population is around 750 and projected to continue to grow over the next ten years. West Sioux CSD has Latino/Hispanic population close to 40% and free and reduced lunch of about 60%. To find a school district with similar Latino/Hispanic and FRL demographics as West Sioux, one would have to travel 40 miles to Sioux City Public School District. West Sioux is a unique rural community in Sioux County. The challenges facing West Sioux have been the changing demographics of the community and continued growth.

In 2010, West Sioux High School participated in the first round of Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools surveys. The survey produced an index score based on student survey results in the areas of school engagement, safety, and environment. Our first index score was 15 out of a possible 36. West Sioux was one of the lowest scores in the state. Therefore West Sioux received the IS3 grant for five years with the expectation we would develop effective strategies and action steps to improve our index score. Once the data was drilled down, the IS3 team realized the lowest construct area was in adult-student engagement and in particular the survey questions, “My teachers care about me” and “My teachers let me know when I do a good job”. On the flip side, our staff IS3 survey results put adult-student engagement as one of the highest construct scores. While staff believed they were making great connections with students, students were telling staff they needed or wanted a relationship beyond academics.

Initially to shorten this gap between teacher and student engagement, the IS3 team attempted some student engagement strategies in the classroom such as choosing two students a week to spend 10 mins or more talking to about non-academic related questions. Another strategy was sending home notes of positive feedback to parents or guardians. The result of these strategies and many others was an index score that rose from 15 to 24 the first year, but then went down to 23 and stayed there over the next three years. In addition, the same adult-student engagement construct area and survey questions remained the number one reason for the stagnate score.

Frustrated with lack of significant improvement and diminishing teacher buy-in, the IS3 team on advice from consultant Ron Mirr decided to try the Parent Teacher Home Visit Program (PTHVP) or as West Sioux renamed it, Friendly Home Visits. The IS3 team decided to focus on the data and the subgroup scores that were reporting the lowest scores in adult-student engagement. The team was surprised to learn that white males in the 9th and 10th grades were feeling the least connected to adults at school. It was decided that the first rounds of Friendly Home Visits would focus on the incoming 9th graders. Each grade at West Sioux High School is around 50-60 students. Ten teachers volunteered to be trained by Ron Mirr in the PTHVP. From there each teacher pair was assigned 10-11 incoming freshman students. The first year West Sioux High School conducted Friendly Home Visits between the months of June-August 2014, the teacher pairs were able to visit 39% of the incoming freshman class and the
feedback was exciting. The teachers found the format of the PTHVP rewarding and effective. They talked about experiencing engagement with students and their families in a different way. While conversations tended to drift towards school and upcoming fears and concerns, teachers felt they connected with students and their families on a deeper level. Some teachers reported families staying in contact and following up later on with more questions and concerns. This was a new experience or trend at West Sioux, to have the parents want to contact the school. There were also areas to troubleshoot, the teacher pairs found out. Many of the parents did not want to meet at their home or even on neutral ground, but at school. Teacher pairs reported some families being very leary of the visits and unsure of why the school would want to conduct them. Recognizing there was a trust issue between families and the school was hard factor for the teacher teams to come to terms with. Yet, when the second round of Friendly Home Visits started the same teacher pairs signed up again.

West Sioux Friendly Home Visits conducted their second round between May-July 2015. Once again the focus subgroup was incoming 9th graders. The second round of visits saw almost a double in visits completed going from 39% to 67%. Once again teacher pairs experienced many of the same positive rewards as the first round. The second round, the teacher teams increased the use of a translator for Spanish speaking families and an increase in parents and guardians wanting to meet at sporting events because of the convenience in their busy schedules. The biggest obstacle teacher pairs faced was once again parents trusting the intention of the visit. On a positive note, West Sioux saw an increase in attendance at the 9th grade orientation in August of 2015.

Moving forward, more after-visit data collection needs to occur in order to understand the true impact Friendly Home Visits are having at West Sioux. Yet, there has been enough positive feedback for the administration and board to approve another round of Friendly Home Visits and create a board goal around building a positive school climate with students and their families. The teacher pairs felt more community awareness and partnerships with program would help ease some these issues. To accomplish this, West Sioux has established a Family Engagement Team that help oversee and coordinate the Friendly Home Visits and involvement with the PTHVP. In summary, West Sioux is just starting our journey of building capacity for better school, family, and student engagement and the PTHVP is our catalyst and anchor for future programs, initiatives, and frameworks. At West Sioux, we want to continue to be risk-takers and pioneers in our communities when it comes to family engagement and to experience the positive increase in student achievement that has been linked to the PTHVP and family engagement in schools.

For more information about West Sioux CSD Friendly Home Visits please contact Laura Hensley at 712-551-1181 or lhensley@w-sioux.k12.ia.us