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EDUCATION

# Bringing Potential Dropouts Back From the Brink

By JULI S. CHARKES

Roosevelt

ON the morning of her Regents Exam in English language arts earlier this month, Sheile Echie-Davis, an 11th grader at Roosevelt High School, pointed to a blemish just below the swirls of pink and purple polish that covered her long fingernails and explained its meaning. "I've been writing so much, I'm getting bruises from holding my pencils," she said, her tone conveying pride rather than concern that the results of weeks of intense studying were so visible.

Sheile, 16, expected to do well on the exam, judging by her past results: She scored 88 percent on her Regents Exam in United States history last year, even though the subject is her least favorite.

Three years ago, Sheile was an unlikely candidate for academic success given her chronic truancy from school. Skipping class regularly led to her having to repeat eighth grade in her Brooklyn middle school. Parental pressure and visits from truancy officers did little to budge her belief that the classroom was not where she belonged. Dropping out, she said, was a foregone conclusion.

"There was just no way for me to sit with 35 other kids and be able to learn anything," she said. "I couldn't do it."

Sheile's prospects improved when her mother and nine siblings moved to Roosevelt. Here, in a school district that is one of the area's poorest, she caught up and is now planning her next step come graduation next spring: enrollment in a local college with the hopes of working as a medical technician. Dropping out is no longer a consideration.

Roosevelt has a 34.6 percent dropout rate, according to figures from the New York State Department of Education from the 2004-5 academic year (the latest year for which statistics are available). By comparison, nearby Hempstead has a 7.1 percent dropout rate and Malverne a 3.7 percent dropout rate.

To improve their dropout numbers, officials in districts throughout Long Island said they were taking aggressive steps to keep students in the classroom.

Next year, Malverne will start a mentoring program to help students most at risk of dropping out. “Once they slip away, it’s hard to reconstruct a successful path,” said James H. Hunderfund, the superintendent.

Brentwood also has programs in place to stem dropouts, including one that identifies children as young as elementary age who are not attending school and may be at risk of dropping out in later years.

Sheile’s prospects improved when she enrolled in the New Horizons Alternative Education Program at Roosevelt High School. The five-year-old program caters to about 85 students from the regular high school who have been identified as academically at risk, whether because of truancy, disciplinary issues or even incarceration, said Charlene Stroughn, the program director.

Housed in the sprawling Roosevelt High School, New Horizons classes take place in late afternoon and early evening, long after the 700 or so students enrolled in the regular high school have gone home. The late hours allow students to hold down jobs during the day. The alternative school also emphasizes small classes in which individual attention can be paid to students, allowing them to remediate and accelerate their academic standing so they can earn a high school diploma within a time frame consistent with their peers’.

That distinction — targeting would-be dropouts and encouraging them not only to return to the classroom, but also to catch up with other students — is important because of new accountability standards school districts must adhere to under state law.

Two years ago, the State Department of Education initiated a new system of tracking graduation rates that is based on the number of students who began ninth grade together and graduated four years later, said Tom Dunn, an Education Department spokesman.

The goal of the tracking system was to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the number of students completing high school, he said. The previous system did not consider factors like students who dropped

out in the first two years of high school, Mr. Dunn said. He called the new system much more accurate even though under it, school districts typically show lower graduation rates than reported using the previous system.

Identifying students at risk of failing as early as possible is a vital step in their recovery, said Patrick A. Silvestri, principal of the Program of Alternative Comprehensive Education, or PACE, the alternative high school in Brookville sponsored by the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

Situated on 40 acres, the Brookville school sits at the end of a secluded road, giving it a remote feel that one recent graduate, Troy Sinatra, 18, of East Meadow, said he initially found daunting. “What is this place?” he recalled thinking when he began classes there two years ago at the suggestion of a guidance counselor who advised him that he was in danger of flunking out.

The seclusion worked in Troy’s favor, though, allowing him to apply himself without distractions.

Last week, Troy and his 24 classmates graduated from the program, which grants a special certificate. A New York State regents diploma is issued by each student’s home district.

Joining Troy was Crystal Sanatass, 18, also of East Meadow. Next fall she will begin attending Nassau Community College, which would have been unimaginable a few years ago when her dismal attendance record at her middle school in East Meadow led her to consider dropping out.

“I was just uninspired; no one took the time to sit me down and make the effort,” Crystal said.

That changed with her enrollment at PACE. In addition to small class sizes and individual instruction, it emphasizes physical outlets like wall climbing and outdoor yoga that can help with behavioral issues that are often factors in attendance and performance, administrators said.

Crystal said that she particularly enjoyed the yoga, which allowed her to relax and concentrate on her studies. “You would lay back and see the sight of the sky and the trees,” she said. “That was beautiful.”

*Linda Saslow contributed reporting.*

