

Taking Life to School

BY DAVID DEMILLE

Life can be hard, but statistically it tends to be more so without a high school diploma.

It's a lesson Adam Nilssen was about to learn the hard way. He struggled through his senior year in high school, uninterested in staying on track when he wasn't sure where that track would lead. That's when he found the School of Life Foundation.

A program devoted to helping young people learn life skills and find success, School of Life offers students like Nilssen a chance to recover lost school credits and find a course in life. Over the course of a 30-day training course taught after regular school hours, students focus on life skills to supplement the academic focus of the school day.

Now Nilssen is working his way through college at Dixie State University — he just earned his Associate degree — and is planning on becoming an elementary school teacher.

"It's just made such a difference," he said. "It's really meant a lot."

That's why the Washington County School District has gone all in with its partnership with School of Life, implementing the program throughout each local high school as part of a larger trend toward more individualized education and targeted "interventions" built around the specific needs of each student.

The program started in one school three years ago, but quickly expanded to 14 in the last school year. In 2015-16, more than 30 schools are slated to use it, including schools in Iron, Davis and Utah counties, as well as in Las Vegas.

The reason it is spreading so quickly? Results.





One in five Washington County students is in danger of not graduating, potentially setting themselves on a course that statistics say is more likely to lead to crime, poverty, poor health and less happiness, said Jack Rolfe, president and founder of the program.

But School of Life Participants have seen their overall GPAs jump an average of 14 percent, and teachers report major improvements in dispositions toward attendance, peer pressure, homework completion and overall attitude.

“Research shows that if we catch these students early and make significant life changes we can make a bigger impact,” Rolfe said, noting that of students who enter the program previously off track to graduate, 85 percent have gone on to do the extra work and earn their diplomas.

About 400 students participated in the program in the 2013-14 school year, and based on formulas that estimate future earnings and taxpayers costs, Rolfe said the program saved society about \$18 million by helping students to earn diplomas when they otherwise might not have — essentially turning

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them from people expected to cost taxpayer money over the course of their lives to people expected to pay into the system.

At no cost to students or parents, students are walking away with essential life skills and remarkable improvements in attitude and motivation, said Justin Keate, assistant principal at Desert Hills High School.

The first year of the program participants saw their GPAs improve 16 percent, with some students as high as 22 percent he said, noting that educators usually get excited at just a 2 or 3 percent gain over a large group of students.

“Such positive results and improvement in GPA and all from an eight-hour course that rarely even mentions grades or homework,” Keate said. “Even more exciting is the fact that some students who were not on track to graduate before School of Life were able to learn positive life skills, make changes for the better, school their toughest opponent and earn their diploma.”

Rolfe said the program moved into some intermediate schools as well, and a pilot program is scheduled at elementary schools in the next school year. The earlier the age, the more likely the concepts are to have an impact, he said.

Superintendent Larry Bergeson said he has been impressed by the effectiveness of the program so far, recommending it to other districts.

“For many students owing high numbers of restitution hours, successful completion of the course will cover many, if not all, of the hours owed,” Bergeson said. “The change in the attitude and motivation of attending students has been remarkable, and is well worth the compromise on the hours.”

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