

College and Career Readiness Starts With Essential Skills

BY RICK DALTON

Two Years ago, a high school junior experienced a huge change in her life when she moved from Michigan City, IN, to Sarasota, FL. For many teenagers, a 1,000-mile relocation to a new community would be overwhelming. However, Ellen was immediately welcomed into her new school and included in a supportive network with a mentor who involved her in school clubs and activities.

Ellen not only quickly adjusted, she also began to thrive; she moved out of her shy comfort zone and began taking part in public-speaking opportunities at Booker High School. Today, Ellen is excelling academically, identifying college options, and mentoring student peers so that they too will cultivate the Essen-

tial Skills that drive growth and development inside and outside of school.

Wherever they live and whatever their backgrounds, young people need grit, adaptability, resilience, teamwork, leadership, and other foundational skills—or Essential Skills, as we call them at College For Every Student (CFES)—to move forward in school and life.

At College For Every Student, the nonprofit organization I have led for 25 years, we have seen that Essential Skills underlie academic success. Students develop these skills through three evidence-based core practices—mentoring, leadership through service, and pathways to college and career—that were tested in a pilot program nearly three decades ago and refined over the ensuing years. ►

Rick Dalton is president and CEO of the nonprofit College For Every Student.

Today, more than 200 schools throughout the country are implementing the practices. While originally established to help K-12 students in low-income rural and urban communities become college and career ready, these practices are today universally relevant.

Beginning in elementary school, mentoring helps build the confidence and habits needed to succeed in school and college. Mentors and mentees also

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engage in leadership through service activities that require students to organize community events, such as beautification projects, recruiting professionals to speak at their schools about college and career, and organizing recycling and other clubs. The pathways practice helps students understand college and career options and how to pay for college.

Providing this exposure can be problematic for schools in low-income rural and urban communities, which often lack supportive networks to cre-

ate opportunities that complement learning in the classroom.

This is where partnerships come in. School-college and school-business networks provide local support that expands the horizons of low-income students. Partnerships provide a range of opportunities for students: Campus visits to learn about college life; interaction with college representatives to learn about the admissions process and paying for college; workplace internships; and job shadowing opportunities.

In the next 10 years, the United States will be unable to fill 23 million jobs because we won't have enough educated/skilled workers. At the same time, there will be more than 25 million young citizens from low-income households unemployed or underemployed, not because they lack the ability, but because they did not have the opportunity for postsecondary training and schooling. Creating partnerships combats this trend, enabling young people to improve their lives and make lasting contributions to society. Uplifted outlooks also result from mentoring relationships.

At Marta Valle High School in New York City, one teacher remarked that a student's mindset shifted after working with a

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mentor who shared his own life journey, which involved facing and dealing with difficult challenges. The mentor also urged the student, Victor, to apply himself in school rather than just “get by.” He talked to Victor about the opportunities that can come with academic success, and encouraged him to take AP classes and aim high on his Regents Exams. Equipped with motivation developed through interaction with his mentor, Victor became more involved in school activities and basketball, and experienced a 70% improvement in his course test scores over one year. Today, Victor is captain of the school’s mentoring effort and represents Marta Valle at high school fairs to recruit other students to the school.

At CFES, we’ve observed how the power of human relationships produces specific positive outcomes: When mentors listen and tap into student expertise, students feel empowered and become motivated to achieve; service initiatives with peers build teamwork, adaptability and leadership skills; and on-site campus visits offer perspective about what life is like at college, raising aspirations to take required steps to get there.

Excitement about going to

college inspired one 8th-grade student at Alamo Middle School in Texas to showcase a bulletin board featuring colleges throughout the United States.

Demonstrating her teamwork and leadership skills, Makayla, a 10th-grade student at Crown Point Central School in New York State, said, “I am ready to show the world what I can do and how I can help.” Ginnette, a 9th-grader at Bronx Leadership Academy, also intends to inspire others: “I want everyone to know that they can go to college too.”

While academic standards change over time, Essential Skills are timeless. By engaging in practices that build these skills, students feel empowered to overcome barriers in their communities, pursue higher education, and fully apply themselves to reach their potentials.

Once young people believe they can attend college, they aspire to new possibilities: I can attend a community college and become a nurse; I can graduate from a four-year university and become an engineer. By connecting more low-income young people to practices that help them develop Essential Skills while they are in school, many more talented and motivated young people will emerge to fill the jobs of tomorrow. ■