

Coachella Valley High School: Demonstrating *Career Choices*' Effective for All Freshmen

In an effort to address a very high dropout rate, *Career Choices* became the backbone of a required course for all freshmen at Coachella Valley High School in Thermal, California.

Coachella Valley High School's principal had been desperately seeking a curriculum that would address his school's high dropout rate (at the time, the highest in San Bernardino county). The demographics of the population were reported as over 90% Hispanic, with nearly every student qualifying for free lunch. The majority were children of agricultural workers.

Author Mindy Bingham met Coachella Valley's principal at the National Association of Secondary School Principals conference and discussed the merits of the *Career Choices* curriculum. That June, the principal sent ten instructors to a [two-day \*Career Choices\* workshop](#) in Santa Barbara, California. Among the instructors was the champion of the concept, Midge Rodier.

The *Career Choices* curriculum was adopted, and textbooks and consumable workbooks were purchased. That fall, all ninth grade students were divided into small learning communities, or "Cores." The students in each Core (120-150 students each) remained together for English, Math, Science, and Career Prep/Keyboarding. *Career Choices* was used in the Career Prep/Keyboarding class.

During the first year of implementation, the Career Prep/Keyboarding course was taught in semester blocks. Half of the ninth-grade students began the year with a semester of Career Prep (using *Career Choices* textbooks and workbooks), while the other half of the ninth-grade students took Keyboarding. At the semester break, the groups switched.

It was discovered at the end of the implementation year that the students who began the year with a semester of Keyboarding dropped out at a much higher rate than the students who began the year with a semester of *Career Choices*.

As a creative solution, the following year the Career Prep/Keyboarding course was taught to all ninth-grade students over the course of the entire school year, so that all students were exposed to *Career Choices* from the first weeks of their freshman year. Students alternated between *Career Choices* and Keyboarding every other week. This allowed all ninth-grade students to **begin** their high school experience with the career awareness and self-discovery activities in *Career Choices*.

Midge Rodier reported to us that their restructuring efforts and this creative problem solving worked. "*We are seeing a huge drop in our drop-out rate since we started the Career Prep program.*"

In 1995, The Desert Sun, a regional newspaper, reported on the preliminary success of the program, affirming Midge's assertion.

(Statistics below were reported in the article. Please note: The reduction in dropout rates began the same year the *Career Choices* curriculum was introduced in the ninth-grade Career Prep classes.)

Annual percentage dropout rates	1991-1992	1992-1993	1993-1994
Coachella Valley	15.7	12.7	3.8

Each year the school found the funding to order a *Career Choices* Workbook and Portfolio for each freshman student. As Midge Rodier explained, "*The students are encouraged to keep their Portfolio and work on adding to it through their 12th grade year and let it become their scholarship folder. When the students...state 'I never thought about [college] before' I feel I am touching their future.*"

A few years later, with the program in full swing, author Mindy Bingham visited Coachella Valley High School and spoke to the entire freshman class during two spring assemblies. She was impressed by the maturity and seriousness of the questions asked by the students. It was inspiring to address nearly 500 students who were just finishing their *Career Choices* year and to see the wonderful results of their classroom experience.