

Jacksonville Schools Keeping Up With Gov. Bush's Mandates With a Course for All Freshmen

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Duval County Public Schools was well on their way to addressing Governor Jeb Bush's **A++ Plan for Education** this fall, as 19 high schools in Jacksonville implemented a new course for all incoming freshmen call **Keystone: The Freshman Experience**. The course, built around the acclaimed **Career Choices** curriculum, will help students become career-focused and career-committed while learning how to make effective decisions about their futures. It also aims to improve upon the district's current 63.7% graduation rate.

Rebecca M. Dedmond, PhD, director of school counseling for The George Washington University Alexandria Center and founder of the Freshman Transition Initiative says, *"Long-range thinking and planning can be taught, and the best time to do this is during the transitional year into high school, in either the 8th or 9th grade. Helping students visualize a productive adult life and write a 10-year plan for their futures is key to school retention and academic achievement. Once adolescents understand the impact a good education has on their future life satisfaction, and how their high school decisions affect the rest of their lives, educators find they have willing and enthusiastic learners."*

Dr. Dedmond has been working with school officials in Duval County to develop the district's Keystone course, which will culminate with students developing meaningful **10-year, career-inclusive education plans** that include goals for high school graduation, matriculation, and graduation from college or post-secondary education or training, and the successful transition into the workforce with the training and skills necessary for economic self-sufficiency.

Studies show that students who enter college or post-secondary training career-focused and career-committed are far more likely to graduate and transition into productive work that matches their education and training. Duval County Public Schools hopes that when the acquisition of education becomes relevant to their future life satisfaction, all students will exert the effort required to master their high school coursework.

Finding the Right Tools and Support

Duval County covers approximately 840 square miles in Jacksonville and slightly more than 133,000 students (50% minority population) comprise its 160 schools. In late 2005, the district received a Smaller Learning Community grant for its 19 high schools, at which point a planning team attended a Reach 'em, Teach 'em, Keep 'em conference in Tennessee to determine the next step.

Impressed with the information presented by Dr. Dedmond at the conference, Duval's team inquired about curriculum that would meet the new Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes and contribute to the district's goals -- increasing course rigor and helping students earn a meaningful diploma. After many months of thoughtful consideration, the district determined that the **Career Choices** curriculum would best meet the needs of its students and faculty.

Relying on Professional Development

Academic Innovations, publisher of **Career Choices**, worked quickly to assess the district's specific needs and tailored lesson plans to meet their various class structures of the Keystone course. Meanwhile, Dr. Dedmond met with school principals and district decision-makers to give them strategies for recruiting the best teachers for the course, impressing upon them the importance of assigning a lead teacher at each high school who would commit a minimum of four years to the project. She also provided an overview of the chosen curriculum.

Duval then contracted with Academic Innovations to deliver a comprehensive implementation effort. This included a two-day **Career Choices** training for more than 80 teachers and two additional one-day trainings for 50 more teachers over the summer. Certified **Career Choices** Trainer, Wendy Bingham, used these training sessions to provide the Keystone teachers with a thorough "walk-thru" of **Career Choices**, giving them valuable hands-on experience with the materials they would be implementing when school commenced.

Duval also contracted for follow-up on-site technical assistance, and this began in September once classes were underway. During the first on-site visit, teachers reported that students seem genuinely excited about planning for their futures. In a post-implementation survey, one teacher reported, *"Most of my students are able to make the connection between this course, everyday life, and their other subjects. It is very encouraging to see that about 98% of them have already decided on a career [path] and are putting a plan together to*

achieve their goals..."

Another teacher commented, "The students are now starting to see the 'big picture.' Several have said to me that they now understand what the class is about and see how it's fitting together with who they are."

Plans for Assessment and Technology Integration

Monitoring student progress is important to everyone involved with the course. In fact, the district is exploring having the Freshman Transition Initiative of The George Washington University assess the effectiveness of the course using pre- and post-surveys. Taken at the beginning and end of the class, these surveys will measure students' attitudes about their commitment to education/training and career planning. This data will be very valuable: to district administrators as they identify the strategies that work and to Keystone teachers as they assess the needs of each student.

Finally, Duval County is working to provide students with access to technology that will allow them to easily store, update and save -- throughout their high school years -- the work and data related to the development of their 10-year plans. Using the **Career Choices** online portfolio tool, www.my10yearplan.com, teachers, counselors, parents and administrators will be better equipped to mentor students on their best educational path and provide tutoring and support when academic effort doesn't match lifestyle aspirations. With immediate access online, advisory and counseling efforts will reach a new plateau.

Duval County has gone to great lengths to build a successful program, offering a vision of what is possible to other districts around the country.

For more information about the Freshman Transition Initiative and to join their listserv, visit <http://www.freshmantransition.com/> or contact Dr. Dedmond at rdedmond@gwu.edu.