HISD Grad Lab for Credit Recovery

As a part of HISD Superintendent of Schools Terry B. Grier's focus on lowering the current dropout rate of 18.7 percent (Class of 2008) and increasing the district's completion rate of 80.6 percent (Class of 2008), credit-recovery labs and graduation coaches have been placed in every HISD high school. Already, 2,500 students have taken advantage of the new program, and the number climbs every day. Students can take failed courses online beginning at a proficiency level determined by testing on the subject. The graduation coaches help students with the courses, which are designed to "catch them up" for graduation.

1. In January 2010, all HISD high schools began offering a new alternative for students who have dropped out of high school or are in need of credit recovery. The new strategy is designed to reach not only those who have already dropped out but also those students who are at risk of dropping out.

2. Called "Grad Lab" by the students who are in it, the program works for students who have failed three or more courses in a previous semester, students with excessive absences, students at any grade level who have been retained while in high school, and those who have dropped out and want to return to school.

3. Dr. Grier spearheaded the initiative after seeing enormous success with similar programs he implemented in Greensboro, North Carolina, and in San Diego.

4. HISD's dropout rate is currently 18.7 percent. One of Dr. Grier's main priorities for HISD is to increase the graduation rate and lower the dropout rate.

5. Students enrolled in the program have access to a variety of online courses that can be completed at the school's "Grad Lab" and can complete work at home.

6. The $6-million, centrally funded initiative provides computer labs with special software at 46 school campuses (including 19 charter and contract schools) as well as graduation coaches at each of HISD's 27 comprehensive high schools.

7. The digital curriculum called APEX tests each student's knowledge in certain areas and provides coaches with specific information on what each student already knows and what he or she needs to focus on in order to pass a class or recover a credit.

8. Students don't start at the very beginning of a subject; instead they focus on their weaknesses and what they don't know through a series of online assignments. When the computer program and graduation coach determine a student is ready and likely to receive a passing grade, the student then takes a final exam. Exams are taken during school hours with a graduation coach present.

9. Graduation coaches monitor student progress in a subject through a series of quizzes and are sent regular updates and e-mails on how long each student is spending on assignments. Progress e-mails are also sent to the student and the student's parents or other advocates if desired.

10. Selecting the 27 graduation coaches was a rigorous process. They had to have a special blend of tough love and a willingness to devote themselves to these children 24/7. They act not only as teachers but also as mentors, counselors, and social workers. They also work to identify students at risk of dropping out and to get them enrolled in the program.

11. Students are already giving the program rave reviews because they say they can work at their own pace and are given more freedom and responsibility. They also love using the computers and say they can often relate to the computer better than to a teacher lecturing in front of a class. Plus, they can rewatch or rewind something if they don't understand or missed what was said.

12. Many students in the program have already received credit or multiple credits for courses they have completed since the program started a little over a month ago. Each course takes on average about 40 to 45 hours to complete.