

Jefferson Davis High School

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Principal: Jaime Castaneda

Houston's Jefferson Davis High School, also featured in the Helping Students Navigate the Path to College topic, serves nearly 1,600 ninth- through twelfth-grade students. Once referred to as a "dropout factory," Davis has seen the dropout rate decrease from 18% in 2006 to just 3.4% in 2010, the lowest dropout rate in all of Houston Independent School District. This results from focused efforts to support students' progress toward graduation, readying them for postsecondary opportunities. At Davis, it's a priority to build a sense of community and belonging, developing strong relationships between staff and students. The school also engages multiple strategies to help ensure all students are accounted for and prepared to complete high school:

- ◆ High (9-12)
- ◆ 89% Hispanic
- ◆ 10% Black
- ◆ 1% White
- ◆ 92% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 12% English Language Learners
- ◆ 15% Special Education

- Using data to identify at-risk students,
- Providing a range of social-emotional and academic support programs, and
- Implementing programs for dropout recovery.

Keeping Students on Track

Staff at Davis continually monitor and share data on student progress so they can support students when needed, not when it is too late. Examining middle school data helps staff members ensure that incoming ninth graders are on track for graduation and postsecondary education. This review of standardized assessments, course grades, and attendance and discipline data allows teachers to discuss appropriate course placements before students enter ninth grade. Once the school year begins, teachers hold weekly meetings to discuss student data on behavior, attendance, interventions, class test scores, and course progress. Using these data, teachers and administrators can make decisions about academic support programs, family support, tutoring, credit recovery options, and course placement changes.

If a student is not on track for graduation, staff members work to determine the root causes of the problem. Teachers meet with each other and the student's parents to discuss what kind of support is needed. The school offers three primary academic support programs:

- GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) focuses on students most at risk of dropping out and offers academic workshops and family support.

- Project GRAD provides enrichment classes, helps with the college and financial aid application processes, and offers scholarship incentives.
- CIS (Communities in Schools) focuses on dropout recovery and provides support and incentives to keep students in school once they return. A crisis team from CIS offers counseling and emotional support as a way to minimize the impact barriers to graduation such as homelessness, domestic violence, mental illness, and teen pregnancy.

In addition, Davis has set up a “Mod Squad”—a team of successful twelfth-grade students—to visit ninth-grade classes and provide extra support to struggling students.

Providing Supportive Relationships

Programs at Davis are carefully designed to make all students feel valued as part of the school community and realize a compassionate adult is always looking out for them. More than 90% of Davis faculty are involved in the Ninth-Grade Mentoring Program, which specifically targets the transition into high school and ensures that at-risk students have strong connections with adults who serve as advocates for them. To build a trusting relationship, mentor teachers make time to meet informally with students during or outside school hours to discuss the student’s schedule, academic progress, sports and other activities, personal or family matters, or anything else the student wants to talk about. In addition, mentors receive text message alerts if a student’s grades drop or if a student is absent from class; this enables mentors to support the student immediately.

The Dropout Recovery Intervention Planning (DRIP) team—consisting of the principal, assistant principal, counselors, dropout specialist, graduation coach, truancy officer, parents, and assistants of administrators—helps students reenter school after dropping out and tracks them closely to ensure they get on track for graduation. The team monitors student attendance, supervises credit recovery progress, and supports the social aspects of getting back into the school routine. Members of the DRIP team also meet to discuss students’ records and attendance to determine which students need immediate support. As part of the DRIP team’s individualized support, team members may visit students at their houses before or after the school day, over the weekend, or during summer break.

Staff members at Davis also work closely with families to keep students in school or recover students who have already dropped out. In addition to initiating home visits when extra support is needed, staff encourage parents to participate in school events, such as Parent Night—where they can meet their child’s teachers—and parent meetings focused on GED skills, language improvement, or the college application process.

Providing Safety Nets

Davis also has programs that can help reorient at-risk students toward graduation. For example, to help with the DRIP team’s efforts to keep students on track, the school offers programs for rapid credit recovery. The graduation coach, a key member of the DRIP team who serves as a resource for both students at risk of dropping out and those who have returned to school, oversees the Graduate Lab. Through the Lab, students can

participate in PLATO and Apex, two self-paced online credit recovery programs accessible from the Graduate Lab, home, school, a library, or anywhere with Internet access.

Davis's graduation coach believes that the school's success stems from high expectations held by all. When students meet these expectations, Davis makes sure that students are recognized: The school held a pep rally for the soccer team that did well in a regional match, honored a student in the Culinary Arts program who won the dessert round of a cooking competition, and presented varsity letter jackets to students who achieved good grades. No achievement is too small to be celebrated at Davis.

Conclusion

Jefferson Davis High School continually examines data to determine the areas in which students need support, provides that support, and offers supportive adult relationships along the way. Taken together, these components at Davis create a close-knit community and atmosphere that help students succeed and keep them on track toward graduation and postsecondary education. As a result, the school has raised its graduation rate dramatically and provided students with a greater level of preparation to succeed in their postsecondary ventures.