

## **Advancing Student Success, One Connection at a Time**

### Indio High School reverses poor academic track record with a Freshman Transition course and a focus on personal relationships

Two years ago, academic and behavioral problems threatened the very future of Indio High School.

One year later, the school had achieved remarkable improvement in decreasing absences, suspensions, and expulsions while simultaneously increasing participation in AP (Advanced Placement) classes and CSF (the California Scholarship Federation). Most incredibly, students were exhibiting impressive insight and maturity in their decision-making and dedication to their studies.

What had changed?

After uncovering the extent to which students' problems originated in their first year of high school, Indio decided to implement a freshman transition course called Success 101 using the *Career Choices* curriculum. The program aims to guide students as they develop a high level of self-knowledge, as well as a more accurate understanding of life and work, so that they can choose an appropriate career and develop a 10-year plan to obtain that career.

"Success 101 is all about making relationships, all about making connections, all about setting students on a path to their next journey," says Indio High School Assistant Principal Margo McCormick. "It's giving them direction, it's giving them purpose, it's giving them ideas, and actually enabling them to make those choices and take them to the next step."

### **The Greatest Responsibility for the Strongest Teachers**

Indio's philosophy centers on facilitating connections between students, the staff, and the school so that all students have at least one individual engaging them in school and therefore keeping them on track to fulfill their potential for success in life. Since Success 101 relies heavily on teachers to form relationships with students, the administration took the teacher selection process especially seriously. They credit a large part of the program's success to the strength of its teachers.

"Through the process of finding your best teachers (because it's all about best teachers), you have to find those teachers who are enthusiastic, engaging, positive, who really make that connection," says McCormick.

Success 101 has such a unique capacity to connect with students because the topic they are learning about is themselves. Students eagerly take ownership of the work they do in the class, the content of which eventually inspires them to assume responsibility for the rest of their academic classes and for their lives' directions. Along the way, the class catalyzes thoughtful discussions about life-defining questions and fosters meaningful relationships among the students and teachers.

"I think the difference is that they're *allowed* to have this discussion, they're allowed to have this dialogue, and they can have a place where they can feel safe," McCormick says. "When you have the right person who's leading that and working with the students in a partnership, there's nothing that's off-limits. And that's a good

thing, because through that you have a lot of growth in other areas. This program allows for that dialogue, so long as you find that right person that can hook them with their heart.”

Above all, the Indio staff remain determined not to give up on a single student. They continually work to create a multitude of opportunities for a variety of staff, ranging from the principal’s secretary to the dean, as well as older students to mentor and connect with even the most resistant incoming freshmen in hopes that at least one attempt will be successful.

“I think that every student has something that they have to offer,” McCormick says. “Every student has some gift, some talent, that they’re going to offer, and you just don’t know when it will be.”

### **Professional Development and Support**

Academic Innovations was on hand to provide professional development and support for all Indio staff. Indio administration and other staff members had collectively attended the Freshman Transition Leadership Institute, a Two-Day Implementation workshop, and the annual Focus on Freshman conference before introducing the course in the fall, but Academic Innovations additionally conducted an onsite workshop to train the entire staff.

“It’s important that, if you’re going to provide this program for freshmen, you remember that everyone is a part of these freshmen being successful,” McCormick says. “Teachers, custodians, support staff—everybody is important.”

The school-wide training, in particular, played a crucial role in cultivating widespread faculty support for the program while simultaneously improving the quality of the students’ experience. Indio administration called on Academic Innovations to train all staff on the premise of the program and how to utilize a student’s online 10-year plan to guide and motivate that student. The training made an enormous difference in generating enthusiasm for the course among staff members that were not involved with planning or teaching it.

Indio High maintained its teachers’ energy for the program by supporting them in any way possible.

“If you want to build relationships with the students, you have to build relationships with the staff,” McCormick says, “so you need to be there, you need to be supportive any way you can. You have to make the connection, you have to build the relationship. It’s especially important because they’re the ones that are going to carry the entire program and what the program’s outcome is depends on how well they make the connection.”

Academic Innovations technical support was also consistently available to provide advice, sample lesson plans, and check in periodically throughout the year.

“We could call and have our questions in a flash and sometimes we’d have four or five people answering our questions,” McCormick says. “In terms of personal connections or relationships, it was amazing. They exactly walked the same road that *Career Choices* walks; it’s all about the relationship.”

### **Data and Results**

The Indio administration prioritizes collecting data and monitoring any effort that is undertaken to improve student performance. If specified results have not been achieved after a designated amount of time, strategies should be revised. Alternatively, metrics indicating that improvement has been achieved provide an incentive to continue.

“Have that follow-through four to five years down the road so you can see the growth, see the change, and track it,” says Sandra Lopez, formerly both the curriculum coach and the lead teacher of Success 101 at Indio High. “We’re all about data now in schools, so you want to show how it has helped and made changes for the students.”

After just one year, Indio students showed dramatic improvement in their academics and their behavior. Suspensions for the entire school were down by 80 percent, and while freshmen still made up nearly half of those suspensions, freshman expulsions decreased by two thirds. Absences among freshmen declined, as well, and the number of freshmen with three or more Fs decreased by nearly a half. The school has also enjoyed tremendous academic growth and witnessed a huge increase in participation in AP exams from about 200 participants to 800. By the time the first class of students progressed to the tenth grade, 70 students had joined CSF versus 10 students in the previous class.

As a result of the administration’s dedication to transforming the quality of their school’s education and the willingness of the staff to adopt a personalized approach toward teaching, Indio High School has succeeded in implementing a system that has the potential to make a real difference in its students’ lives.

“Just seeing students in different places, they’re mature, focused, they have a sense of direction, they have a plan,” says McCormick of the students she’s worked with before, during, and after taking Success 101. “Those are the things they’ll carry with them. They’ll remember that connection you made with them.”