

Union High: How a Big School Makes Learning Personal

By Tom Vander Ark — March 19, 2018

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South of Tulsa are a couple high functioning one high school districts. Rapid growth and community interest in competitive sports resulted in super-sized high schools.

In some districts, big schools mean some young people, especially those that haven't been well served or supported, to feel disconnected and fall through the cracks. Superintendent Kirt Hartzler explains that Union High School bucks the trend with a commitment to 100% graduation and college and career readiness for all students. Union's graduation rate has gone up despite a dramatic increase in the number of students living in or near poverty and some of the lowest school funding in the country.

On a recent visit Associate Superintendent, Kathy Dodd outlined ten strategies that contribute to the remarkable success under challenging circumstances.

1. **Clear focus.** The Union Public Schools leadership team is laser-focused on 100% graduation with college and career readiness. Many districts talk about a commitment to equity and excellence but it was clear from a visit and discussions with a dozen alumni that the commitment is real. They have a well-articulated strategy with just a few priorities. Their persistence is paying off, however, as they have a four-year average graduation rate of 90%--a number that does not include those who they coach to graduate one, two, or three years beyond their target graduation date.
2. **Community schools.** Union takes community engagement and partnerships seriously. Elementary schools have health clinics and links to community agencies.

The Community Schools concept is supported by a regional collaborative that promotes early learning, mental and physical health, youth development, and lifelong learning. This highly effective model, which capitalizes on community services that are co-located in school buildings, has resulted in increased attendance, reduced mobility and improved academic success.

3. Early childhood learning. Like other districts in metro Tulsa, early learning and care is a priority in Union. The Rosa Parks Early Childhood Education Center is part of the CAP Tulsa network which combines high-quality early childhood education with innovative family services and resources. The two-generation approach “aims not only to prepare young children for future success in school, but also to help their parents succeed through programs designed to increase parenting skills, employability and earning potential.”

4. Supportive environments. As the district grew to almost 16,000 students the community wanted to retain a single high school. As a result, the administration has iterated over the years with facilities and configurations. There is a 6th/7th Grade Center, 8th Grade Center, 9th Grade Center and Union High School, as well as an Alternative School and virtual learning opportunities.

While that’s a lot of transitions, the Union team has worked hard to make each program safe and supportive while maximizing participation in extracurricular activities. By “looping” counselors and administrators with grade level cohorts, students remain paired with their principals and counselors for grades 6/7, 8/9, and 10-12.

5. Guidance. The College and Career Center operates in a new building that looks like a college campus (below). The staff provides career awareness, internship coordination, and college planning services. Union Career Connect is a series of industry partnership that provides work experiences and industry certification opportunities. Union also has a strong relationship with Tulsa Technology Center, part of the statewide CareerTech system.



6. College credit opportunities. In addition to AP and dual enrollment opportunities, Union launched Collegiate Academy, an early college high school where students can earn an associate's degree while in high school. Union is committed to creating more first-generation college students, and the pilot program is expected to serve as a model for how early college programs will be implemented in Oklahoma.

7. Online learning. Union Virtual Learning Academy offers online courses (in partnership with Florida Virtual) to expand options to electives, languages and career courses. Students attend onsite classes weekly to ensure academic success. Over 900 students take advantage of online courses.

8. STEM. Union offers extensive STEM courses and pathways. With over 10,000 students in Project Lead the Way (PLTW) STEM courses, Union was recognized by PLTW as a distinguished district for their inclusive, "STEM for All" philosophy which removes gatekeepers to student participation in biomedical, engineering, and computer science courses.

9. Facilities. Oklahoma districts struggle with low levels of operating funds but Union garners strong local support for high quality facilities that inspire and support learning and current technology.

10. Culture. The most important aspect of Union success is the culture. They live by Deming's quote, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." It's the glue that holds all their efforts together. It's what graduates talk about. Union's legacy of excellence is based on the motto "Together We Make a Difference" and they put it into practice for every student.

The photo above was taken by Tom Vander Ark.

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