



## Clearinghouse tracks former students in college

School districts increasingly are being held accountable for ensuring that students are prepared for college and success in life. The National Student Clearinghouse provides a reliable, affordable way to determine if they are succeeding.

StudentTracker for High Schools lets school officials know whether high school graduates have gone to college and where, whether they graduated and what degrees they earned, said Jerry Smith and Joe Roof, regional directors of the clearinghouse at a conference workshop.

The clearinghouse's database has information on more than 3,100 postsecondary institutions, representing 91 percent of the currently enrolled students in the nation.

Participating institutions have authorized the clearinghouse to provide the information to high schools and school districts to help secondary educators improve their college preparedness efforts.

## Teachers get help with national certification

Madison City Schools in Alabama has taken steps to improve student achievement by creating incentives for teachers to become nationally certified, said Superintendent Dee Fowler at a conference workshop.

The Madison school district had just 10 teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) three years ago. It now has 27, and several others are applying this year.

The district offers the HOPE Award (Honoring Outstanding Performance and Excellence), which provides a \$1,000 bonus to teachers who address two of these five standards: content knowledge, teaching and learning, literacy, diversity, and professionalism. These standards correlate with the NBPTS requirements, so teachers who compete for this award are already started on the path to national certification.

For each standard they select, teachers must write a reflective essay and choose among several other activities, such as keeping a journal, cre-

ating lesson plans, or producing a video.

The district presents HOPE Awards to up to 25 teachers a year. These master teachers are recognized on Institute Day, when they are invited to a luncheon or reception with the school board.

By competing for a HOPE Award, teachers are taking "baby steps" toward national certification, which is a much more rigorous and lengthy process, Fowler said. Once teachers have seen how improving their skills leads to solid results with students, they are more likely to seek NBPTS certification.

## 'Parent chats' build support for local schools

Good communications should be less like a "one-night stand," as it is carried out in many districts, and more like a "healthy marriage," where there is frequent dialogue and communication is a "natural and ongoing process," said Paul Vranish, superintendent of the Tornillo, Texas, Independent School District.

At a conference workshop, Vranish and his colleagues described Tornillo's monthly Parent Chats—or *Charla con los Padres*—to keep the lines of communication open and build community support.

Parents are invited to the events through letters sent to their homes, flyers posted throughout the community, and recorded phone messages in English and Spanish. About 150 to 200 parents usually attend.

Parents are encouraged to come early and have dinner at the high school. Giving parents a night off from cooking is an added incentive, and the cafeteria staff appreciate the chance to earn extra pay, Vranish said. Supervised care, along with snacks and games, are provided for young children.

The meetings include a student musical performance, and students sometimes receive recognition for academic achievement. Previous meetings have included a presentation by architects who are planning a new high school, a slide show of a student field trip, and a discussion of the district's academic status.

Regardless of the topic, "the question-and-answer dialogue with the audience is absolutely crucial to the continued success

of the Chat program," Vranish said.

To further educate parents and promote family involvement, district officials give participants a test—often covering material from a previous chat—and award cash prizes to those with the highest scores.

To show how effective the chats are, Vranish cited the passage of a \$5 million school bond with an 82 percent margin, even though the wording on the ballot measure didn't mention it was for schools.

## Yearlong activities support families and schools

The Washoe County, Nev., school system, offers a year-long calendar of family involvement activities designed to encourage positive parent-child interactions and promote active, healthy lifestyles.

One goal of the Tune In to Kids initiative is to reduce the amount of time children spend watching TV and playing video games. Currently, kids use "screen media" approximately 44 hours a week and spend only one hour a week engaging in meaningful conversation with their parents, board member Jody Ruggiero said at a conference workshop.

The program, targeted to children in prekindergarten through the eighth grade and their families, attempts to change children's habits by teaching media literacy and provide alternative, fun activities families can do together.

The program includes a large annual fair in a local park, put together by the district with help from dozens of organizations and businesses.

Activities during the current school year included a family dinner in September, a winter fun fair to mark "screen-free day" in November, classroom reading contests, and a parent discussion on "raising kids in the Internet age."

## NASA resources support teachers and students

More than 90 members of NSBA's Technology Learning Network learned about NASA's educational resources on a trip to the Kennedy Space Center during the conference.

While the tour included the launch pad and vehicle assembly buildings, the school leaders



Teachers perfect a science project at the Kennedy Space Center Educator Resource Center.

concentrated on NASA programs aimed at enhancing math and science education.

They learned about the space station's digital learning network that allows up to five K-12 schools to simultaneously participate in online, hands-on workshops. Learning modules cover such space-related topics as force and motion and how being in space affects an astronaut's body.

Also on the tour was NASA's Educator Resource Center, which provides professional development for K-12 teachers on-site and at remote locations. It offers workshops on such topics as the history of flight, the principles of rocketry, and living and working in space.

Center staff help teachers gather ideas and do research so they can create their own lesson plans. Teachers can take advantage of a wide range of educational materials on astronomy, life sciences, physical sciences, the environment, mathematics, energy, careers in aerospace, and other topics.

The space center's Exploration Station offers hands-on learning activities for student groups.

## School board has plan for handling public requests

School board members generally want to provide a quick, appropriate response to constituents' questions, but they can risk crossing the line into the district administration if they don't respond properly.

To avoid such concerns, the Duval County, Fla., school board and superintendent put into place a system for tracking and responding to constituent inquiries.

Staff members often are unsure how to react when a board

member contacts them about a request from a constituent. "By establishing a system to handle all of these calls through one central location, it takes away the impression that staff is being asked to do something against policy," said board secretary Bonnie Susan Cole.

A central system also avoids the situation where a parent might call all of the board members individually about a problem, and each board member follows up with staff.

Duval County's system includes a protocol for handling constituent requests for information or assistance; a primary contact person in the board office who refers constituent requests to the superintendent's office as directed by the board member; an information management system for storing, tracking, categorizing, and analyzing requests; and a feedback system so board members know how requests were resolved.

Board members also receive periodic reports on improvements in the district that were made as a result of constituent requests. ■