

Texas initiative helps high school dropouts get diplomas

By Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA) — More high school dropouts are returning to school and obtaining their diplomas, thanks to a Texas Education Agency program.

The program encourages high schools to use computer-delivered curriculum to help the former students learn through individualized instruction.

"It's about meeting them where they are," said Anita Givens, senior director for the technology division at the Texas Education Agency in Austin.

As the agency's liaison to the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund, Givens has seen grants go to dozens of Texas school districts for technology-based curriculum.

The fund comes from a special tax collected on monthly telephone bills and helps build the communications backbone for computers throughout Texas.

She estimated that statewide more than 100 districts

help former dropouts recover their high school credits and graduate with a diploma. Most districts are doing so with a technology-based curriculum bought with money from the telecommunications fund.

Givens estimated that there are about 20 to 25 software programs on the market that offer high school classes aligned with the state's curriculum requirements.

"And when there's a successful one, word travels fast among the districts," she said.

Hutchins Academic, the alternative high school for the Wilmer-Hutchins Independent School District, purchased one such program late last year.

A recipient of about \$25,000 in state grants and district matching funds, Hutchins Academic purchased new computers, interactive software platform and the curriculum.

The school's reconfigured credit recovery program, called Reconnect, took off this spring. About 35 students have already returned to

Hutchins Academic to finish their high school education. "It's not a GED program," said Robel Robinson, principal. "Out in the working world, [former students] see the need for a high school diploma."

Givens agreed. "In many circles, the GED has a stigma attached to it," she said. "The diploma is a prized possession. Students want to be able to say, 'I graduated from that high school.'"

Most Reconnect students need more help than the computer software suggests to complete their courses. Like many dropouts, most of them left school the first time because of family needs or to go to work. But, except for a few, all of the students were failing school when they dropped out, Robinson said.

"If they come back, we don't want them to become discouraged again," he said.

The software allows Christopher Heath, the school's technology leader, to monitor student progress from his own computer. If he

notices a student struggling with a problem, he can send an instructional note to help.

"Or the science or math teacher can be brought on to view and monitor," Heath said. The regular faculty are linked through their classroom computer to the computers the Reconnect students use. The faculty can send helpful instructional notes without having to leave the students in their regular classroom.

Robinson said that Hutchins staff has stayed late to provide one-on-one instruction that Reconnect students need. Sometimes, that help has included learning to read.

"If someone got to the 11th grade and they still can't read, the system failed them," he said. That student didn't fail.

Nearly all the 35 students in Reconnect are men. The average age is 19, and Hutchins Academic imposes no age limit. Robinson said only one student has dropped out of Reconnect so far, the rest are recovering their cred-

its and on their way to graduation. One 26-year-old woman graduated this spring.

Robinson said he counts success in other ways, too. As the alternative school, Hutchins Academic has experienced staff who can recognize if a student is using Reconnect to avoid real-life responsibilities.

"We demand accountability and responsibility," he said. "We do it without humiliation. After we get them back on track, then we step back."

The success of Reconnect comes when a student views himself or herself as a success, he said.

"Through independent study, they learn responsibility. If they're sitting with the language arts teacher going through [the assignment] word by word, they can't fake it," he said.

Givens said that although every high school's mission seeks to educate every student, securing the diploma—no matter how long it takes—is the ultimate goal and what counts in the school's rank-

ing. Rankings for high schools sink when dropout rates are high.

"Each success ends up in their 'plus' column," she said.

Robinson said that for Hutchins Academic, Reconnect is not a means to an end itself, however. In other words, graduating with a high school diploma is not the end goal, but a means to greater goals.

"We ask the students, 'what are you going to do when you finish?'" he said. "Because if they can't visualize it, if they can't understand part two, they need help with that, too."

Hutchins Academic understands the financial demand of the next step, whether it is vocational school, junior college or a four-year university education. The school district backs any Reconnect student's higher education goals with scholarships.

"And we've got that in writing," Robinson said.

Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe writes for the Dallas Examiner.

Clingman

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the MATAH Network? You are buying the same products from someone anyway, and using them in your homes everyday. Switch. Buy some Grenada Nutmeg Oil from MATAH, and start relieving pain externally rather than popping so many pills and destroying your kidneys and liver. Switch.

That e-mail I cited went on to say, "This effort in support of Danny is a reminder that in a society that professes democratic values, we all have a right, and in fact a responsibility, to express our views and be heard." That is so right, and that's exactly what I am doing. I have a responsibility to my people not only to talk about economic freedom but also to show how it is obtained. That's the real victory we should be seeking; and the latest melodrama featuring MCI will not take us there.

Another victory for Black folks? I don't think so.

It's just another in a long and exasperating line of shortsighted solutions to long-term problems. Danny Glover, of whom I am a big fan and admirer, will be just fine. He will continue to speak out on relevant issues regardless of what MCI or anyone else does; he's a man, a Black man, and he is not afraid to stand up for that. We can ill afford to allow the threat of a Joe Scarborough and a resulting capitulation by MCI to get us off track and make us think we have a victory.

This is a money issue; let's deal with it with our money. Switch. Then we will see the real victory.

James E. Clingman is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati's African-American Studies dept.

Slavery

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quire companies in business with the city to sign an affidavit stating whether firms or their predecessors ever profited from slavery. If a company finds any such records, it would be required to disclose them.

"This is another step for the healing that needs to occur in this country," said Los Angeles NAACP President Geraldine Washington. "Slavery, in this country, was one of the most vicious acts perpetrated against our people. Many of the problems that we have today have been generated by the effects of slavery."

Councilman Bernard Parks agreed with Washington.

"People are debating whether there was full recovery from slavery," he said. "[The African-American] community may never overcome the bondage of slavery."

The Los Angeles ordinance is the second effort in California to uncover links to slavery-era profits. In 2000, the state passed a law requiring insurance companies to disclose whether they sold policies on slaves. Since then, eight companies have reported they had such policies and provided the names of 614 insured slaves.

"It's the respect," said Opal Young, a member of the Reparation United Front. "That's the biggest thing—respect, our due respect."



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