

UASSP Administrative Spotlight - Valley High School

In the past five years, Valley High school has experienced some turbulence. In the 2018-2019 school year, our school was placed in CSI Turnaround status due to low graduation rates. This was followed by the pandemic and all of the issues Covid forced educators and educational institutions to address. Being in Turnaround status placed us on a three-year plan of reflection and self-improvement. Covid made us (like all of you) figure out how to do “business” differently. In both cases, addressing school culture became a must.

As an administrative team, we strive to maintain a school culture that empowers all within our walls and helps each individual find happiness, success, and fulfillment. At Valley High, voices matter. We strive to create an environment where all employee and student voices are heard. Our school culture invites discussion, reflection, creativity, and innovation that is centered on meeting our student’s individual needs. Valley High’s culture is rooted in communication/outreach, flexibility, and balancing compassion with high expectations. The tangible results of our commitment to the culture we term, “The Valley Way,” have been a source of inspiration and celebration, as we have seen a 25% increase in our graduation rates over the past four years.

Philosophy & Beliefs

As an alternative high school, we have held a longstanding belief that graduation rates are central to our school’s overall success; however, we also believe there are other facets, such as developing the habits of grit, fortitude, accountability, and developing life and social skills that will help students become productive members of society.

The faculty and staff of Valley High School recognize that each student who enters the school is an individual with a name, a family, unique abilities, personal desires, and specific needs. By treating each student individually with respect and nourishing their creativity, Valley High School is a haven and a non-threatening atmosphere for learning of nontraditional students. The rules and policies of Valley High School are designed to build student responsibility by making students accountable for their attendance, work, and actions, ultimately taking charge of their learning. As a result, the focus at Valley High School is on education and student success rather than on extracurricular activities.

Although Valley High is an alternative high school, staff and faculty make a concerted effort to ensure equality and equity in all services rendered. Valley’s staff maintains a high level of expectations related to a rigorous curriculum. Valley’s staff recognizes that students have diverse learning styles and aspirations and therefore allocates appropriate time to familiarize ourselves with students and their strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, we are better able to customize individual instructions to meet the needs of each of our students.

The Schedule

An essential ingredient in helping students be successful at Valley is the freedom from the rigidity of the typical high school class schedule. Valley offers classes Monday through

Thursday from 9:00 a.m. until 6:30 p.m. Some students might choose to have classes in the morning, while others prefer attending the afternoon session.

The typical Valley student has experienced school-related and/or personal problems to the extent that he or she is behind in graduation credits, especially in core subjects such as English, social studies, math, and science. Therefore, the class schedule emphasizes core classes so students can catch up and get back online for on-time graduation. More importantly, it allows teachers to stress essential learning critical to the student's successful functioning once out of school. The emphasis on core classes means that Valley offers few elective courses. However, Valley students can earn elective credit through a work release program, through participation in service learning, by taking additional core classes, or by participating in Friday Activities for elective credit.

Since most Valley students are credit-deficient, counselors meet with all students quarterly to review their graduation status and make needed schedule modifications. New students are added quarterly, so teachers must integrate new students into ongoing classes. The school tries to accept all referred students, but each class size is limited to no more than twenty students.

Attendance and Outreach

It is common for students referred to Valley to have experienced severe attendance problems at their boundary high schools. Students have much more schedule flexibility at Valley than at a traditional school, and regular class attendance at Valley is always emphasized. Students are allowed only two absences in a grading period. Students are encouraged to communicate with the school when they know they'll be absent. The first absence initiates a process known as "outreach." When students miss class for the first time, they are expected to email or call each teacher they have that day, much as they would with a job. If the teacher does not hear from the student, they email the students and parents, so they will know a class was missed. On the second absence, even if the student emails as required, the teacher notifies the parents (usually by email.) A third absence results in the student's grade being changed to an I. A fourth absence then results in the student receiving an NC (No credit). The administration can excuse an absence for illness or emergency if documentation is provided. Students who receive an NC from too many classes run the risk of being dropped or placed in our Continual Program (CP). Students must pass at least four academic courses to remain enrolled. Students placed in CP can earn the opportunity to return to the regular program by completing academic work and hours during a given quarter. If they do not complete those requirements, they may be entirely dropped from Valley.

The direct follow-up provided by the outreach process is one of the cornerstones of the Valley program. At Valley, a significant amount of teachers' and counselors' time is spent on maintaining regular contact, monitoring progress, and building trust with students, many of whom view school as aversive based on their negative performance histories.

When students enter Valley, they find that the emphasis is on taking personal responsibility for their education. Students who make up their minds to attend regularly, follow basic expectations, put a reasonable effort into class work, and communicate honestly with their teachers and counselors, will find a school that is responsive to their individual needs, is nonjudgmental, and is dedicated to their academic and personal achievement.