

To: Board of Education
Dr. Gary C. Niehaus, Superintendent

From: Dr. Dawn Green, Director of Secondary Education

Date: May 12, 2008

Re: Good News – Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA) Grant

Despite effective school reforms over the past 20 years, achievement gaps still exist, especially for minority and low-income students. These students have few role models for attendance at post-secondary institutions, work, and careers. It is a role that has been placed upon the local districts to not just prepare students for their future, but also instill a vision as well as hopes and dreams for their future. These same students have never seen a college campus. They do not understand the connection between secondary success and admittance to post-secondary education. The opportunity to succeed financially and contribute to the community seems beyond their reach. Society's goal of ending poverty begins and ends with education. It is imperative to create and put in place a support system to prepare first-generation and underrepresented college attendees.

It is for these reasons that Unit 5 has collaborated with Illinois State University on a project specifically geared towards these students. This three-year project (now completing its second year) has three goals: (1) to expand a successful college readiness program for non-traditional students at the high school level through a variety of programs and interventions; (2) to adapt and replicate the Unit 5 model in other school districts with similar demographics, in order to establish college preparation programs in conjunction with higher-education partners and to develop a replication "toolkit" for use by other districts in the state; and (3) to provide the state with research and data analysis to inform policy-making related to effective college preparation.

Unit 5's Post-Secondary Coach, Kathy Smalley, helps our students in the following ways: (1) advocating for students by working with teachers to assure appropriate help and encourages upward placement in high school courses; (2) arranging for tutors for academic coaching and mentors for social networking and role modeling; (3) monitoring student's progress by tracking academics, logging contacts, following up on college applications and financial aid, surveying the student's post-secondary plans, and keeps in touch with them after graduation to offer support and guidance; (4) providing college information & experiences through college visits, college contacts, alumni interaction, financial aid information, and application assistance; (5) communicating with and educating parents through informal meetings, home visits, and one-on-one meetings; (6) creating supportive adult and peer networks by a case manager approach, sharing goals, providing bridges to college personnel, "Scholars' clubs", and positive feedback.

While it may take a few more years to see the results of this program, we are encouraged by the level of involvement of the counselors, the parents, and the students. As the program continues to unfold and refine, we expect the numbers of students involved in the program to grow as well.