

DUNDALK: Dropout focus - *The Dundalk Eagle*

Wednesday, 20 January 2010 15:18



John Murray, CEO of AdvancePath Academics, talks about how his company's program helps at-risk students graduate on time while Baltimore County Public Schools Superintendent Joe A. Hairston listens. *photo by Bill Gates*

by Bill Gates

Dundalk High School student Megan Elliott admits she put herself in the position of needing the resources of the new Advance-Path Academy in order to graduate on time.

"I had trouble in school, slacked off a little bit and got behind," Elliott said. "I decided to take up this program so I could graduate this spring with the rest of my class."

The AdvancePath Academy, a dropout prevention and recovery program, started this month at Dundalk High.

It was introduced last week during a meeting at the school that featured Baltimore County Superintendent of Schools Joe A. Hairston and John Murray, chief executive officer of AdvancePath Academics.

It is the second such program started in the county, after Chesapeake High in 2008.

"The program added 50 graduates to Chesapeake last year," said Dale Rauenzahn, executive director of student support services for Baltimore County Public Schools.

"Those students wouldn't have made it without the program," he said at the Jan. 13 event. "That's 50 dropouts who were able to graduate."

A high dropout rate was the main reason Dundalk High failed to meet federally mandated adequate yearly progress (AYP) five years in a row, leading to the school's restructuring that began last year.

"They had a need for this program, that's obvious here at Dundalk," Rauenzahn said.

Even more so, said Dundalk principal Tom Shouldice, considering changes in how the dropout rate is measured.

"This program will allow us to meet the new standards more effectively," Shouldice said. "This will reduce our dropout rate, and more students will be graduated."

To satisfy AYP, a school's graduation rate must be above 85 percent. Dundalk's rate was 74 percent in 2004, 72 percent in 2005, 69 percent in 2006 and 62 percent in 2008.

The school achieved the AYP graduation rate in 2007 and 2009.

The AdvancePath program will continue at Dundalk after the school moves into a new building it will share with Sollers Point Technical High School.

Construction of the new facility is expected to begin this summer.

"We're about six, seven months out from the groundbreaking, weather permitting," Hairston said. "The architects and designers have a meeting next month. Once started, [the construction] will be a two-year endeavor."

The AdvancePath Academy is an after-school program that helps students make up missed schoolwork.

At Dundalk, there will be one program for Dundalk students only, and a 6 p.m. evening high school for students from all over the county.

Each student gets individualized, self-paced, computer-based courses. Teachers work with groups of three to four students.

Elliott, for example, is working on English 11, environmental studies and an Economics and Public Issues class.

"It's been really good," the St. Helena resident said. "I'm doing everything I need to do, and I'm excited to be graduating."

Rachel Silwick of Graceland Park needs to finish an Earth science course to insure she graduates on time in 2011.

Silwick's schedule got "messed up" while she was spending mornings at Dundalk High and the rest of the day studying cosmetology at Sollers Point Technical.

"It's easy," Silwick said of the AdvancePath program. "You read, take notes, take quizzes. I like this program. I had to come here to take all of my science credits because they couldn't fit into my schedule. A lot of students have that same problem."

Murray, a Scotsman who once ran England's largest educational software company, said he expects the AdvancePath Academy to add 30 to 40 students to Dundalk's graduation class this year.

"The program works because of the culture we create," he said. "Every school always has a number of kids who are disengaged, bored and create chaos."

Gesturing to the students in the room, which is in Dundalk's Industrial Arts wing, Murray said, "Here we have 40, 50 of those type of students, and they're being engaged, being treated respectfully, as adults. They have to take responsibility, and they get that."

"I detest the term 'dropout.' It's a negative stigma that sticks to these children."

As Dundalk has started its restructuring program, Shouldice has often said the biggest challenge was changing the culture at the school.

Which is another big reason Dundalk was chosen to host the second AdvancePath Academy, Hairston said.

"With all the future plans we have here [at Dundalk High], it was a perfect storm," Hairston said. "All the stars were in alignment. We wanted to be consistent in terms of the renaissance, revitalization here at Dundalk."