Distance Learning and the CES Common Principles

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Sometimes our classroom is quiet. You might hear the tapping of the computer keys and an occasional chuckle or a sigh. Two or three students sit at separate tables; one is focused on the laptop screen diligently writing her second draft of her science report. In the other room, a student meets with Mr. D. about his math project. Sometimes it's crazy! Music comes from a computer. Students discuss their video. An alum sits at the table helping another student with her digital project. A teacher works with a student who is there with her newborn, discussing her work plan for home and the other teacher talks with a few students about political philosophies. Meanwhile, some students wait their turn to confer with the teachers, and others are packing to leave after a few hours of work. This is our classroom at any given time, on any given day.

Like every classroom, we have students with varied learning styles, interests, and backgrounds. However, our students, who very much want to be in school, have constraints on their schedules that make it challenging for them to be present during the typical daytime school hours. We have young moms with and without daycare. We have students who need to work to help their families pay the rent or simply to survive on their own. We have students who have health conditions that flare up, causing them to be in and out of school and disrupting their academic progress. We have students who simply are "too old" to sit in a regular classroom with other students. They all have a mission: to finish school and receive their high school diplomas.

Our History: What Worked, What Didn't

In 2001, Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) started its Distance Learning Program (DL) to serve students who could not come to school on a regular basis. Because we are by design a competency-based school, the opportunity to have a program where students truly demonstrated the required skill set rather than just attending specific courses met the school's mission. Initially, the DL program was designed for a specified group of students who met the criteria of being able to demonstrate independent study skills and had issues that kept them from attending school regularly. BDEA aimed to lease school-owned laptops to them so they could complete a competency-based program from home. In the DL program's first year, I was its coordinator and only teacher. I was going to be the students' advisor as well as their program manager, assigning "tests" and practice programs that students "tested into" from the Plato Learning program. Then reality set in.

At that time, the installed version of Plato was not compatible with the Apple iBooks laptops. As an immediate remedy, we switched to Plato's web-based version. Inner-city networking was in its early stages, and there were many Internet glitches that occurred during our time in school. Our access to technical support was limited; because we were an evening program, when we had problems at 6:00PM, the Office of Information Technology was closed.

As well, computers at home were not as accessible to students as they are now. The idea of leasing laptops was well-intended, but sending students home with brand new computers was not wise. First, though students had computer bags, they became walking targets for theft within their neighborhoods and on the bus. Second, wireless connections were not widely available. The best way for students to get on the Internet was through a dial-up connection, which proved to be a nightmare for students without a landline. Even those that had active landlines faced challenges because of the poor quality of the phone connections in their living spaces that often had not benefitted from telecommunications upgrades for some time, if ever.

In addition to acclimating ourselves to Plato and troubleshooting our technology challenges, I still had to help students who were trying to do school in a "flexible" manner. They needed work to do and to feel that they were making progress. In that first year, with 12 students, I created "homework packets" that not only

provided skills practice, but also opportunities to demonstrate competence. Our school-wide competency-based program was "product-based," meaning that students could demonstrate competencies through designated assignments. I created what I could and borrowed the rest from the math department. (I am not a math teacher.) This survival mode helped the students, but I wanted more quality within the program.

Moving from year one to year two, I had two major worries: math (did I mention that I am not, by training, a math teacher?) and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Massachusetts was coming down hard on trying to implement the mandatory, standardized MCAS tests English-language arts and math. Students also needed more schedule options for check in and instruction. To alleviate my worries, my own hours were expanded and the program was able to hire a part-time math instructor.

We continued to use Plato because we were under contract, but its value and practicality diminished for us. It wasn't that the program wasn't good, but it didn't fit our needs. We came to understand that even though our students could not and did not always come to school, for some, school was the one thing in their lives that they could count on; it's always there. Sending them home with a program and assigning a web activity to teach them equations isolated them even more. Our students needed and wanted human contact; and I committed to providing that contact as an advisor and teacher. From year two on, BDEA realized the full value of the program. Students who once thought they were not going to finish because they couldn't come to school were now making progress on their own time and schedules, and they were graduating. In 2003, when BDEA physically moved across the city to its present location, the program was given a chance to grow. We not only got a permanent math instructor, Ray Dimagiba, but we grew in numbers; first to 30 students, and then to our present 50.

The DL Program Today

We are available for students to come in to work or check in for nine and a half hours a day, Monday through Thursday, with five hours on Friday. Students are not assigned a schedule. Instead, their "required" time varies, case-by-case, student-by-student. We do ask that students come in and/or check in via email or by phone at least once a week. Certain students have particular situations in which they truly are unable to come in, so we establish an alternate schedule and means of communication. Ultimately, we rely on trust: even though we don't see them frequently, we know they are doing their work, and their proof is in the work itself that they bring when they do come in.

BDEA students have had interruptions in their high school careers; generally speaking, our students have had a rough road of it. Because of the independent nature of the DL program, we prefer that students are at least 18 years old, have had some time in high school, have passed at least one if not two of the required Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests, and have a significant reason for not being able to attend school regularly. If students are currently enrolled at BDEA, their teachers and advisors will recommend them to the DL program if they have demonstrated they are capable of working independently and have had legitimate lapses in attendance. As well as, the admissions office will note particular new students who are older than the age of 18, have been in school at least two years, and have not had success in their attempts to finish high school.

When students enter the DL program, the program instructors design an academic plan based on what the students' transcripts and progress reflect. The program is not a "one-size fits all" curriculum. Each student has his or her own academic plan and schedule, based on the school-wide, competency-based Individualized Learning Plan frameworks. If there is a "little noted history," a plan may take more time to develop. Competency development and assessment includes "testing" the student's skill level through introductory projects or assignments in the required competency areas as well as observation of the students' commitment to the program in their efforts to attend school and maintain communication. The example of a student who enters the program with a transcript filled with "F's" for two years, but who has passed MCAS tells us that the student has the basic state required skill set, but there might have been issues that kept the student from coming to school. We establish a schedule for this particular student, while providing him/her with basic projects that include writing and research skills. In math, Ray might give the student a department-created diagnostic corresponding to the student's last successful math course as well discuss a specific math problem in order to assess the student's level of understanding and ability to explain the concepts.

Once we establish our students' status in terms of demonstrated competencies, we can establish a

"prescription for completion." BDEA students must complete three major requirements in order to graduate; competency demonstration, MCAS passage, and Capstone Project completion. In the regular programs, the students take module-like courses that allow them to demonstrate competency. For example, the math competency course options are broken down into number sense, algebra I, algebra II, and geometry. Depending on a student's diagnostic test results, the student will take the mapped courses to meet all of the math competencies. DL students demonstrate competency through one-on-one teacher-student conversation sessions, integrated projects, individual assignments, and group discussions. As necessary, we incorporate MCAS prep into the student's academic plan. Through each of these competency opportunities, technology is used as a support and a tool. Students use the Internet to research, and enhance their research and presentations using PowerPoint, iMovie, and GarageBand. Students use Google tools to email and collect their work, and participate in a social network, the Ning. Over the years the program has experimented with other online sites such as Nicenet (free) Knowledge Forum (not free) and Blogmeister (free). Nicenet and Knowledge Forum were great for posting assignments and holding discussions, but lacked the luster to hold high school students' attention. Blogmeister was an excellent teaching tool to introduce students to the skills of blogging, webpage management, and commenting on each other's work online. However, the Ning has been the most successful with DL students because it offers the "glitz" of posting photographs and music, similar to MySpace and Facebook. The Ning is both a creative opportunity for students and suitable for the classroom purposes of discussion, blogging, and sending messages. As well, the Ning is private; all of the students' work is password protected and accessible by "invitation only."

The final school-wide requirement, the Capstone Project, is a larger project with research, writing, experiential, and digital components that focuses on a student-generated essential question. We encourage students to create a question around a career, creative or social interest. BDEA students begin the Capstone Project after completing competency demonstrations. In the DL program, the Capstone Project is the center of students' academic plans. Once we get a handle on "where the student is" in terms of competency levels and the particular skills s/he has demonstrated, we initiate conversations about the Capstone Project. The Capstone project is designed to be scaffolded: for example, a more novice student may be months away from completing the Capstone Narrative Essay, in which the students connect themselves to their selected questions, but she/he can do a more basic narrative retelling of a life experience so that s/he can learn and practice the writing process. In the Ning, students write blogs about their real-life experiences connected to their essential questions, and read, comment on, and learn from their classmates' blogs.

Pulling all students into the Capstone experience helps condense the academic plan by combining the remaining skills with the topics students want to focus on—this beckons students into finishing school as they become more invested in what they are doing. Shaniqua, an 18 year-old mother and soon to be graduate, enjoyed her Capstone experience. She says, "The Capstone is good because you get to make up your own questions and study things you want to learn about."

The CES Common Principles Enacted in BDEA's Distance Learning Program
What happens every day in the DL space is differentiated and structured, calm and crazy, creative and consistent. These qualities make us a unique program that reflects what the Common Principles intended.

Learning to Use One's Mind Well
Our academic mission is to have students think for themselves using the information that is around them and become life-long learners. The DL program's instructors honor the principle "learning to use one's mind well" by talking to students about their work and consistently encouraging them to think deeply about what they study. Even on the Ning, students can respond to and question their classmates, encouraging one another to dig a little more into their own ideas.

Less Is More, Depth over Coverage
Because our students have various obstacles that keep them from coming to school on a regular schedule, we understand their time is valuable. They have real grown up things to take care of—school is another thing on the list. But they still have their eyes on the prize: the diploma. For every one of them, earning that high school diploma has been a struggle. Our format of a flex schedule combined with a curriculum that is based on the demonstration of competency and embedded interdisciplinary projects demonstrates that less is more. Students can get more done in less time. Their education is not about a number of hours in the seat but about the quality of work that students can do on their own schedules. The less is more concept also applies when students take their personal interests and the issues they care about and use that content to

fulfill their academic requirements. Math instructor Dimagiba comments, "Acquiring the ability to focus on one thing is important not only for the information but also, and more importantly, for the experience in being able to focus so much of yourself in that one thing. Less is more; it's about process. The journey is the destination, the experience of getting there, not the actual graduation."

Goals Apply to All Students
It is the goal of every high school student to earn the coveted diploma. In DL, it is understood that the means by which each student reaches the same goal will differ from student to student. According to Dimagiba, "There is something amazing about each and every student. We're simply setting up the proper stage for it."

Personalization
Because students in the DL program have different situations that keep them from coming to school on a regular basis, their highly individualized schedules are examples of personalization. Nearly every component of the program is personalized from individualized learning plans to the content of the Capstone Project. DL students understands that their experiences will be distinct as they proceed toward graduation.

Student-as-Worker, Teacher-as-Coach
Much of the success of DL students is based on their individual drive and commitment to finishing high school. The teachers are there to teach when and what is needed, and to support students as they work through their academic plans. As soon as students enter the program, we tell them "It's on you! We are here to support you where you need it, to direct you and guide you through your academic coursework. But when it comes down to it, your success depends on you." Accountability, self-direction, and independence are attributes of a successful DL student. Sometimes guidance is more important than content. Marie, a 19-year-old mother, came to DL at BDEA after trying to return to a regular high school to finish her senior year after having her baby. Feeling like she couldn't focus all day in a regular classroom, she took the advice of her cousin who just graduated from the DL program. Her impressive record and demonstrated learning from her previous school meant that she could complete the Capstone Project. "What works for me is the flexibility," commented Marie, "Rather than worry about all my classes all day, every day, I can focus on one project on my time. It's on me to keep in touch and know what I need to do. But whenever I need help, I know where I can find it." Marie now is applying to colleges and is ready to graduate in June.

Demonstration of Mastery
The whole point of a competency-based education comes down to the ways students demonstrate mastery. The majority of the ways students move through the curriculum plan is by talking about their work and demonstrating what they have completed to get to the final point of competency. As a means of doing a final assessment at the end of a trimester, students in the Distance Learning Program participate in the Habits of Mind summit, in which they are given a small reading, topic, or question to discuss from a number of perspectives. They are required to apply their work and experiences to the theme. This summit experience allows students to demonstrate competency and to identify the BDEA Habits of Mind and understand what skills they need to master in order to graduate. The Capstone Project is also a culminating experience that focuses on students' ability to research, write, and communicate ideas regarding a topic about which they are passionate. "The project is the umbrella that holds all the competencies," says Karen Cowan, acting Co-Head of School at BDEA. "When they open the umbrella, they can look up and see the spokes that flow from their topic and see how they can all can connect."

Tone of Decency and Trust
When others hear a DL student talk about the program, they often become alarmed. One of the many comments students frequently offer about their success is that we don't push them, nag them, or get on their cases if they have a "momentary lapse." It's not that we don't care. We care. We care a lot. But our philosophy is that we support and we always emphasize students' personal responsibility. We respect their choices knowing that if they choose to be consistent, they will succeed. Many of our students often have no choice but to set school aside for some time, but they trust us to allow them to pick up where they left off. We trust them to keep us in the loop as to what is happening with them and know that when they can, they will be back. It is this sense of trust that allows the students to find success in more than just their assignments. Curricular flexibility combined with teacher availability gives students confidence in school and sets the "tone of decency and trust." Students understands and trust that when they do come in they are not "punished" or reprimanded for what time they have missed, but instead are welcomed because they

returned. Karen Cowan states, "The program is not the perceptive notion of what distance learning is; 'distance' is the time they spend away from the classroom, because they still come in to connect." Jesse, a 20-year old senior who struggled to focus and complete his work, knows exactly why he hasn't had success. "I know I can do the work, but times I haven't been committed to what I need to do. But it is the flexibility that has kept me from dropping out. The flexibility is awesome. You either use it or abuse it. For me, if I don't finish I can only blame myself." Jesse also added that he does hope to finish, assisted by the DL program's calming atmosphere that helps him focus.

Commitment to the Entire School

Though one of the DL program teachers specializes in math and the other in humanities, our all-encompassing advisory is what truly makes this program work. We talk to the students about their work and their progress. Most important, we find time during every student visit to talk to all students about themselves. It is all about them. And for us, it's not just about teaching, but it's also about listening, supporting, and offering options to help them be successful. Ray and I have our academic specialties, but we are generalists in our approach with each student. We can't work effectively with students until we know and understand them and why they aren't able to attend school in a regular program. Our academics are embedded in the advisory model and we know that "life" is a reality that should be embraced in their education and at school. Kristin, an 18-year old senior, appreciates that her Capstone Project on personal health not only helped her finish her science requirement, but also provided an opportunity for her personal growth. "The project wasn't just about one subject or another. It was about learning more about me." She adds, "The program was more than just school. My schedule works around getting things done. It's a great prep for college because it teaches you how to manage your time."

Resources dedicated to teaching and learning

The DL program exemplifies "resources dedicated to teaching and learning." With 50 students, two full time teachers, and two post-grad advisors housed in two connected classrooms, our "department" resources are mostly spent on technology equipment and maintenance in the service of learning and student progress. Other materials include art supplies, random books for reading, and snacks. We like to keep snacks on hand for our students, who appreciate this token of TLC.

Democracy and Equity

The DL program truly works for students who run into obstacles that have kept them from finishing high school. While the program works best for students who work independently, have a strong skill base and are very committed to their education, not every student in the program has these qualities. If a student wants to finish school and is committed to this goal, we will do our best to serve that student. We believe that everyone needs something different to be successful. Some students may need more skill-building but their life circumstances keep them from going to school. We try never to turn kids away; they all deserve a chance. If there is room on the roster, if they are close to the age of 18, and they have the potential to work independently, we do everything we can to give them a shot. Individualization plays a huge role in this: each student's program may differ and it may take some longer to complete their plan, but all students gets a chance.

Conclusion

As any classroom teacher can understand, it is difficult to meet each and every student's individual academic needs on a daily basis, let alone be flexible when it comes to dealing with personal issues. The CES Common Principles encourage all of us to reach beyond the daily classroom structure to do our best to put the students first as a group and as individuals. Life is not fair for many of our youth. And for some, it seems no matter how hard they try, challenges constantly plague their intentions to do better. As instructors and advisors in the DL program, we are committed to meeting the goal of "when there's a will, there's a way." If we can get a student to commit and work hard, we will develop a plan that will get them to where they want to go. It's an unconventional, but with the right combination of personal attention and technological support, it works.

Boston Day and Evening Academy

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) is a year-round public high school with a unique mission: to serve 350 students who are over-age for grade level and who are either at high risk for dropping out or have

already dropped out of high school. BDEA began serving students in September 1995 as the Downtown Evening Academy, Boston's first evening, diploma-granting, public high school. In 1998, the school became a Horace Mann Charter School and was renamed the Boston Evening Academy. In 2001, the Distance Learning Program was added and now operates at full capacity with 50 students. In 2003, the Day program was added, strengthening our ability to serve at-risk, over-age, and academically under-prepared eighth grade students who may be as old as 18. During the same year, BDEA became a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). All three of BDEA's programs use a competency-based curriculum, and progress is assessed through a variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, including written and oral exams, research projects, meeting over 300 benchmarks, internships, capstone projects, and field work. BDEA's curriculum and assessment does not include traditional grade levels or Carnegie units for grading, but meets all students "wherever they are" in their education using a combination of individual learning plans and differentiated instruction to meet and surpass graduation requirements.

RELATED RESOURCE
Read more about Boston Day and Evening Academy in Horace

"Conditions for Small School Success in Boston: Lessons from the Pilot Schools," Summer 2005, http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/368

"Principled Principal Development: The Greater Boston Principal Residency Network," Spring 2008, http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/502

Jennie Hallisey has been a faculty member with Boston Day and Evening Academy since its inception as the Downtown Evening Academy in 1994. She has taught in high schools in California and Massachusetts. As coordinator of the BDEA Distance Learning program, Hallisey emphasizes to all of her students the importance of passion in reaching their academic potential, as well as continuing to use their strengths and passions to grow and learn after graduation. Hallisey holds a B.A. in Speech Communication from Purdue University, an M.A. in Guidance Counseling from Bridgewater State University, and has a certification in Speech Communication, ELA, and Guidance Counseling.

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