

FEATURE STORY

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Success from the Ground Up

Jeff Woofter, Assistant Principal, Oak Glen High School, Hancock County

Jeff Woofter is emphatic when he says he wants people to understand one thing: “Sixty-four percent of all students who fail the 9th grade will never finish high school.”

This national statistic is the powerful motivator behind Oak Glen’s SEEDS initiative, and the compelling reason Woofter jumped at the chance to lead his school’s partnership with *The Education Alliance*. Oak Glen High School had support from Tom Jones, President and CEO of the West Virginia United Health Care System, and from Dr. Mary Harris-John, associate professor at Marshall University. Woofter quickly evaluated that the peer mentoring need at his school would rely heavily on Harris-John’s expertise. “That’s a great characteristic of the SEEDS initiative,” says Woofter. “It has an initial structure, but it can be customized to what works for individual schools.”

Oak Glen High School received a two-year \$50,000 grant from *The Education Alliance*. The school took a close look at incoming students who scored “at mastery” or above on the West Test, but who had at least two D’s in four of their core 8th grade courses. Coming into high school, these students had the intellectual capacity to succeed, but were struggling academically. Harris-John designed a class for peer mentors, and a curriculum for that class that was integrated into the school day like a traditional class. “Her mentoring handbook teaches some students to tutor others,” says Woofter. Using a private blog for the student mentors and the principal to support their learning, Harris-John and Woofter created a 45-minute program that benefits both struggling students and their peer mentors.

The results are impressive. “When we compare groups of students, our SEEDS kids really outperformed other students,” says Woofter.

Reflecting on his professional development, Woofter considers the challenges posed by the SEEDS initiative to be a key to his skill development.

“The SEEDS program has been truly beneficial to my growth as a leader,” says Woofter. “Getting anything going from the ground up is difficult work. Tracking the data, coordinating the program, and getting buy-in from the faculty in Year One were all significant challenges.”

Woofter pauses to reflect on the crucial buy-in issue. “Public school professionals are sensitive to being asked to throw themselves behind something that won’t be around the next year, or that doesn’t demonstrate proven results. Once you have good, measurable results to share, the buy-in is automatic. For a new program, it’s a tougher sell.”

“*The Education Alliance* gave our kids an opportunity to succeed. These were kids who, statistically, were destined not to graduate without intervention,” Woofter says. “*The Education Alliance* gave us an opportunity to help.”

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